

AR-RĀZĪ

Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakarīyā ar-Rāzī was born in Rayy near present-day Tehran in Iran around 864, and he died there as well in either 925 or 932. In the Arabic intellectual tradition ar-Rāzī was famous as a doctor—he was called “the unsurpassed physician in Islam”—and infamous as a philosopher, labeled a “freethinker,” “schismatic,” and even an “infidel.” A polymath and voluminous in his writings, ar-Rāzī composed approximately two hundred books covering virtually the whole gamut of scientific and philosophical topics; most of these works dealt with issues in medicine, but still more than a third were dedicated to philosophy. From what is available of his writings it is clear that ar-Rāzī was a nonconformist who refused to accept things solely on the basis of authority, no matter who or what that authority might be. Thus, in medicine he readily challenged such illustrious ancient authorities as Hippocrates and Galen, correcting and emending their claims on the basis of his own observations and medical experience; he developed his own metaphysical system—a medley of Greek and perhaps Sabeian influences—at odds with many of the features of Neoplatonized Aristotelianism, which was already gaining prominence among Arabic-speaking philosophers; and most notoriously, he denied the need for revelation and prophecy, arguing that at best they are superfluous, since we have reason, and at worst, morally repugnant, since they lead to schisms and bloodshed.

The influence of ar-Rāzī’s thoughts on medicine was not limited to the Islamic world but also extended into Latin Europe, where as early as the twelfth century some of his medical works were being translated. Indeed, ar-Rāzī’s works were still being read in Europe as late as the sixteenth century. His philosophical writings, however, did not fare as well. We thus have to glean our understanding of his philosophical thought from short extant works, fragments, and *testimonia*, which most frequently are drawn from hostile sources. The loss of the greater part of his philosophical corpus is no doubt due in large measure to the repugnance later thinkers had for the heterodox aspects of his thought, with its rejection of important features of both Aristotelianism and Islam itself.

I. THE PHILOSOPHER’S WAY OF LIFE^a

1. [99] Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakarīyā ar-Rāzī (may God augment his soul with refreshment and repose!) said the following.

2. When scholars of reflection, discernment, and intellectual achievement see us mixing with the people and pursuing various ways to earn a living, they chastise and disdain us. They argue that we have abandoned the life of philosophy, not to mention the model of our leader Socrates, about whom it is related that he would not

associate with kings and scorned them if they sought him out; that he did not eat delicious food or wear luxurious clothes; that he did not build a home or acquire possessions or have children; that he did not eat meat or drink wine or attend any public entertainment. Rather, [they say], he confined himself to eating dry herbage, wrapping himself in a threadbare robe, and taking shelter in a barrel in the wilderness.¹ Furthermore, he did not conceal his thoughts before commoner or king, but answered their questions with what he deemed the truth, in the clearest and most straightforward manner of speech. They say that we are the complete opposite of that. Then, however, they talk about the evils of this way of life that Socrates pursued, saying that it is against the natural way of things and the preservation of civilization, and that it encourages the ruination of the world and the destruction of human life. We will respond to them here with what we think about that, God willing.

3. They speak the truth about the reports they record concerning Socrates. That was certainly part of what he was. However, they ignore many other things about him, and they intentionally neglect to mention these things in order to bolster their argument against us. These things reported about Socrates were applicable to him from the beginning and for a long period of his life. But then he gave up many of them, so much so that eventually he died leaving behind daughters, fighting enemies, attending entertainment, eating tasty food (with the exception of any meat), and even imbibing a little. This is common, received knowledge to anyone who has bothered to look into the reports about this man. His behavior [100] in the beginning was the result of his strong fascination with and love for philosophy; his intense desire to spend his time on it instead of on bodily desires and the pursuit of pleasure; his natural propensity to do that; and his scorn and disdain for anyone who does not examine philosophy with the keen eye that it deserves and who chooses instead anything less.

