

# Razian prophecy rationalized\*

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Accepted with minor revisions at *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*

## Abstract

Abū Bakr Muḥammad bin Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī (865–925) is generally known as a freethinker who argued against prophecy and revealed religion based on arguments from fairness of God and rationality. Recently some scholars argued that Razi was not as radical as the general interpretation takes him to be. Both the freethinker and conservative interpretations seem well supported based on different bodies of evidence. However, the evidence is based on secondhand reports. In this paper I argue there is an interpretation of prophecy which is supported by primary sources and can reconcile these putatively contradictory positions. Under my interpretation Razi allows for prophecy based on the rationality of moral deference in certain circumstances. In this picture one function of prophets is to act as moral experts for deference. This interpretation provides a synthesis of the freethinker and conservative views. Razi is conservative in having room for prophecy because of his dualist nature of humanity, and Razi is still a freethinker who values reason above all, because moral expertise requires excellent command of reason.

**Keywords:** Abū Bakr al-Rāzī · prophecy · moral deference · miracles

## I Introduction

Abū Bakr Muḥammad bin Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (865–925; henceforth just *Razi*) is mostly known for his contributions to medicine. Two of his books, *Kitāb al-Manṣūrī fī al-tibb*

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\*Many thanks to Hao Dong, Nick Eggert, Harvey Lederman and Matt Mandelkern for helpful comments and encouragement. Special thanks to Sonya Ringer for reading multiple drafts and providing extensive comments on earlier drafts and two reviewers of this journal for excellent comments which improved the paper immensely. Peter Adamson kindly shared some of the articles crucial to the discussion. While writing this paper I have been partly supported by a summer research grant provided by Department of Islamic Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

(*The Book on Medicine for Mansur*) and *Kitāb al-Hāwī fī al-tibb* (*The Comprehensive Book on Medicine*) remained part of the medical canon as late as 17th century (Iskandar 2008). He was the first physician to clinically distinguish small-pox from measles (al-Rāzī 1848) and the earliest practitioner of Placebo trials (Iskandar 1962; Savage-Smith 1996). His expertise in medicine also gave rise to a natural interest in alchemy and chemistry, which culminated in *Kitāb al-Asrār* (*The Book of Secrets*) (al-Rāzī 1964; English trans. al-Rāzī 2014). Stapleton et al. (1927) call Razi’s *Book of Secrets* “the first systematic classification of carefully observed and verified facts regarding chemical substances, reactions, and apparatus, described in language which is almost entirely free from mysticism and ambiguity, in the history of the world”. His philosophical output is no less impressive. According to Nādīm and Bīrūnī’s biobibliographies, Razi produced more than 100 manuscripts in philosophy and logic (Dodge 1970, pp. 703-709; Deuraseh 2008). Unfortunately, most of these works are now lost. In fact, only three works survived in their entirety: *Al-Tibb al-Ruhanī* (*The Spiritual Physick*), *Fī al-Sīrah al-Falasaḥīyyah* (*Philosophers’ Way of Life*) and *Fī ’alāmāt iqbāl al-dawla* (*On the signs of a prosperous state*). These three works along with other fragments were collected and edited by Professor Paul Kraus in the early 20th century.<sup>1</sup>

Calling Razi “a controversial figure” would be an understatement. Even the famous open-minded polymath Bīrūnī had to apologize for writing a biobibliography of Razi. Although Bīrūnī sometimes speaks highly of Razi due to the importance of Razi’s *Kitāb āl-’Ilm al-Ilāhī* (*On Divine Science*) and his achievements in medicine, he still calls Razi’s philosophical ideas “unseemly” and “stupid” as well as deeming two of Razi’s books on prophecy not even philosophy, but only heresy (al-Bīrūnī 1936, pp. 2-5; Deuraseh 2008, pp. 57-62). Other high-profile philosophers of the Islamic enlightenment are unambiguously damning. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) remarks that Razi overstepped his bounds and should have stuck to “urine and stool testing” (Berjak 2005, §16) and Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* calls Razi’s ideas “mad and foolish” (1904, §3.12).

It was Razi’s ideas concerning religion and prophecy which caused such withering commentary. Unfortunately, the only source of information on Razi’s ideas is now through sec-

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<sup>1</sup>See Kraus 1935, 1936 for initial editions and translations and al-Rāzī 1939 for Razi’s most comprehensive collection of works along with reports and commentaries on these works. See al-Rāzī (1950) and al-Rāzī (1993) for English translations of *Spiritual Physick* and *Philosophers’ Way of Life*. Shlomo Pines also undertook a major investigation of Razi’s metaphysics in Pines (1936) (English trans. Pines 1997). There is one other work which survived in large, but incomplete fragments, *Al-Shūkūk ’alā Jālīnūs* (*Doubts about Galen*), which we have a complete French translation of the fragments thanks to Pauline Koetschet (al-Rāzī 2019). See Daiber (2017) for a commentary on the philosophical portion of the bibliography. Thanks to a reviewer for reminding me to include the political treatise in the list.

ondhand accounts and many rightly suspect them to be not entirely neutral in conveying Razi's ideas.<sup>2</sup> Recent commentators on Razian views on prophecy are split based on two different sources of information. Earlier commentators focused on Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's (d. 932; *Abū Ḥātim* henceforth) *A'lam al-nubūwah* (*Proofs of Prophecy*). It gave rise to a heretical interpretation where Razi rejects prophecy by arguing that no wise and merciful deity would single out an individual to reveal the truth about good and bad, since this would be unfair to the rest of the individuals who would be in equal need of such truth.<sup>3</sup> More recently some scholars discovered passages in the Ash'arite Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (1149-1209; *Fakhr al-Dīn* henceforth) *al-Matālib al-āliya* (*Exalted Pursuits*), which paints a more conservative picture where Razi participates in contemporary Qu'rānic hermeneutics and merely denounces internal conflicts in the succession of Islamic leadership following Muhammad's death rather than the totality of religion and prophecy.<sup>4</sup> The schism in the Razian scholarship on prophecy seems to have led to an impasse based on whether one takes the evidence from Abū Ḥātim or Fakhr al-Dīn to be accurate.<sup>5</sup>

My aim is to bring new evidence to the debate by focusing on confirmed Razian sources such as *Spiritual Physick* and medical writings instead of relying on the evidence from Abū Ḥātim or Fakhr al-Dīn.<sup>6</sup> The evidence suggests that Razi not only has room, but also a positive role for prophecy. One of the necessary duties of prophets is to inform people of vices and virtues, knowledge of which would otherwise be unavailable. So legitimacy of prophecy necessarily includes the acceptability of deferring to a judgment other than one's own on moral issues.<sup>7</sup> Razi in *Spiritual Physick* affirms the rationality of moral deference in certain situa-

<sup>2</sup>Paul Walker comments (1992, pp. 66-67) it is surely odd that most of our information about Razi's heretical ideas come from Ismā'īlī scholars whose agendas seem diametrically opposed to Razi's. See Daftary (2011) for a recent survey of Ismā'īlī philosophy. Sarah Stroumsa downplays such suspicion (1999, pp. 108-110).

<sup>3</sup>Tarif Khalidi translated *Proofs of Prophecy* into English (Abū Ḥātim 2011). See pp. 1-4 and §3 in *Proofs of Prophecy* for the relevant arguments. See also Stroumsa 1999 and Vallat 2015 for the heretical interpretation.

