

al-Razi, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya' (d. 925)

*Perhaps the most famous and widely respected Islamic authority on medicine in the medieval period, al-Razi also aspired to a comparable achievement in philosophy and the other sciences such as alchemy. His success in these other subjects, however, was seldom recognized either in his own time or later; in philosophy, for example, more writers cite him for purposes of rejection and refutation than for admiration and emulation. However, his ideas were and are important. Chief among his positive contributions is his advocacy of a doctrine of equal aptitude in all humans, which grants no special role for unique and divinely favoured prophets and which recognizes the possibility of future progress in the advancement of knowledge. Philosophically, al-Razi was by his own admission a disciple of Socrates and Plato, much of whose teaching he knew on the basis of the latter's *Timaeus*. Accordingly, he was noted for upholding the eternity of five primary principles, God, soul, time, matter and space, and for a concept of pleasure that sees it as the return to a normal harmony following a serious deviation or disruption which is itself pain.*

1. [Life and work](#)
2. [Metaphysics](#)
3. [Ethical and moral philosophy](#)

1. Life and work

Al-Razi's main career was that of a physician, and in that field he earned great respect and wide acclaim even from his most vociferous detractors in other matters. He directed two major hospitals, one in Baghdad, the capital of the Islamic empire at that time, and another in his native city of Rayy in northern Iran. His voluminous writings on medicine were universally admired. Despite advancing infirmities, he continued his research and writing into old age, still surrounded by students and assistants when he died in ah 313/ad 925. In Christian Europe he was known as Rhazes, and his works on medicine were highly respected.

The whole of al-Razi's work, both in medicine and the physical sciences and in philosophy, derives its central concern from his naturalistic view of the universe as like a 'visible animal' which, in contrast to almost all of the other philosophers in his era, he regarded as a subject of empirical scrutiny. At the heart of his philosophy lies Plato's *Timaeus*, which seems to have been al-Razi's ultimate inspiration (see [Plato](#)). He displayed almost no interest in the rest of Plato, although curiously he was the most avowedly loyal follower of Plato in Arabic and Islamic literature. His other idol was, as might be expected, [Socrates](#), whose way of life he attempted to emulate, advocate and defend; although al-Razi's Socrates was not the extreme ascetic of an earlier period in Socrates' life but rather a later, fully participating social being. For Aristotle he had little use, rejecting outright commonly accepted doctrines that had deeply influenced his philosophical

contemporaries (see [Aristotelianism in Islamic philosophy](#)). Unusually for his time, al-Razi boldly claimed that he could and had moved beyond his ancient philosophical predecessors and that neither the religious prophets nor the Greek masters (nor even al-Razi himself) possessed the final word or ultimate truth. Others in the future can and will surpass the achievements already realized by the great minds of the past and present.

Although denying prophetic religion, al-Razi's own ethical philosophy suggests a kind of religion that encompasses God and the universal soul, and hints at the salvation of particular souls. Nevertheless, writings of his on the falsity of prophets were broadly and specifically condemned and he was branded an arch-heretic for them. An opponent quotes him as claiming that the Qur'an yields no information of particular value in comparison with the books of Ptolemy, Euclid, Hippocrates, Galen, Plato or even Aristotle. It is clear that al-Razi would not accommodate revealed religion, which he saw as both particularistic and divisive. There is thus no harmony to be found between such religion and philosophy - a dangerous and certainly radical stance to take in his day. Al-Razi's metaphysical doctrines received no approval from later scholars. As a consequence, with the exception of two treatises on ethics, few of his non-medical works survive, thereby making a fair and detailed judgment of his ideas now difficult and often impossible.

2. Metaphysics

The metaphysical doctrine of al-Razi, insofar as it can be reconstructed, derives from his concept of the five eternal principles. God, for him, does not 'create' the world from nothing but rather arranges a universe out of pre-existing principles. His account of the soul features a mythic origin of the world in which God out of pity fashions a physical playground for the soul in response to its own desires; the soul, once fallen into the new realm God has made for it, requires God's further gift of intellect in order to find its way once more to salvation and freedom (see [Soul in Islamic philosophy](#)).

In this scheme, intellect does not appear as a separate principle but is rather a later grace of God to the soul; the soul becomes intelligent, possessed of reason and therefore able to discern the relative value of the other four principles. Whereas the five principles are eternal, intellect as such is apparently not. Such a doctrine of intellect is sharply at odds with that of all of al-Razi's philosophical contemporaries, who are in general either adherents of some form of Neoplatonism or of Aristotelianism.

The remaining three principles, space, matter and time, serve as the non-animate components of the natural world. Space is defined by the relationship between the individual particles of matter, or atoms, and the void that surrounds them. The greater the density of material atoms, the heavier and more solid the resulting object; conversely, the larger the portion of void, the lighter and less solid. Time

and matter have both an absolute, unqualified form and a limited form (see [Matter](#); [Time](#)). Thus there is an absolute matter - pure extent - that does not depend in any way on place, just as there is a time, in this sense, that is not defined or limited by motion. The absolute time of al-Razi is, like matter, infinite; it thus transcends the time which Aristotle confined to the measurement of motion. Al-Razi, in the cases of both time and matter, knew well how he differed from Aristotle and also fully accepted and intended the consequences inherent in his anti-Peripatetic positions.