4. At the outset of any pursuit that is desired and loved, one cannot but long for it, love it excessively, persevere in it, and hate anyone opposed to it, until, after he has immersed himself in it and [his activity] has brought him close to achieving it, he stops overdoing it and returns to moderation. There is a proverb for this: "Every novelty has its appeal."

5. This was Socrates' condition at that time in his life, and it is this aspect of what is reported about him that is best known and widespread, because it is the strangest and most amazing and furthest from people's usual behavior—and because people love to spread the rare and odd report and avoid the mundane and customary ones.

6. So we do not object to the most praiseworthy aspect of Socrates' way of life, though we ourselves mostly fall short of his [standards] and acknowledge our short-

¹ For this apparent confusion with the Diogenes of Greek wisdom literature, see generally Ilai Alon's study *Socrates in Mediaeval Arabic Literature*, esp. p. 49.

comings in applying the just way of life, in taming our whims, in the love of knowledge and the passion for it. Our dispute with Socrates, then, lies not in the quality of his way of life, but rather in the quantity. And we are not diminished by admitting to our deficiency, since it is the truth, and acknowledging the truth is nobler and more honorable. So that is what we have to say on that topic.

7. With regard to what they condemn about Socrates' two ways of life, we say the following. The blameworthy aspect rightly lies again in quantity, not quality, since, clearly, obsessive attention to bodily desires and their pursuit is not more noble and honorable, as we have explained in our book *On Spiritual Medicine*. Rather, for each need, it is nobler to take the necessary measure or a measure that does not invite a pain that exceeds the pleasure derived from it. And, in fact, Socrates ultimately did turn away from the excessive behavior that is truly reprehensible and that leads to the ruination of the world and the destruction of human life, since he returned to fathering children and fighting [101] enemies and attending entertaining gatherings. Anyone who does that has stopped working for the ruination of the world and the destruction of human life, but one does not have to be different from that to be awash nonetheless in desires. We ourselves, though unworthy of the title of philosopher in relation to Socrates, are entitled to it in relation to those people who do not want to pursue philosophy.

8. Having come this far, let us now make as thorough a statement about the philosophical way of life as will be of benefit to those who love and honor knowledge.

9. We need to lay the foundations of our aim in this treatise on some basic principles that we have already explained in other books, the aid of which must be sought if the contents of this treatise are to be lightened. These books include our *On Metaphysics*, our *On Spiritual Medicine*, our *On Censuring the Philosophasters for Their Obsession with the Minutiae of Geometry*, our book entitled *The Noble Discipline of Chemistry*—especially our book known as *Spiritual Medicine*, for it is indispensable in seeking to complete the aim of this treatise.

10. Now, the basic principles on which we base the practical elements of the philosophical way of life and which we use here in abridged form are the following. We have a state after death that is either praiseworthy or blameworthy, depending on the way we lived during the time our souls were with our bodies. The noblest thing for which we were created and to which we are directed is not the pursuit of bodily pleasures but rather the acquisition of knowledge and the application of justice, both of which lead to our liberation from this world in the world in which there is neither pain nor death. Both nature and whim led us to prefer the pleasure of the present, while the intellect often calls on us to give up present pleasure in favor of things that *it* prefers. The Lord of us all, from whom we anticipate reward and fear punishment, watches over us, is merciful with us, does not seek to harm us, loathes our injustice and ignorance, and loves our justice and knowledge. For this Lord [102] will punish in fair measure those of us who cause harm and those who deserve to suffer pain. We are not required to suffer pain in place of a pleasure that is preferable to that pain in quantity and quality. The Creator (mighty and high is He) has placed in our trust

things particular to our needs, such as the cultivation of land, the craft of weaving cloth, and other such things that allow for the maintenance of the world and our livelihood. Let us accept these principles as valid so that we may build upon them.