<sup>4</sup>See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1987 (vol. 4, pp. 417-419). Josef van Ess was the first to hint at the conservative interpretation by suggesting Stroumsa gives too much credit to Ismā'īlī sources (van Ess 1997, §8.2.2.3.1.1; English trans. van Ess and Goldbloom 2019, pp. 360-361). Rashed (2000, 2008) discovered the passages from Fakhr al-Dīn and developed the conservative interpretation in a systematic way. Peter Adamson (2021a, §6) endorsed and strengthened it.

<sup>5</sup>See Vallat 2015 for a critical response to Rashed and Adamson 2021a,b for providing further support for the conservative interpretation.

<sup>6</sup>See al-Rāzī (1950) and Steinschneider (1866) respectively.

<sup>7</sup>*Moral deference* is the term philosophers use to refer to situations where an individual with some body of evidence and full rational capacities can rationally defer to the opinion of an expert with the exact same body of evidence and rational capacities on a moral issue. Even though philosophers are mostly comfortable with the rationality of epistemic deference, they are more apprehensive about moral deference. For instance, Bernard Williams (1995, p. 205) doubted even the permissibility of moral deference and McGrath (2009) bolstered this

tions because of the role of the passions for human nature in his metaphysical system.<sup>8</sup> Such endorsement by Razi not only supports the case for prophecy, but also provides a positive role for it—prophecy as moral expertise.<sup>9</sup> I also highlight further passages from one of Razi’s neglected work *On the signs of a prosperous state* which suggests supporting conditions for effective moral expertise, e.g. dialectical skills and the respect of community.<sup>10</sup> Thus the evidence from *Spiritual Physick* supports the conservative interpretation. However, further evidence from Razi’s medical writings (Steinschneider 1866) appears to tell against an important feature of the conservative interpretation—prophetic miracles. I first clarify the notion of miracle and then argue that Razi rejects miracles in the sense deployed by the conservative interpretation. In light of the total evidence in the paper I conclude that Razi seems to have a heterodox conception of prophecy somewhere between the heretic and conservative interpretations. Even though Razi seems to allow for prophecy, he seems to do so in a more naturalistic and rational rather than a supernaturally revelatory way.

## 2 A tale of two Razi’s: the heretic and the conservative

First, the bad news: although we know from al-Nadīm’s and al-Bīrūnī’s biobibliographies that Razi directly wrote on prophecy, these works did not survive. These works are classified as “heretical writings” in Bīrūnī’s list and their titles are *Fī al-Nubuwwāt (On Prophecies)* and *Fī Hiyaḷ al-Mutanabbīn (On the Tricks of False Prophets)*. We also have one non-heretical title called *Fī Wujūb Da‘wat al-Nabī ‘Alā Man Naqara bi al-Nubuwwāt (Obligation to Propagate the Teachings of the Holy Prophet Against Those who Denied Prophecies)*.

So we have to rely on secondary sources. Let us start with the Ismā‘īlī philosopher Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī. Abū Ḥātim’s *Proofs of Prophecy* (2011, esp. §3) contains long quotes from Razi

suspicion. By contrast, Enoch (2014) defended the rationality of moral deference in situations of evidential opacity and ambiguity.

<sup>8</sup>See al-Rāzī 1939 (pp. 170-191), al-Rāzī 1950 (§1) and McGinnis and Reisman 2007 (pp. 44-47). For an analysis of this metaphysical system, see Goodman (1975).

<sup>9</sup>Thanks to a reviewer for this formulation of the argument. The reviewer also notes that moral expertise, if sufficient, would undermine prophecy rather than bolster it, since, if all prophecy required was moral expertise, then this could be satisfied by any human who acts as a moral guide, which would make prophecy superfluous. Importantly, I do not claim that moral expertise by itself suffices for prophecy—only that it is necessary. Even though a regular person acting as a moral guide does not make them a prophet, it makes them display some prophetic quality. This may explain why Razi observes a similar function for philosophers when he calls Socrates, Plato and other philosophers *imāms* or leaders. See al-Rāzī 1939 (p. 97); English trans. al-Rāzī 1993 (p. 227) and also Fakhr al-Dīn 1987 (vol. 4, p. 418).

<sup>10</sup>See al-Rāzī 1939 (pp. 135-138). This work is confirmed by Ibn Abī Uṣaybī’a (1882, 318-329) and al-Bīrūnī (1936) (item 182: Deuraseh 2008, p. 74).

on the topic of prophecy, supposedly recorded from a debate between them. Abū Ḥātim also probably relies on a copy of *On Prophecies* (Daiber 2017, p. 396). According to Abū Ḥātim, Razi started the debate with the following inquiry (2011, p. 1):

Why do you hold it to be necessary that God singled out one particular people for prophecy rather than another, preferred them above all other peoples, made them to be guides for mankind and caused mankind to need them? Why do you hold it to be possible for the Wise One in His wisdom to have chosen this fate for them, setting some peoples against others, establishing enmities among them, and multiplying the causes of aggression, thus leading mankind to destruction?

Razi's argument is a *reductio*, assuming the wisdom and mercy of God as well as transitivity of causality. If God had chosen prophets and prophets had caused strife, then God would have given rise to strife. Since God could not cause strife on account of its mercy and wisdom, either it did not choose prophets or prophets did not lead to strife. Since the latter seems to be an undisputed empirical fact, this leaves God not choosing prophets as the only option. Of course, this leaves open what a wise and merciful God would do instead of choosing prophets as guides to people on account of his wisdom and mercy. Razi proposes (Abū Ḥātim, 2011, p. 1):

It would have been more worthy of the wisdom of the Wise One—more worthy also of the mercy of the Merciful—for Him to have inspired all His creatures with the knowledge of what is to their benefit as well as to their harm in this world and the next. He would not have privileged some over others; and there would be no cause for quarrel and no dispute among them, leading to their destruction.

So according to Razi, the wise and merciful God would provide the knowledge of what is beneficial and harmful for *all* individuals rather than only the prophets. The strife and conflict in this picture is not attributed to God, but to individuals who posed as prophets and incited such violence. Also Razi's proposal in the passage is exactly what happens in his metaphysical scheme of five eternals.<sup>11</sup> Razi posits five fundamental principles to explain how a wise and

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<sup>11</sup>See Goodman (1975) for a detailed investigation of Razian metaphysics and its five eternals. Goodman reads Razi's system in a mythical manner similar to Plato's *Timaeus* (Plato 2008). I think this a sound interpretation given Razi's familiarity with *Timaeus* (cf. item 107 in al-Bīrūnī 1936; Deuraseh 2008). See al-Rāzī 1939 (pp. 170-191) for the collection of passages dealing with Razian metaphysics. For English translation of some of these passages, see McGinnis and Reisman 2007 (p. 44). See also al-Rāzī 1950 (§2) for Razi's discussion of soul.

merciful God can coexist with the existence of evil in the world. Along with God, there is a universal soul (*nafs*) whose nature is appetitive and absolutely free in a way even God cannot control its actions. Razi attributes evil to the appetitive nature of the soul. However, God endows the soul with reason (*'aql*) such that it can eschew passions of the world. This ensures that God is wise and merciful, since it imparts all ensouled creatures with reason, which they use to figure out what is beneficial and harmful for them. The need for prophecy drops out of the picture.

