CHAPTER 5

The Cognitive Therapy of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*

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1 Introduction

This chapter is a theoretical exploration of *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī* ("Spiritual Medicine") by Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925),[1] analysing the book's overarching argument. It aims to demonstrate that al-Rāzī's work constitutes a sustained effort to elaborate and defend three interconnected claims. Firstly, it posits that vice and psychic ailment stem from epistemic deficiencies, where individuals may lack a complete understanding of what is good or the consequences of their actions. Secondly, it asserts the causal efficacy of reason and moral understanding in providing incentives for individuals to believe what is right and act accordingly. Lastly, on the basis of the first two claims, al-Rāzī contends that possessing the right knowledge, under the guidance of reason, is sufficient to set one on the path of virtue and psychic well-being. By investigating these aspects, this chapter seeks to provide an understanding of al-Rāzī's significant contribution to the field of philosophical ethics and psychological therapy. This chapter begins with a brief background on al-Rāzī's life, times, and works, contextualising him within the philosophical tradition. It then moves on to discuss the key issues that reflect the book's overarching argument.

2 Al-Rāzī's Life, Times and Works

Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī was born in Rayy, present-day Iran in 250/864. In his late thirties, he embarked on the study of medicine in the ʿAbbāsid capital, Baghdad. Upon completing his studies, he practised medicine in his native city of Rayy, but he later returned to Baghdad. In both

1 The precise date of al-Rāzī's death remains a subject of disagreement, and it is beyond the scope of our current focus to discuss this matter.

places, he directed hospitals and gained fame as a distinguished physician. He enrolled in the service of local rulers, wrote many books on medicine and philosophy, and travelled extensively before he died in his native Rayy in 313/925. Despite his outspoken ideas on philosophical topics and matters of religion, he managed to lead a peaceful life, free from the types of persecution that some of his contemporaries, or near contemporaries, were subjected to, such as Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and Ibn al-Rawandī (d. 298/911), to mention but two examples from opposite sides of the theological spectrum.

Al-Rāzī lived in the Islamic golden age. During his time, Baghdad was the centre of learning in the civilised world, having benefited from the patronage of a succession of enlightened ʿAbbāsid rulers who actively supported the Arabic translations of much of the legacy of antiquity in the fields of science, medicine, and philosophy. A brief mention of the names of some the figures who lived not long before or after al-Rāzī bears witness to the intellectual achievements and riches of the Islamic civilisation at that point in time. Keeping in mind some uncertainty about the dates of some of the major thinkers of classical Islam, we can see that al-Kindī (d. 256/870), the first philosopher in Islam, died when al-Rāzī was just a child; al-Farābī (d. 339/951), known to Muslims as "the second teacher" (after Aristotle) survived al-Rāzī by some 25 years only; al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/936), one of the key figures in *kalām* (Islamic theology), outlived al-Rāzī by only 10 years; Ibn Ḥanbal, one of the central figures of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), died only 10 years before al-Rāzī was born; and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 427/1037) was born a quarter of a century after al-Rāzī's death. All this and more, attests to the fact that al-Rāzī lived during a period of intellectual ferment and creativity.

To his credit is the fact that he was a creative participant in the intellectual and scientific life of his times. His greatness of stature was such that Arthur Arberry (d. 1969) could claim that "With the possible exception of Avicenna and Averroes [...] no man so powerfully affected the course of learning in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance as Rhazes" (al-Rāzī 1950, 8). Indeed al-Rāzī's achievements were varied. He is, of course, primarily known and famous for his medical writings, which continued to be printed in Europe as late as 1866 (al-Rāzī 1950, 8). But of more interest to us here are his contributions to the fields of ethics, religion, and philosophy, where his writings were typically controversial, in fact, so unorthodox as to draw critique and censorship from nearly all sides, philosophers, jurists, and *kalām* figures. In many cases, we know about his views only through fragments preserved by his opponents in books written for rebuttal. This applies, in particular, to the infamous book *Makhārīq al-Anbiyāʾ* ("On the Tricks of the Prophets"), parts of

which survive in the rebuttal written by his namesake and countryman, the other al-Rāzī, Abū Ḥātim (d. 322/934).[2]

Al-Rāzī wrote his *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, the subject of the present chapter, at the behest of al-Manṣūr ibn Isḥāq (d. 302/915), who was governor of Rayy, between the years 290/903 and 296/909. The book was intended to be a companion volume to his medical tract known as *Kitāb al-Manṣūrī* ("The Book for al-Manṣūr") (Mohaghegh 1967, 6). In writing this book al-Rāzī has contributed to the creation of a new genre of writing about spiritual maladies and cures.[3] According to Mehdi Mohaghegh (1967, 7), several books bearing titles similar to that of al-Rāzī's own text were produced, often reviewing material covered in al-Rāzī's own book, and having similar divisions. Of these, Mohaghegh mentions Ibn al-Jawzī's (d. 597/1201) *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, and we may mention two other books, namely *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* ("The Maladies of the Soul") by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 74/693 or 75/694) and *Mudāwāt al-Nufūs* ("Remedies for the Souls") by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). We may take this to be a sign of the influence which al-Rāzī had on those who followed him.