11. Inasmuch as the pleasures and pains of this world are brought to abrupt conclusion with the end of life, while the pleasures of the world where there is no death are eternal, unceasing, and infinite, the idiot is one who purchases a perishable, transitory, and limited pleasure in exchange for one that is eternal, perpetual, unending, and infinite. This being the case, it necessarily follows that we should not seek out a pleasure the attainment of which requires the perpetration of something that prevents our liberation in the eternal world of the soul or that imposes on us in this world a harm greater and more intense in quantity and quality than the pleasure we chose. Any other pleasure is permitted us. But the philosopher will often forgo many of these permitted pleasures for the sake of training and conditioning his soul to resistance, so that when it becomes necessary he will find that easier and more effortless, as we wrote in our *Spiritual Medicine*.² For habit, as the ancient philosophers said, is a second nature that can make what is difficult seem easy and inure one to it, whether it be in matters of the soul or the body. Thus we see couriers more capable of walking long distances and soldiers more courageous in battle and other such unremarkable examples of the way in which habits ease things that were burdensome and difficult before one was accustomed to them.

12. While this statement is condensed and summarized (I mean what we said about circumscribed pleasure), it covers many specific examples, as we have explained in *Spiritual Medicine*. For, if the principle [103] that we have set down is correct and true in itself or derivative of such, that is, the principle that the thinking person should not yield to any pleasure that is accompanied by his fear of a pain that will outweigh the pain he experiences by suffering to forgo the pleasure and restrain the desire, then it necessarily follows that were we, at some given point, capable of possessing the whole Earth for the duration of our lives by perpetrating against people an act that does not please God, that is, an act that prevents us from attaining eternal good and permanent blessing, then we should neither do that nor want to do that. Furthermore, were it our lot, or all but certain, that if we ate a plate of ripe dates our eyes would be inflamed for ten days, we obviously would not want to eat them. The result is the same for anything that falls between these two examples we mentioned, in terms of the relative extremes of great and small, for each case is small in relation to the greater and big in relation to the smaller, but the discourse cannot encompass them all because of the plethora of specific individual examples that fall under this general summary.

13. Now that what we wanted to explain on this topic is clear, allow us to try to elucidate another one of our aims consequent to that one. Since the principle that we set down—that is, that our Lord and Master takes a concern in us, watches over us, and has compassion for us—also entails that He abhors any harm that befalls us,

² See *Spiritual Medicine*, ch. II.

and that every such thing that is not the result of our action and choice but is rather a part of nature is a necessary thing, that is, its occurrence is unavoidable, then, on that account, we must not harm any sentient creature whatsoever unless it is absolutely necessary to inflict that harm or by doing so we avert a greater harm. [104] Under this summary statement there is, again, much detailed division of examples, including acts of injustice as a whole; the pleasure rulers derive from hunting animals; and people's extreme overwork of the beasts of burden they use. All of that must accord with a reasoned and just aim, behavior, method, and doctrine that cannot be transgressed nor violated, so that pain is inflicted only when it will deflect a greater harm, as in such cases as lancing an abscess, cauterizing an infected limb, taking a foul-tasting medicine, and avoiding tasty food as precaution against seriously harmful illnesses. Beasts of burden may be overworked for a specific purpose that does not involve excessive force, unless such is deemed absolutely necessary by reason and justice. For instance, spurring on a horse to arrive at safety from an enemy: in such a case justice deems it necessary to spur it on and even destroy it if the person hopes to be saved, especially if that person is learned and virtuous or is rich in some other way that will be of benefit to all people, since the largesse of such a man and his survival in this world is of greater good to the people than preserving the horse. Another example is that of two men stranded in a waterless wasteland, one of whom has enough water to save himself but not his companion. In such a situation, the water should go to the man who is of most benefit to the welfare of society. This is the logical conclusion applicable in such examples.