Taking Abū Ḥātim's remarks and other supporting evidence, [Stroumsa \(1999\)](#) defends a heretic interpretation on which Razi rejects prophecy.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation was the default until [Rashed \(2000, 2008\)](#) discovered some passages in Fakhr al-Dīn's *al-Matālib al-āliya (Exalted Pursuits)* (1987, vol. 4). Rashed's main argument is that the evidence taken to support the heretic interpretation is not only biased, but also contradicted in Fakhr al-Dīn's quotes from Razi's *Al-'Ilm al-Ilahi (On Divine Science)* and reports of Razi's debate with his contemporary Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī (known as *Ka'bi*) from the Mu'tazilite school.<sup>13</sup> According to Rashed, Razi was contributing to a lively debate around the Qu'rānic hermeneutics by proposing that his views comport with certain the Qu'rānic claims and teachings of the prophets better than those by his Mu'tazilite opponents. This throws the heretic interpretation into doubt.

First, Rashed highlights that there was a lively debate in Razi's time around the verse 14 in Al Imran chapter in the Qu'rān (trans. Sahih international):<sup>14</sup>

زَيْنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبَّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ وَبَيْنَ وَقَنْطِيرِ الْمُقَنْطَرَةِ مِنَ الذَّهَبِ وَفِصَّةِ  
وَحَيْلِ الْمَسْوَمَةِ وَأَنْعَمَ وَحَرْثِ ذَلِكَ مَتَعَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَلَهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمُنَآبِ

Beautified for people is the love of that which they desire—of women and sons, heaped-up sums of gold and silver, fine branded horses, and cattle and tilled land. That is the enjoyment of worldly life, but Allāh has with Him the best return.

<sup>12</sup>Stroumsa was not the first to propose the heretical interpretation, but she provided the most extensive defense of the heretical interpretation. See [Kraus and Pines \(1936\)](#) who describe Razi as “the least dogmatic of the Arab physicians” and [Pines \(1936; 1997, p. 44\)](#) who describes him as “arch-heretic”.

<sup>13</sup>Mu'tazilism was the biggest Islamic rationalist movement during 8th-10th century in Basra and Baghdad. They mainly attempted to reconcile reason with Islam. See [Nader \(1984\)](#) and [Campanini \(2012\)](#) for an overview of Mu'tazilism.

<sup>14</sup>See [Al-Qurtūbī 1937](#) (p. 28) who notes the exegetical debate around this verse.

The critical question here is *who* has beautified the world, given that the passive voice in passage does not specify the beautifier. Rashed found long quotes from Razi's *On Divine Science* in Fakhr al-Dīn's *Exalted Pursuits* and a corresponding work replying to criticisms, which are most likely addressed to Ka'bī (Rashed 2000, pp. 46-49).<sup>15</sup> In Razi's response to Ka'bī in Fakhr al-Dīn's *Exalted Pursuits* we get a very different, conservative Razi rather than the heretic portrayed by Abū Ḥātim (1987, §7, pp. 418-419):

[Razi] asserted that [...] all the prophets and envoys who have come before have condemned the world, cast reproach on what it contains, admonished to turn away from it. But if God Most High had been the first to create and establish the world, prophets would certainly not have condemned it; and if He had created the creatures in this world, if He had filled it with desire for this world, if He was responsible for its invincible attraction and its passion for this world, how then to conceive that He makes him renounce it and orders him to move away from it? If, on the other hand, the Soul has passionately desired to unite itself with corporeal things, and then God, in all His wisdom, knew that this union was a cause of humiliation and affliction, then God is entirely in His honor that He has diverted [Soul] from it and that He has ordered distrust towards [Matter]. The saying of the Most High is an example of this: "How has the love of the desires for this world been embellished for men..." Some have said: the beautifier is *Iblis* [Satan]. [...] In this case, it is necessary that *Iblis* needs another *Iblis*, and an infinite regress ensues from this. And if the beautifier were God, how then would it be in conformity with the mercy of the Merciful and wisdom of the Wise, that He works on its embellishment, then orders we beware of it? If, on the other hand, we grant God that the passion of the Soul for Matter is something that happened to [the Soul] and imposed itself on Him, then it is all to the honor of God, may He be exalted, to warn men and enjoin circumspection and distrust.

There are two takeaway messages in this passage. First, Razi cites prophets advising people to eschew what is appealing in the world and, more importantly, Razi seems to take this as evidence for his interpretation that God is not the beautifier mentioned in Al Imran 14. Why

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<sup>15</sup>*On Divine Science* seems to be a major work in Razian philosophy, but it is lost. The response work *Fī Idāh Ghalat al-Muntaqid 'Alayh Fī al-'Ilm al-Ilāhī* (*Criticism and Clarification for those who criticize Divine Science*) is also noted by Razi's biobibliographers (item 117 in Bīrūnī: Deuraseh 2008, p. 71). Kraus put together the fragments about this work in *Rasā'il falsafīyya* (1939, pp. 170-191), which importantly did not include passages Rashed draws attention to.

should Razi care what prophets said and did, and treat it as evidence, if he rejected their legitimacy in the first place? Second, Razi seems to argue that his interpretation based on his metaphysical system does the most justice to Al Imran 14 while preserving wisdom and mercy of God. In particular, taking the beautifier to be the appetitive part of human nature is a better reading of Al Imran 14 than taking the beautifier to be Satan or God. Why should Razi be concerned with his system making the most sense of a verse from *Qu'ran*, if he rejected it in the first place?

Rashed concludes that Razi was not undertaking a wholesale rejection of Islam and prophecy, but merely participating in an exegetical debate about a the Qu'rānic verse by proposing a compelling interpretation grounded in his system of five eternals (2000, pp. 51-54). Rashed's case so far merely provides a negative thesis about Razi's views on prophecy—that he did not reject it. It leaves open which role Razi could have in his system for prophecy. Rashed in a subsequent article (2008) builds on this case and provides a positive role for prophecy in the Razian system. According to Rashed, prophets act as “envoys of reason” for Razi (Rashed 2008, p. 175-178), meaning that God's gift of reason is materialized as prophets' actions and sayings.

There are two recent contributions to this debate by Philippe Vallat (2015) and Adamson (2021a). Vallat disputes the conclusion Rashed drew from the passages by Fakhr al-Dīn and defends the heretical interpretation. Vallat's main claim is that God's bestowing reason on the Soul is all the revelation there is in Razi's system and this leaves no room for prophecy. He makes the case in two different ways: (i) by refuting Rashed's analysis of Fakhr al-Dīn's passages and (ii) bringing new evidence for the heretical interpretation from Ka'bi.<sup>16</sup> Vallat suggests that the passage which has Razi treating prophets' sayings and actions as evidence actually has Razi *granting these claims for the sake of the argument* to show that even his opponents claims contradict a consistent reading of Al Imran 14 and passages from Maqdisī (quoting Ka'bi) support the passages from Abū Ḥātim in painting a heretic picture for Razi.