3. Ethical and moral philosophy

More can be said about al-Razi's ethical doctrines because two of his treatises that contain elements of a moral philosophy - [al-Tibb al-ruhani \(The Spiritual Physick\)](#) and *al-Sira al-falsafiyya (The Philosophical Life)* - have survived. On the one hand, al-Razi saw ethics as a kind of psychological medicine. The restoration of equilibrium following upon dislocation is the goal of spiritual or psychic healing, and preventing such disruptions is ethics. For him, pleasure is not a positive or cumulative affection but instead the result of a prior pain that was itself caused by a rupture or departure from the normal state and which thereafter ceases as the normal condition returns or is restored. Passion and appetites will occur naturally but they must be restrained by reason from growing to excess; they should be neither served nor encouraged. True virtue lies in satisfying every need only so far as is indispensable. Al-Razi was against all forms of asceticism, specifically those practised by Muslims. In comparison to the ascetic model of Socrates, contemporaries faulted him for leading a public existence, marrying and having children, earning a living and enjoying the company of princes. Al-Razi, however, vigorously denied that such asceticism was true of his ancient master; Socrates, he insisted, eventually did return to public life and thereafter avoided the extremes of his earlier position.

Equally al-Razi denied excesses of commission as well as abstinence. The merciful Lord, he said, does not approve the causing of pain and injustice; hence inflicting hurt either on oneself or on any other being is wrong unless necessary or inevitable. All must be in accord with nature and thus, on occasion, the greater good or benefit may require it. In this way al-Razi warned against the needless slaughter of animals (except in the case of wild, carnivorous creatures whose own extinction may spare their victims' death and also provide for the release of the beast's own soul).

On the other hand, al-Razi, in line with his emphasis on the controlling role of reason, believed that philosophy and the philosophic life yields the only salvation that is ultimately possible (see [Salvation](#)). Pursuit of that life is to imitate God in the way possible for humankind. The ultimate end for which humans were created does not comprise a physical existence but another world, one without death and pain. The human soul will achieve its hold on that world in proportion to the

quality of its previous life while in the body. Those who practise justice and seek to acquire knowledge - that is, to lead the philosophical life - become habituated to reason, living free of the body and accustomed to unceasing joy. Upon death this will be their permanent state. In contrast, those who cling to a physical existence will, as Plato said, fail to depart this world of generation and corruption and will therefore continue to suffer pain and unending distress.

See also: [Ethics in Islamic philosophy](#); [Platonism in Islamic philosophy](#); [Soul in Islamic philosophy](#)

PAUL E. WALKER

Copyright © 1998, Routledge.

List of works

al-Razi (before 925) *al-Tibb al-ruhani (The Spiritual Physick)*, ed. P. Kraus in *Rasa'il falsafiyya li-Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Zakariyya' al-Razi*, Cairo: Fouad I University Faculty of Letters, 1939; repr. Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1973; trans. A. Arberry, *The Spiritual Physick of Rhazes*, London: John Murray, 1950. (An account of al-Razi's philosophical and ethical psychology.)

al-Razi (before 925) *al-Sira al-falsafiyya (The Philosophical Life)*, ed. P. Kraus in *Rasa'il falsafiyya li-Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Zakariyya' al-Razi*, Cairo: Fouad I University Faculty of Letters, 1939; repr. Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1973; trans. A. Arberry, 'Apologia Pro Vita Sua', in *Aspects of Islamic Civilization*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964. (Al-Razi's own philosophical autobiography.)

References and further reading

Goodman, L. (1971) 'The Epicurean Ethic of M. b. Zakariya' al-Razi', *Studia Islamica* 34: 5-26. (An account of the links between Epicureanism and al-Razi.)

Goodman, L. (1972) 'Razi's Psychology', *Philosophical Forum* 4: 26-48. (An explanation of the implications and background of his psychological views.)

Goodman, L. (1975) 'Razi's Myth of the Fall of the Soul: Its Function in His Philosophy', in G. Hourani (ed.) *Essays in Islamic Philosophy and Science*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 25-40. (A detailed account of the doctrine of the soul.)

Goodman, L. (1994) '*Al-Razi, Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Zakariya*', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn. vol. VIII: 474-77. (An excellent summary of all that is known about al-Razi and his work.)

Goodman, L. (1996) '*Muhammad ibn Zakariyya' al-Razi*', in S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds) *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, ch. 13, 198-215. (Description of the life and thought of the thinker, and the wider relevance of his ideas.)

Walker, P. (1992) '*The Political Implications of al-Razi's Philosophy*', in C. Butterworth (ed.) *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 61-94. (The standard work on al-Razi's political theory.)

<http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H043>