14. With regard to hunting and chasing, exterminating and destroying, this should be reserved for animals like lions, leopards, and jackals, which feed only on meat, and those like serpents and scorpions, which cause the greatest harm, which people have no interest in taming, and for which there is no need to otherwise use. This is the logical conclusion applicable in such examples. There are two reasons why it is fitting to exterminate these animals. The first is that if they are not exterminated, they will eradicate many other animals; [105] this is a case unique to solely carnivorous animals. The other reason is that souls are liberated only from human bodies. Since this is the case, liberating souls from animal bodies is akin to paving the way to and facilitating that liberation. Since both reasons are combined in the case of solely carnivorous animals, it is obligatory to exterminate them when possible, because doing so both minimizes harm to other animals and allows for the hope that their souls will then inhabit more suitable bodies. In the case of serpents, scorpions, and hornets, etc., the fact that they both harm animals and are of no use to humans, the way beasts of burden are, combine to permit their destruction and extermination.

15. However, animals used by humans and fed on herbage must not be destroyed and exterminated. Rather they should be worked gently, in the manner we have stated, their use as food should be kept as far as possible to a minimum, and they should not be bred to such a great number as would require their inordinate slaughter—rather slaughtering them should follow an aim and accord with need. If it were not for the benefit to be had from releasing souls from nonhuman bodies, reason would deem it

right that they not be slaughtered at all. In fact, those who pursue the way of philosophy have different opinions about this, some judging it good for people to eat meat, while others, including Socrates, do not.

16. Since neither reason nor justice grants people the right to harm others, it follows that neither should they harm themselves. Many examples fall under the general notion of self-harm that reason rejects, like the Hindus who, in seeking to be near God, set fire to themselves and fling themselves on sharp nails, or like the Manis³ who castrate themselves to resist the urge for sex, weaken themselves through hunger and thirst, and allow themselves to get filthy by avoiding water, using urine instead. Also falling under this heading, though to a much lesser degree, are Christians [106] who practice monasticism and withdrawal from the world in cloisters, as well as many Muslims who spend all their time in mosques, give up daily affairs, and limit themselves to a small amount of unpalatable food, and to wearing painful and uncomfortable clothes. All such behavior is just a form of self-oppression and self-harm that does not help one avoid a more preferable pain. Yes, Socrates used to follow this path at the beginning of his life, but he gave it up at the end, as we already said (see par. 3).

17. Now, people hold vastly divergent but inarticulate views on this subject [of self-denial], so we should offer an accessible statement on it so that there will be some examples [with which to work]. Since people differ in their circumstances—some accustomed to prosperity, some to hardship, and some seeking gratification of one desire more than another (such as those passionate about women, or wine, or power, or any other thing in which people show great diversity)—the pain they experience by restraining their desires varies greatly according to their differing circumstances. Consider, for instance, someone born to a king and raised in prosperity: his skin cannot bear rough clothes and his stomach will not accept bad food in comparison to what will satisfy someone born to a commoner; rather he will experience great pain as a result. Or those accustomed to a particular pleasure will experience pain when denied it, and the suffering they endure will be multiplied and all the more grave and intense than for someone not accustomed to that pleasure. For this reason people cannot be burdened in the same manner but rather differently, according to their different circumstances. So the king's son who seeks the way of philosophy cannot be made to bear what the commoner's son can in terms of food and drink, except by slow degrees if necessity calls.

18. But the limit that cannot be transgressed is that they must refrain from a source of pleasure that they could not attain but [107] by perpetrating oppression and murder and, in sum, anything that invites divine displeasure and is not necessary by

³ "Manis" refers to the Manicheans, who believed that two principles governed the world: one was light and associated with the soul, the other was dark and associated with matter. In order to limit the amount of matter in the universe, certain Manicheans avoided procreation, since they believed that it trapped the soul within matter.