Agreeing with Rashed, Adamson (2021a) argues that passages from al-Maqdisī never name Razi or Ka'bi, which puts their attribution of them to Razi-Ka'bi debate in doubt. Adamson also provides a new context for the passages from Abū Ḥātim, where he argues that Razi's target in these passages are not prophets—Razi merely intends them to be anti-*imāmate* where *imāms* are understood as so-called leaders who claim to be successors to the Prophet. Ismā'īlīs such as Abū Ḥātim and in general Shia groups espoused the necessity of such leaders (Adam-

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<sup>16</sup>Passages from Ka'bi are provided by al-Maqdisī. See *al-Maqdisī (1899-1919)* for the manuscript along with its French translation.



son 2021a, §6.3). According to Adamson this gave Abū Ḥātim a political motive to frame Razi as a general critic of religion and prophecy, since this way he could make Razi sound less acceptable to Islamic scholars of his time (cf. Walker 1992, p. 89). The strife brought up by Razi is then explained by the chaos caused by *imāms* in the succession to the prophet.<sup>17</sup>

I find Vallat and Adamson's responses somewhat wanting. According to Vallat, Razi is merely using its opponent's position for a *reductio* (Vallat 2015, p. 216). However, this is not the case, since we do not find in Fakhr al-Dīn as the same tone of a *reductio* argument as we find in Abū Ḥātim (2011, p. 1). This suggests that Razi is merely assuming his opponent's position for a *reductio*. He seems to genuinely take prophets' actions and sayings as evidence for his interpretation of Al Imran 14. There are also other places where Razi seems to acknowledge prophets and holy texts (e.g. al-Rāzī 1950, pp. 44-46; al-Rāzī 2019, §2.1, pp. 7-9). Also Adamson points out (2021a, p. 151) that the evidence from al-Maḡdisī which matches the passages from Abū Ḥātim's *Proofs of Prophecy* names only Brahmanism rather than Razi. If Vallat is right that al-Maḡdisī is accurately quoting from Ka'bi-Razi debate, we cannot ignore his attribution of the anti-prophetic view to Brahmanism rather than Razi.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, I find Adamson's defense of Rashed also somewhat wanting. This defense makes the bitter commentary in the introduction mysterious. Even if Abū Ḥātim was biased in his account and framed Razi in a generally anti-prophetic way to serve the Ismā'īlī agenda, this does not explain why non-Ismā'īlī Bīrūnī labels Razi a heretic. Bīrūnī claims to have read *On Prophecies* and takes this book to have "corrupted [Razi]'s thought, tongue and pen" (al-Bīrūnī 1936, p. 3; Deuraseh 2008, p. 59). This calls into doubt the claim that the heresy attributed to Razi was merely due to Abū Ḥātim's anti-prophetic framing of Razi's remarks against particular Ismā'īlī doctrines. In short, neither the heretic nor the conservative interpretation seems to do justice to all the evidence available.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>See Turner 2006 (p. 194) for an account of these events.

<sup>18</sup>See Stroumsa (1985) and Stroumsa 1999 (§1) for a detailed discussion of prophecy in the context of Brahmanism.

<sup>19</sup>A helpful reviewer notes that Bīrūnī himself may have been influenced by Abū Ḥātim's framing. This would have been true if Bīrūnī had read a corrupted copy of *On Prophecies* or merely based his claim on Abū Ḥātim's *Proofs of Prophecy*. The latter seems unlikely, since Bīrūnī refers directly to *On Prophecies*. The former is unclear, given that there is no evidence as to whether Bīrūnī's copy of *On Prophecies* was corrupted. The reviewer also notes Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064) as a non-Ismā'īlī critic of Razi. Ibn Ḥazm claims to have read *On Divine Science* (al-Rāzī 1939, p. 170).

### 3 Primacy of the primary sources

I do not mean my remarks so far to be decisive against the above interpretations, but merely to suggest that going with either requires us to ignore compelling evidence. I will instead focus on primary Razian sources to settle some of the questions about prophecy to the extent primary sources allow it. We remarked above that none of Razi's primary sources directly on prophecy survived. However, some of the primary sources, especially *Spiritual Physick* and some medical texts, still provide us with important, yet indirect clues to Razi's views on prophecy, or so I will argue.

In order to make sense of the evidence I will adduce, we should start with what we have meant so far by *prophecy*. Prophets are usually taken to utter divine revelations or accurately predict future events. Such features are charged with superhuman features, whose legitimacy in our context is somewhat dubious, so I will set the supernatural features aside until §6. There seems to be one common feature of prophets: they act as moral guides either by their actions or enunciations. For instance, Jesus's *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5, 6, 7) is mainly about moral teachings. There is also a special emphasis on the moral quality of Muhammad. Even before his prophecy, most of the lore around Muhammad is centred around his moral qualities, e.g. trustworthiness and truthfulness (Ishāq 1955, p. 86). Further Muhammad's moral qualities and his role as a moral teacher figure prominently in Islam.<sup>20</sup> The role of moral guidance is a necessary feature of prophecy, since if people uniformly displayed perfect moral character, the presence of prophets would be redundant. The legitimacy of prophecy requires that people be sometimes in need of deferring to the moral judgments of prophets.

Razi explicitly affirms the rationality of moral deference in *Spiritual Physick*, one of his few surviving works. Razi's *Spiritual Physick* is a book on practical ethics, which serves both as a defense of basic principles of practical rationality and a list of virtues and vices compatible with these basic principles. Its style and structure resembles *Doctrine of Virtue* in Immanuel Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (1991) in that both concern the virtues to be acquired and fostered in accordance with reason. In *Spiritual Physick* Razi explicitly states that humans, even if endowed with reason, are not always self-sufficient in discovering or maintaining awareness of their own vices. Razi claims that our vices are not always transparent to us and he recommends the reader to rely on moral experts in such situations (al-Rāzī 1939, pp. 33-34; al-Rāzī

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<sup>20</sup>Qu'rān emphasizes the moral teacher aspect in many places (Al Ahzab 21; At Tawbah 128). Much of *ḥadīth* also involves Muhammad teaching moral lessons (Sahih Muslim, 1826; 2593-4). A reviewer helpfully notes that Ghazali in *al-Munqidh min ad-Dalāl* (*Deliverance from Error*) (English trans. Watt 1952, pp. 41-43) also seems to treat Muhammad's good conduct as further evidence for the legitimacy of his prophecy.

1950, p. 36):

Inasmuch as it is impossible for any of us to deny his passion, because of the affection he has for his own self and the approval and admiration he feels for his own actions, or to look upon his own character and way of life with the pure and single eye of reason, it can scarcely fall to any man to have a clear view of his vices and reprehensible habits. Since the knowledge of this is denied him, he will hardly depart out of any vice, seeing that he is not even aware of it; much less will he think it disgraceful and endeavour to be rid of it. He must therefore rely in this matter upon an intelligent man who is his frequent associate and constant companion.

We learn an important thing from this passage. Due to our passion all of us are prone to losing sight of our own vices and we may not be aware of these vices no matter how hard we try. This is why Razi recommends we keep mentors around to remind us of our vices. Razi believes that a rational agent may fail to attain the necessary moral knowledge in certain circumstances by themselves and in those circumstances morally deferring to moral mentors is rational. David Enoch (2014) recently defended the rationality of moral deference on similar grounds where he argues one agent can rationally defer to another due to opacity of evidence and risk of moral harm. For instance, if you are unsure which way to go in a referendum on war and your friend has a more reliable track record of being right about such issues, then you are not only permitted but also required to defer to their judgment despite the identity of evidence and rational capacities at hand.

The passage above is not the only one where Razi endorses rationality of moral deference. In the chapter entitled *Of Greed* (al-Rāzī 1950, pp. 75-76), Razi narrates an interaction with a gluttonous man who seems unaware of his vice and Razi convinces the man with a dialectical (rather than philosophical) argument to give up on his gluttony. Not only does Razi convince the individual out of his vice, but he also speaks highly of merely dialectical as opposed to philosophical arguments to establish good behavior in others (al-Rāzī 1950, p. 76).

Razi grounds the rationality of moral deference in the dominance of passions over reason. In Razian metaphysics human nature is divided into passion and reason. Passions stem from the nature of the Soul, whereas reason is a gift from God as an act of benevolence and mercy and hence merely external to human nature. Without directives from reason humans are inclined to follow the drives of the passion and not those of reason. This is why Razi claims vices

are disposed to return, even if they are rid of several times (al-Rāzī 1939, p. 34; al-Rāzī 1950, 37):

Moreover, [one] must renew his request to such a supervisor<sup>21</sup> time and time again, for evil characteristics and habits have a way of returning after they have been expelled.

Even though reason separates humans from non-human animals according to Razi, humans are still intrinsically governed by passions rather than by reason just like non-human animals.<sup>22</sup> Relatedly, Razi also suggests (1950, p. 76) that it is possible to confuse demands of passions with demands of reason. His example is confusion of eating for pleasure (a demand of passion) with eating for survival (a demand of reason).

Razi's admission of the rationality of moral deference in certain circumstances not only satisfies one of the necessary conditions for prophecy, but it also provides a positive role for it. Since Razi deems moral deference to be required in certain circumstances, prophecy may be required in situations where there is a large group of individuals who are rational, but cannot introspectively discover their own vices and eschew them. In religious lore, such events are usually marked both in the form of warnings and moral lessons by prophets. Importantly, I am not claiming that rationality of moral deference establishes prophecy for Razi. I merely claim that Razi seems to incorporate a necessary feature of prophecy in his ethical system and that this makes room for prophecy. My case provides a *pro tanto* reason for Razi's not only having room, but also a positive role for prophecy.

One may object at this point to our use of the evidence from *Spiritual Physick* for Razi's views on prophecy.<sup>23</sup> Razi openly adopts his stance on moral deference from Galen (al-Rāzī 1950, p. 37; cf. Galen 1963, pp. 31-37). This links Razi's affirmation of moral deference to Galen

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<sup>21</sup>Razi uses *musharaf* مشرف for "supervisor" (al-Rāzī 1939, p. 34). Its root *sharaf* شرف means honor. "Mentor" would bring out the positive connotation for *musharaf* better than Arberry's "supervisor".

<sup>22</sup>For Razi non-human animals are also ensouled like humans, but they do not possess reason. This makes them wholly subservient to their passions. The primacy of passions for humans manifests itself very interestingly in Arabic. Razi uses *nafs* نَفْس for the universal Soul (al-Rāzī 1939, p. 12). The term *nafs* also prominently figures in the Qu'rān in both universal (Nisa 1) and individualistic senses (Baqarah 48). The word derives from *nafas* نَفَس, which means to breathe. Etymologically speaking, passions are very much tied to the life itself through breathing. The term *'aql* عقل, on the other hand, originates from *'ql* قَل, which means to bind or tie, which lacks this primacy for biological human functioning. See al-Rāzī 1950 (§2), Adamson (2012) and Montasari and Faramarz-Qaramaleki (2021) for Razi's views on animals.

<sup>23</sup>Thanks to a reviewer for raising this very important issue and helpful discussion here.

and hence to a secular ethical tradition going back to ancient Greece.<sup>24</sup> Relatedly, many esteemed scholars of Razi also stress the non-religious tone of *Spiritual Physick*.<sup>25</sup> For instance, Mohaghegh notes (1967, p. 8) that Razi’s rational ethics in *Spiritual Physick* was condemned by his contemporary theologians. Arberry (al-Rāzī 1950, p. ii), Goodman (1996, p. 201) and Druart (1997, p. 49) also emphasize the non-religious form of ethics espoused in *Spiritual Physick*. So one may worry whether the evidence from *Spiritual Physick* can support any interpretation of Razi’s views on religion and prophecy.

I have two lines of response to this worry—one historical and one philosophical. First, even though the tone of *Spiritual Physick* is non-religious, Arberry notes in his introduction to *Spiritual Physick* that it is hardly *anti*-religious (al-Rāzī 1950, p. ii). Moreover, Bar-Asher and Druart observe that Razi stays neutral on many topics in *Spiritual Physick*, e.g. soul’s immortality, in order to widen the scope of *Spiritual Physick* (Bar-Asher 1989, pp. 122-123; Druart 1997, p. 49).<sup>26</sup> This would make the lack of religious themes a choice rather than a necessary consequence of *Spiritual Physick*. Also despite his best attempts Razi finds himself having to deal with religious themes in *Spiritual Physick* and his treatment is far from anti-religious. For instance, Razi argues that carnal love is a vice against those who claimed otherwise by pointing out prophets’ affliction by it (al-Rāzī 1939, pp. 43-45; al-Rāzī 1950, pp. 44-47). If anywhere, this would be an opportunity for Razi to further denounce prophets on account of such affliction. However, this is not what Razi does—he carefully argues that prophets’ affliction with carnal love was merely a “slip” and not a virtue they upheld. This careful treatment makes most sense against the background of Razi assuming a generally virtuous nature for prophets contrary to Abū Ḥātim’s report of Razi’s remarks in *Proofs of Prophecy*. So *Spiritual Physick* is neither sterile of religious themes nor is its content ineligible as evidence for Razi’s views on religion.

Second, my argument concerns a conceptual link between one of the roles for prophets and whether Razi has room for such a role in his system. Given that the debate around Razi’s

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<sup>24</sup>Al-Kindī before Razi and al-Jawzī and al-Jurjānī after Razi all produced works similar to *Spiritual Physick*. See Mohaghegh 1967 (p. 7) and references therein for further discussion.

<sup>25</sup>For extensive scholarly work on *Spiritual Physick*, see Mohaghegh (1967), Bar-Asher (1989), Goodman (1996), Druart (1997), Rémi Brague’s introduction to his French translation of *Spiritual Physick* (Brague 2003) and Adamson 2021a (§8).

<sup>26</sup>Bar-Asher takes his arguments to support the heretical interpretation (1989, pp. 143-145). So to the extent our arguments support the conservative interpretation, they also speak against Bar-Asher’s position. Druart, despite her disagreement with Bar-Asher’s charge of incoherence against Razi between *Spiritual Physick* and *Philosophers’ Way of Life*, also endorses the heretical interpretation (1997, p. 51). However, given *Spiritual Physick*’s neutrality about religion, their main evidence for Razi’s heresy must come from Abū Ḥātim, which should be reconsidered in light of Rashed and Adamson’s findings.

views on prophecy from secondhand sources reached a deadlock, I take such conceptual links to be indirect evidence for Razi's views and hence crucial to resolving this deadlock. Razi's endorsement of moral deference in *Spiritual Physick* seems to be a non-trivial piece of first-hand evidence for moving the debate further. So even if *Spiritual Physick* is manifestly non-religious, its conceptual resources seem to contribute to the debate about Razi's views on prophecy. This will become clearer in the next section when I illustrate how my argument bears on the debate between the heretical and conservative interpretations.

#### 4 Moral deference and extant interpretations

So far I have made the case that there is room for prophecy in Razi's thought based on his admission of moral deference. How does this position stand with respect to the literature? Vallat claims that intrapersonal examination with reason is all that is needed for moral knowledge for Razi (Vallat 2015, pp. 233-234). Vallat makes this case by focusing on an argument in Fakhr al-Dīn's *Exalted Topics* (1987, vol. 8, p. 29) where Razi argues for the redundancy of prophecy based on the individuals' self-sufficiency through use of reason for moral knowledge.<sup>27</sup> But the evidence from *Spiritual Physick* suggests that people are sometimes in need of moral experts to defer for moral knowledge, meaning that sometimes intrapersonal examination is not sufficient. Is Razi contradicting himself? I take this conflict to be superficial. When we disambiguate the sufficiency of reason as a foundation for moral knowledge from exercise of reason to obtain moral knowledge, the conflict disappears. Even though reason may suffice as a foundation for moral knowledge, hence voiding the need for an external foundation such as prophets, people are not always in situations to exercise the full capacity of their reason. These are exactly the situations where moral deference becomes rational. So even though I believe in sympathy with Rashed that Razi allows for prophecy because of people's inability to exercise their reason as per the evidence from *Spiritual Physick*, I can also agree with Vallat if all he means by self-sufficiency of reason is that reason is *foundationally* sufficient for moral knowledge without the need for any external foundation such as prophets.