judgment of reason and justice. Anything below that is permissible. This is the upper limit, by which I mean the upper limit in terms of freely pursuing the enjoyable life. The lower limit, by which I mean the lower limit in terms of self-denial and self-restraint, is that a person eats what does not cause him harm or makes him ill, and does not go beyond that to desire and pursue what brings him the most pleasure, so that his aim becomes the pleasure and the desire and not the appeasement of hunger; that he dresses in clothes that his skin can bear without pain, but does not incline to sumptuous embroidered wear; and that he dwells in a home that affords him shelter from extreme heat and cold, and does not exceed that by dwelling in a magnificently ornamented and appointed palace—unless of course he is sufficiently wealthy to afford such luxurious things without recourse to oppression, injustice, and self-destruction in the pursuit of money. In this sense, then, those born to poor fathers and raised in straitened circumstances are superior, because self-restraint and self-denial are easier for such people, just as they were easier for Socrates than for Plato.

19. Whatever falls between these two limits is permissible and does not divest one who does such of the title of philosopher; rather, it is fitting that he be called by it, though superiority lies in preferring the lower and not the higher limit, while virtuous souls accompanying bodies born to prosperity can bring their bodies by degrees to the lower level. But to go beyond the lower limit is to go beyond philosophy to a state similar to those we mentioned with regard to the Hindus, Manis, monks, and ascetics, in other words, to depart from the moderate way of life, to provoke divine displeasure, to engage in a futile form of self-harm, and to merit [108] losing the title of philosopher. This is also the case with going beyond the upper limit. We ask God, Who bestows intellect, drives away anxiety, and discloses the goal to grant us success, to guide us and to help us achieve what is most pleasing and favorable to Him.

20. We say summarily that, since the Creator is the Knower Who is not ignorant, the Just Who does no wrong; since knowledge, justice, and compassion exist absolutely; since we do have a Creator and Lord; since we are to Him servants to be ruled; and since the servants most beloved of their masters are those who carry out their way of living and pursue their code of behavior, then the servant closest to God (mighty and exalted is He!) is the most learned, most just, most compassionate and merciful. The whole of this statement is what is meant by the philosophers' saying, "Philosophy is imitating God (mighty and exalted is He!) to the degree that humans are able." This is a summary statement of the way of philosophy, the details of which are found in *On Spiritual Medicine*,⁴ for there we have set down how to remove vices from the human soul, and how much effort the one who loves philosophy should apply in terms of pursuing, amassing, and spending wealth, and seeking out ranks of leadership.

21. Now that we have explained what we wanted to on this topic, let us turn back to explain ourselves, to take note of those who slander us, and to declare that

⁴ See *Spiritual Medicine*, ch. 19.

no particular way of living that we have followed to this day (with God's bestowal of success and aid) would merit our being denied the title of philosopher. For the one who deserves to be stricken from the roster of philosophers is someone who has an inadequate grasp of both parts of philosophy—I mean the theoretical and the practical—because he does not know what a philosopher should know or follows a path that a philosopher should not. But we are innocent of that (with all due praise to God, His bestowal of success, and His guidance).

22. In the category of theoretical philosophy, even if we had only the ability to compose a book like this one, that alone would prevent the erasure of the title of philosopher from our name, not to mention the likes of our books *On the Demonstrative Syllogism*, *On Metaphysics*, [109] *On Spiritual Medicine*; our book *Introduction to Natural Science*, commonly called *Auscultatio physica*; our discourses *On Time and Place*, *Extension*, *Eternity*, and *the Void*, *On the Shape of the Universe*, *The Cause for the Earth's Fixed Location in the Middle of the Sphere*, *The Cause of the Sphere's Circular Motion*, *On Compositeness*, *On the Essential Motion of the Body and its Determination*; our books *On the Soul* and *On Prime Matter*; our books on medicine, such as *The Mansuri*, *For Anyone Lacking an Attending Physician*, *On Current Drugs*, the one known as *Medicine for Kings*, and the book known as *The Compendium*, the likes of which no one in this kingdom had composed before me and no one since has imitated in quite the same way; our book *On the Discipline of the Philosophy Known to Commoners as Alchemy*; in sum, close to two hundred books, discourses, and treatises produced by me up to the time of my work on this discourse, on the branches of philosophy including natural science and metaphysics. With regard to mathematics, however, I admit that I have given it slight attention, but only inasmuch as I have no pressing need for it and have not given over my time to mastering it with a particular aim in mind, not because I am incapable of it. I will set forth an account of that to anyone who wishes by arguing that the correct thing in that is what I have done, not what those who call themselves "philosophers" have done, who spend their lives obsessing over the minutiae of geometry. So if my achievement in theoretical philosophy is not enough to merit being called a philosopher, I'd like to meet the person in our time who does.