As far as I can see, Vallat does not acknowledge such a distinction for Razi, but can he? There are two ways such acknowledgement would undermine Vallat's case. First, the evidence the distinction is based on is inimical to the main evidence Vallat adduces for the heretical interpretation: individuals' self-sufficiency through use of reason for moral knowledge (Vallat

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<sup>27</sup>Vallat (2015, p. 234) emphasizes the intrapersonal aspect through linguistic analysis of the term *mu'tabiran* (on one's own/through personal examination) found in the same passage from Fakhr al-Dīn.

2015, pp. 233-234). Second, such acknowledgement would concede some room for a Razian conception of prophecy based on moral guidance when people fail to exercise the full capacity of their reason. Since Vallat interprets Razi to have no room for prophecy (2015, p. 242), he must reject this distinction. Vallat may claim that Razi may have advocated for moral deference and hence have room for prophecy without endorsing it. However, this possibility is no refuge, since Vallat makes the stronger claim that Razi has no room for prophecy. So Razi's endorsement of moral deference in *Spiritual Physick* is in tension with Vallat's contention. Importantly, this tension is due to one of Vallat's main reasons for endorsing the heretical interpretation: individuals' self-sufficiency thanks to reason for knowledge of vice and virtues in all situations.

By contrast, Rashed claims that prophets are envoys of reason. Insofar as I can tell, he is not claiming that prophets are the *only* source for reason-based knowledge. This would contradict Razi's general praise of reason at the beginning of *Spiritual Physick* (al-Rāzī 1939, p. 18; al-Rāzī 1950, p. 20):

For by Reason we have comprehended the manufacture and use of ships, so that we have reached unto distant lands divided from us by the seas; by it we have achieved medicine with its many uses to the body, and all the other arts that yield us profit.

Rashed cannot mean reason-based knowledge *in general* is conveyed *only* through prophets, since the knowledge which led to the achievements in the passage is not conveyed by prophets. But if we restrict Rashed's claim to moral knowledge, Rashed can concur that Razi does not reject reason as the foundation for moral knowledge by agreeing with our claim that prophets convey moral knowledge founded on reason (2008, p. 178). So Rashed can take our conclusion on board and endorse moral guidance as one of the positive roles prophecy serves in Razi's system.

Rashed and Vallat agree that Razi is a rationalist *tout court*, but they disagree about whether such all-encompassing rationalism leaves any room for prophecy.<sup>28</sup> I have argued that Razi's rationalism leaves room for prophecy as part of endorsing rationality of moral deference in certain situations. Rashed's view seems to accommodate our conclusion, whereas Vallat's does not. In order to accommodate the evidence from *Spiritual Physick*, Vallat should loosen his insistence on individuals' universal self-sufficiency for obtaining moral knowledge

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<sup>28</sup>Thanks to a reviewer for very helpful discussion here.

through reason. But loosening such insistence is correlated with making room for prophecy as I have argued above. Furthermore, Adamson openly says that he is convinced of Rashed's case and their position is nearly the same (Adamson 2021a, p. 123). Adamson, by extension, should also agree with our conclusion that Razian conception of prophecy is based on the fact that people fail to fully exercise their rational capacities at all times and sometimes require moral deference. Adamson, in fact, asserts exactly our position as a conjecture in his discussion of Vallat's view (2021a, p. 149). Whereas Adamson merely puts this claim forward as a conjecture, I have justified it with the evidence from *Spiritual Physick*.

## 5 Supporting conditions for moral deference

So far I have argued that rationality of moral deference in certain situations makes room for a Razian conception of prophecy. Even though rationality of moral deference is necessary to prophecy and Razi endorses it, it is not by itself sufficient. Not every moral expert is a prophet. As a helpful reviewer notes, *Spiritual Physick* is a book of moral expertise, but Razi himself does not claim prophethood. Further it is one thing to have moral experts and another to have people actually defer to moral experts in time of need. A prophet's moral expertise must be acknowledged by a group of people, if the prophet will be an effective moral guide for them. Here I will draw attention to some passages from *Spiritual Physick* as well as Razi's mostly ignored political treatise *On the signs of a prosperous state* which suggest further features of prophecy in connection with moral expertise.

The properties I will discuss target complementary features for people to actually defer to a moral expert. After all one may be a moral expert in terms of having infallible moral judgment, but if people do not respect their opinion, the material impact of such experts will be nominal. Albeit indirectly, Razi provides us with some clues as to what these properties may be. First, since prophets are moral experts and moral knowledge is obtained by reason for Razi, they need to have excellent command of reason. Second, prophets should be able to address individuals from many different backgrounds. For instance, philosophers and more learned people may require philosophical arguments for conviction, whereas people who have not undergone such training may not be convinced by such arguments, since it would be opaque to them. Razi extols the dialectic capacity for this reason (al-Rāzī 1939, p.41; al-Rāzī 1950, p. 76):

I saw that [the gluttonous man] understood my meaning, and that my words



went home and did him good; and upon my life, such [dialectical] reasoning as this satisfies those who have not been trained in the discipline of philosophy, more than arguments based on philosophic principles.

Third, prophets should be those who are already respected to a degree. Otherwise no matter how wise an individual is, it will be practically impossible for them to have other people listen to their advice in the first place let alone follow it. Razi talks about this quality most openly in his neglected work *On the signs of a prosperous state* (al-Rāzī 1939, p. 137):

Another indication of a good ruler is when those around a person, even before they have attained a position or the ability to do good or bad to others, highly value and view that person as an authority.

Even though Razi remarks this of rulers, this seems equally true of an individual who is expected to remind people of their vices and convince them to move away from them. Sometimes this may even be of necessity to make people listen to one's advice in the first place.<sup>29</sup> So a natural amount of charisma, authority and respect seems also necessary for a prophet in order that they may effectively communicate with a group of individuals unaware of their vices and induce a change of behavior on them.

One often invoked feature for prophecy is divine revelation. Would divine revelation be necessary for a Razian conception of prophecy? In one sense, the answer is no. All of the features I have brought up so far do not require any divine intervention to manifest. But there is a trivial way for Razi in which the answer is yes. In Razian cosmogony, reason is God's gift for every individual. For Razi this is all the revelation a prophet would need. This is a thin sense of revelation, but revelation all the same. No individual is singled out for prophecy in principle, though in actuality some may exercise their capacity to a greater extent than others, which may look like divine selection in isolation just like some people may exercise their mathematical or dialectical skills to a greater degree than others. Razi practically gives this answer to Abū Ḥātim in response to his query about how Razi can oppose prophets or *imāms* given that Razi himself appears chosen for philosophy and medical sciences (Abū Ḥātim 2011, p. 2):

[Abū Ḥātim] says: “[...] Despite this, you yourself claim that you have been singled out for expert knowledge in the philosophical sciences, while others have

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<sup>29</sup>This makes sense in the Islamic context where religious leaders coincide with political leaders. Fārābī and Ibn Sina especially saw both a ruler and philosopher in prophets. See [Strauss and Bartlett \(1990\)](#) for a discussion of Fārābī's notion and [Morris \(1992\)](#) for Ibn Sina's.

been denied this and been made to need you, so that you make it necessary for them to learn from you and to emulate you."

[Razi] says: "I was not singled out for this to the exclusion of others. I simply pursued this assiduously, while others did not. Other people were denied such knowledge, not because of any deficiency in themselves but because they chose not to engage in rational investigation."

There may be more indirect clues in Razi's works, but I think this sufficient for a proof of concept and perhaps starting point for further research. In sum, I have argued that Razi has room for prophecy as part of his acknowledgement of the rationality of moral deference in certain situations. I have also suggested some indirect features from Razi's writings to support moral expertise as a necessary feature for prophecy. I will not argue that these properties along with moral expertise are jointly sufficient. Razi seems to have at least room for prophecy in virtue of prophets' functioning as moral guides.

## 6 Prophetic miracles

Our case so far supports the conservative interpretation over the heretic one simply in virtue of having a place for prophecy. In this section I will present some evidence against one of the commitments of the conservative interpretation—prophetic miracles. Denying prophetic miracles will establish my final position: Razi endorses a rationalized and naturalized conception of prophecy rather than one which requires miracles or revelation. I aim to make the case against miracles in two steps: (i) by disputing Rashed's conclusion from his evidence adduced for Razi's affirmation of miracles and (ii) by providing independent confirmation for Abū Ḥātim's report of Razi's rejection of miracles. In the lore of Abrahamic religions one feature that distinguishes prophets from regular people is the performance of miracles by the former. For instance, Moses is said to have transmuted his staff into a serpent and Jesus is said to have resurrected Lazarus of Bethany from the dead. What does Razi think about miracles?

Here we are in the realm of conflicting evidence from secondhand sources again. Abū Ḥātim attributes to Razi a wholesale rejection of prophetic miracles (Abū Ḥātim 2011, p. 200):

[Razi] had alleged that the performers of legerdemain and magical tricks, such as dancing upon halters and spinning upon the points of spears and other such tricks that many people can perform, were also to be called miracles. He even

compared them to the miracles of Muhammad. [...] [Razi] alleged that the signs (*a'lam*) of Muḥammad were transmitted by [only] one, two or three people, who could have been colluding with one another.

On the other hand, Rashed points out a passage from an anonymous source from the Mu'tazilite school of Abū Hāshīm al-Jubbā'ī (888-933), who quotes Razi acknowledging the possibility of miracles (Rashed 2008, p. 179):

[Razi] said: "It is not impossible that there is among people someone who masters the properties of things and their nature, because everything is distinguished by a property and a nature. So it is not impossible that Moses, peace be upon him, mastered something similar to what is distinguished among bodies by a similar property, which is why his hand did what the hand of another did not do, the transformation of the staff into a serpent".

Before we rule on the evidence at hand, we should clarify what is meant by a *miracle*. A miracle is a violation of natural laws (Hume 1748/2007, p. 83). Given this definition, the reason why miracles must have looked indispensable for prophecy is clear. Miracles would exemplify an intervention by God on behalf of a prophet, distinguishing prophets from regular people whose acts are strictly bounded by natural laws.<sup>30</sup> This implies that if Razi acknowledged the possibility of miracles by prophets, as Rashed claims, then he must have acknowledged violations of natural laws.

However, Rashed's passage does not show such acknowledgement by Razi. If anything, the passage suggests that Razi is trying to explain the would-be miracle in a naturalistic way. All Razi acknowledges is that Moses might have exploited some alchemical technique to transmute his staff. According to Razi, such alchemical techniques are within the bounds of nature and neither require nor entail any violation of natural laws.<sup>31</sup> A regular person in principle could bring about a similar effect by learning the alchemical technique employed by Moses, if there was one, and this would nullify the exclusivity of would-be miracles to prophets. So we cannot conclude, as Rashed does, that Razi acknowledges the possibility of miracles from this passage.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>This is explicitly invoked in the Qu'rān (Ghafir 78). See also Rahman 2009 (pp. 45-47) for further discussion of this point.

<sup>31</sup>See al-Rāzī 2014 (p. 47). Adamson suggests two possible philosophical upshots of Razi's work on alchemy (Adamson 2021a, §4.4). Our argument here suggests a third upshot in the context of miracles.

<sup>32</sup>Rashed notes an important difference between two sources of evidence to discard the heretical implication

Even if we reject Rashed's conclusion, there is still the question about the legitimacy of Abū Ḥātim's quote. It is not clear at first if this is part of Abū Ḥātim's politically biased framing of Razi. In fact, if Adamson is right, we should expect Abū Ḥātim to frame Razi in a politically biased way on exactly topics like this. However, we can dispel such suspicion. Abū Ḥātim's report can be supported from hitherto unnoticed medical writings by Razi himself. Pormann (2005) notes Razi's concern about charlatans in medicine—so great was his concern that he devoted a whole section in the ninth volume of *Kitāb al-Manṣūrī* (*The Book for Mansur*).<sup>33</sup> Steinschneider (1866) also compiled a selection of Razi's remarks from his medical ethics. There are quite a number of them, but what follows is a particularly humorous episode which evidences Razi's attitude towards miracles (Steinschneider 1866, pp. 577-578, my translation):

Another man came to the countryside, settled in an inn near the market of the city, and announced himself as one who could perform enchantments and the like. [...] A number of older and younger people of the city had gathered around him. The consultant gave a man a plate, instructed him to empty and clean his house and leave the plate there. One day, the same man reported that he could not find the plate in his house. The man replied, "Lift up the carpet on which you are standing and take it." When he did so, he was commanded to take it back home and fumigate it with an incense that was given to him. Then an unknown script emerged on the plate, and the man brought it back. After that, he was commanded to throw it away, and told that he would find a certain type of magic in a certain place in his house, which also happened. This strengthened the admiration and faith of the people in him.

So far the story is a detailed description of a street trickster, but Razi continues with a more educational take on what one should do with such trickery (*ibid.*):

However, my colleagues and I investigated the matter with great care for a while, but could not get anything out of the man himself because he was a fraudster

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of Abū Ḥātim's evidence (2008, pp. 178-179). The former is about Muhammad, whereas the latter is about Moses. This matters, because the status of miracles for Muhammad was an open topic of debate during Razi's time, even though Biblical miracles such as Moses's were more readily accepted (van Ess 1997, §D.4.2.2; English trans. van Ess and Goldbloom 2019, pp. 701-715). But this is immaterial to our argument, since it only disputes the conclusion Rashed draws from the evidence about Moses.