23. In terms of the practical part of philosophy (with the help of God and His bestowal of success), I have not exceeded in my way of living either of the two limits I defined above, and nothing observed in my actions would merit its being said that my way of life is not that of the philosopher. I have attended the ruler not as one who bears arms nor as one entrusted with doing his work, but rather as a physician and confidant who has independence of action in one of two cases: either in time of illness, to cure him [110] and improve the condition of his body, or in time of health, to keep him company or to advise him—God knows this of me!—to do all that I hope will lead to his welfare and that of his subjects. None of the evil he perpetrates arises from me, such as hoarding and wasting money and fighting people, arguing against them and oppressing them. In fact, the exact opposite of all that and the relinquishing of much of what is in my rights are well known about me. As for how I behave with

food, drink, and entertainment, anyone who has frequently observed me would know that I do not go to extremes, and the same applies to all my other observable circumstances, in dress or riding mount or servant or slave girl.

24. When it comes to my love of knowledge, my intense desire for it, and my hard work in pursuing it, it is common knowledge to anyone who has spent time with me or observed me that from the days of my youth to the present that I have been so devoted to it that whenever I come upon a book I have not read or a man I have not encountered, I pay no mind to any task (even if that be greatly detrimental to me) without finishing the book or learning what the man knows. My endurance and effort has reached the degree that in one year I wrote more than twenty thousand pages in the minute script used for talismans. I persevered in composing the huge *Compendium* for fifteen years, working day and night, to the point that my eyesight grew weak and the tendon in my hand tore, preventing me now from reading and writing. Despite my condition I still pursue these two things to the best of my ability while regularly employing someone to read and write for me.

25. If this group finds that the measure [of my achievements] in these things causes me to fall below the rank of philosophy in practice, and they deem the goal of following the philosophers' way of life to be different from what we have described, then let them substantiate that, whether in person or in writing, so that we can yield it to them if they show superior knowledge, or refute them if we establish a point of error or deficiency in what they say. But suppose I indulge them and admit to shortcoming in the practical part of philosophy, what might they say about the theoretical part? If they were [111] to find me deficient in it, then let them present what they say about that to me so that we can investigate it and afterward give them what they are due or refute their error. If they do not find me deficient in the theoretical part, then they had best learn from my knowledge and pay no heed to my way of living, that they may follow the proverb of the poet: "Act according to my knowledge so that if I fall short in my action, my knowledge will aid you and my shortcoming will not harm you."

26. This is what we wanted to explain in this discourse. To the Bestower of intellect goes praise without end, as is His merit and desert. God bless His chaste bondsmen and His virtuous bondswomen.

II. ON THE FIVE ETERNALS^a

I. Bīrūnī on ar-Rāzī

1. [195] Muhammad ibn Zakarīyā ar-Rāzī related on the authority of the ancient Greeks that there are five eternal things: (1) the Creator (glory to Him!); (2) the universal Soul; (3) Prime Matter; (4) absolute time; and (5) absolute space. On this he based his own derivative doctrine. He distinguished between time and duration by applying number to one of them and not the other, by reason of the fact that finitude is a consequence of being numbered, just as the philosophers made time a dura-