<sup>33</sup>For English trans. of some passages, see Freind 1750. See also Iskandar 1959 for translation and discussion of many passages from Razi's medical writings.

who was not easily willing to confess. I had, however, become convinced that the trick was in the plate and that the second one placed under the blanket was different. Therefore, I arranged for several plates to be requested from him for a long time, kept them with me, while people had to tell him that they could not find them. So, according to his method, he ordered them to lift the blanket, where the substitute was located. After I was sure about this, I still lacked an explanation of how the plate disappeared in the houses. After thinking for a long time, and with the plates multiplying in my possession, I smelled individual ones and came up with the trick. Namely, he made two very similar plates, coated one with cheese, and dug into the other what he wanted [and coated it with] fig milk, so that it turned black in heat or smoke. He first gave the one coated with cheese, and if left in the empty house, the mouse would come and drag it away. If this did not happen, he commanded the man to fumigate the house and look for an even darker one, further away from the residence of people, and not to come back until the plate had disappeared. *Therefore, one should never give up hope of discovering the tricks of such people, even if it takes a long time, and even if they are of very different kinds.*

This is not an isolated curiosity, either (Steinschneider 1866, p. 578). The passage from Abū Ḥātim has an uncannily similar tone to the passages from the medical writings and there is no reason why Razi should change this attitude towards miracles. Razi also seems to encourage everyone to do everything in their power to uncover and debunk such tricks. Razi must have thought that even if these tricks sound harmless, they might be exploited to take advantage of people. This would explain why Razi took such pains to uncover the causal mechanism of these tricks and encourage everyone to do the same. It would be unsurprising to find that these stories figured prominently in Razi's lost work *Fī Hiyaḷ al-Mutanabbīn (On the Tricks of False Prophets)* and Razi used such stories to caution people in mistaking such tricks as miracles.

Even though Razi seems to reject miracles as violations of natural laws, a weaker, *epistemic* sense of miracles may be consistent with Razi's attitude towards the anecdote about Moses. Such miracles may consist in an event not as a violation of natural laws, but an event whose natural causes are *merely unknown* to its observers.<sup>34</sup> Anyone can bring about a weak miracle by bringing about an event where they are the only individual knowledgeable of the underlying natural mechanism. Weak conception renders miracles available to anyone in principle

<sup>34</sup>Ghazālī discusses a similar notion of miracles (2000, pp. 169-170), though ignorance for him is not of natural causes, but of God's will.

and it prevents miracles from being a distinctive feature of prophets. Razi's main concern seems to be the exploitation of such an asymmetry in knowledge of the causal mechanism of these events. This is why Razi implores his readers to debunk tricks—so that these events look no longer miraculous to them. I believe this gets at the heart of Razi's selection of *trick* (*ḥiyāl* حيل) instead of *miracle* (*mū'jizat* معجزة) in his *Fī Ḥiyāl al-Mutanabbīn* (*On the Tricks of False Prophets*).

Does Razi's rejection of strong miracles imply rejection of prophecy? This depends on whether miracles *qua* violations of natural laws are necessary for prophecy. If miracles *qua* violations of natural laws are necessary, then the evidence suggests that Razi rejected prophecy. But if the weaker sense of miracles is all that is needed for prophecy, then Razi does not necessarily reject prophecy.<sup>35</sup> I see this as the best option for Razi—a naturalized conception of prophecy. A miracle associated with prophecy may involve Moses's would-be knowledge of alchemy which would allow him to transmute his staff. Seeing miracles and prophecy in this way suggests other achievements of prophets as candidates for miracles as well. For instance, some adopted the Qu'rān as Muhammad's only miracle.<sup>36</sup> One common proposal was to treat the Qu'rān as an *inimitable* literary miracle. There may be a natural explanation for Muhammad's eloquence, e.g. being from Quraysh, a tribe with general literary aptitude (see [van Ess 1997](#), §8.2.2.3.1.3; English trans. [van Ess and Goldbloom 2019](#), pp. 371-372), but without an explanation of this form such eloquence may have looked miraculous. In conclusion, Razi's remarks about miracles requires a modification to the conservative interpretation, if the conservative interpretation is committed to the sense of miracles as violations of natural laws.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that Razian conception of prophecy must be natural rather than supernatural.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Adopting the weaker conception of miracles makes the question of how to tell apart a miracle from a trick all the more important. This topic is raised in the Qu'rān (Adh-Dhariyat 52). Mu'tazilite Jāḥiẓ wrote a whole treatise on this question and Ibn al-Rawandi raised some tough issues for the Mu'tazilite contention. See [van Ess 1997](#), §D.4.2.2 (English trans. [van Ess and Goldbloom 2019](#), pp. 713-714) and references therein.

<sup>36</sup>See [Larkin \(1988\)](#) for a thorough discussion.

<sup>37</sup>A helpful reviewer raises the worry that our considerations here do not rule out the possibility that Razi may have only attacked the tricks of the *false* prophets while acknowledging miracles for genuine prophets. I agree with the reviewer that this is indeed possible, since none of my considerations definitively rules out this possibility. My aim was to bring further evidence for Razi's general skepticism about miracles. I did this in two ways. First, I brought passages from Razi's medical writings, which resemble the passages of Razi denouncing miracles in *Proofs of Prophecy*. Second, I disputed the conclusion Rashed draws from the passage where Razi discusses Moses' turning his staff into a serpent. This detail particularly supports Razi's skepticism of strong miracles due to his explaining away the miracle in a naturalistic way. If Razi thought these events are strong miracles in the form of divine interventions, his attempts to explain away Moses' would-be miracle in terms of Moses' knowledge of alchemy would make no sense. Even if these two points do not logically rule out the possibility of Razi accepting strong miracles for prophets, they significantly undermine its plausibility.

<sup>38</sup>Given that Adamson takes Razi to reject the existence of miracles (at least for Muhammad; [2021a](#), p. 143),

## 7 Conclusion

Where does the preceding discussion leave us? On the one hand, I argued that moral expertise is an important and distinctive necessary condition for prophecy, and Razi explicitly endorses it. This provides a positive role for prophecy, which seems to have been performed by the lore of many Abrahamic prophets. On the other, I made the case that Razi rejected miracles *qua* violations of natural laws. These two contentions suggest a rationalized and naturalized conception of prophecy for Razi—rationalized, because prophets must be in robust command of their reason, so much so that other people can consistently rely on them for moral issues, and naturalized, because there is no divine intervention for prophecy in the Razian picture; whatever characteristics distinguish prophets are to be found by way of natural explanations. In a departure from existing interpretations which are mainly based on secondhand reports of Razi, I have stuck to primary sources by Razi. This immunizes my argument against two of the common complaints raised in the literature on Razi: the reliability of the secondhand source as a fair reporter of Razi as in the case of Abū Ḥātim and the unnamed reports attributed to Razi due to their content as in the case of al-Maqdisī.

I would like to end with a brief discussion of how our proposal fares with respect to both Bīrūnī, Ibn Sina and Maimonides’s withering criticisms in the introduction and Razi’s title which seems suspiciously conservative. The former is usually ignored by the conservative interpretation and the latter is ignored by the heretical interpretation. Our account strikes a nice balance. For the latter, prophecy as moral guidance does justice to the conservative titles in Razi’s biobibliographies, e.g. *Obligation to Propagate the Teachings of the Holy Prophet Against Those who Denied Prophecies* (item 138 in al-Bīrūnī 1936; Deuraseh 2008). Much of the account about Muhammad’s life involves him teaching moral lessons (Sahih Muslim, 1826; 2593-4). If we see prophets as moral teachers, there is no mystery in this title—it is the prophet’s moral teachings which should be propagated according to Razi. The withering criticism is explained by Razi’s tendency to naturalize aspects of prophecy which may be seen as miraculous and tied to divine intervention. It is easy to see how untethering prophecy from divine intervention could have been viewed as heretical. On the whole, our account appears promising not only based on the status of evidence it is based on, but also the justice it does to the reaction to Razi’s philosophy.

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but not the legitimacy of prophecy, his position is congenial to the naturalized conception of miracles we have espoused here. Adamson also interprets Rashed’s evidence of Moses in a naturalized way as we do (2021a, p. 144). Given our taxonomy of miracles, I take Adamson’s position to be congenial to mine.

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