Al-Ṭibb al-Ruḥanī is often discussed in association with *al-Sīra al-Falsafiyya* ("On Philosophical Life"), a short treatise which is commonly viewed as al-Rāzī's intellectual autobiography. On the one hand, Meir Bar-Asher (1989, 130–147) takes the view that the autobiographical treatise is inconsistent with the book: whereas *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī* is hedonistic and this-worldly, *al-Sīra al-Falsafiyya* is more concerned with the life of the intellect and the afterlife. Thérèse-Ann Druart (1996), on the other hand, has argued that the apparent inconsistency can be explained by reference to the different audiences and purposes of the two pieces of writing. Be that as it may, I shall focus solely on the book, leaving al-Rāzī's autobiographical treatise aside.

3 Al-Rāzī and the Philosophical Tradition

Al-Rāzī is often viewed as one of the "free thinkers" of classical Islam, along with such figures as Ibn al-Rāwandī, ʿUmar al-Khayyām (d. 525/1131), and

2 Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī was an Ismāʿīlī proselytiser and a critic of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. According to Sarah Stroumsa, Abū Ḥātim's *Aʿlām al-Nubuwwa* ("The Proofs of Prophecy") is "our most detailed source for al-Rāzī's anti-prophetic views" (Stroumsa 1999, 94).

3 So must we also say of al-Kindī, in reference to his memorable treatise, *al-Ḥīla li-Dafʿ al-Aḥzān* ("On the Means of Dispelling Sorrows") (al-Kindī 2007). However, al-Rāzī's contribution was more systematic and wider in scope.

Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1057). In Stroumsa's definition of the term, free thinking is the "[advocacy] of autonomous reflection on the major metaphysical and human issues, with no commitment to the monotheist tradition" (Stroumsa 1999, 9). Majid Fakhry, on the other hand, does not offer a definition of "free thinking," despite his frequent usage of the term. Instead, he proposes an understanding of al-Rāzī and other kindred spirits in the context of "the philosophical awakening that followed in the wake of the introduction of Greek philosophy, and was attended by the rise of a hitherto unknown spirit of free inquiry" (Fakhry 2004, 95). In al-Rāzī's case, this becomes evident in his belief in the sufficiency of reason for knowledge of the truth and the conduct of human life, with no reference to prophecy (Fakhry 2004, 106).

Non-specialists and people with only but a general knowledge of Islamic intellectual history tend to associate al-Rāzī's free thinking with the anti-prophetic tracts which are attributed to him. But, in fact, al-Rāzī's free-thinking reveals itself no less in his ethics than in his discussion of prophecy (see Agraygar 2018; al-Kirmānī 1997). The reason for the aforementioned association is probably the fact that al-Rāzī's views on prophecy were perceived, at least in retrospect, to have been more revolutionary and intellectually destabilising than his ethical views, which were not, on the whole, something that Islamic thought could not, at least to some degree, accommodate. As luck would have it then, the same free-thinking spirit sparked in al-Rāzī by his introduction to Greek learning climaxed, for posterity, in his anti-prophetism, rather than in the ethical system which he propounded.

Many of al-Rāzī's views on ethics and related subjects, such as moral psychology, have Greek origins. By the year 263/877 (the year in which the great translator Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq died), many philosophical works by Plato (d. 348 BC), Aristotle (d. 322 BC), and Plotinus (d. 270 CE) had been translated, and such Platonic ideas as the tripartite division of the soul (rational, spirited, and appetitive) were known to al-Rāzī. According to Fakhry, "there can be little doubt that the inspiration for his metaphysical thought is essentially Platonic" (Fakhry 2004, 100). As to his ethical ideas, Lenn Goodman has forcefully argued that al-Rāzī was a hedonist and an Epicurean (Goodman 1971, 5–26). Among many other things, al-Rāzī's well-known position on the "fear of death" adds little to what is to be found in Epicurus's (d. 270 BC) *Epistolē pros Menoikea* ("Letter to Menoeceus") (reprinted in Inwood, and Gerson 1988, 28–32). As we shall also see later in this chapter, al-Rāzī's views on the relationship between knowledge and virtue bear a clear Platonic stamp.

In this chapter, I will not offer a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the contents of *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, nor pause to comment on the many particular assertions that he makes about the sizable list of "spiritual" ailments he proposes to treat.

This has been done by other writers, notably Druart (1996) and Mohaghegh (1967). Rather, I will present a theoretical analysis of the book in terms of a few basic concepts which include the concept of practical reasoning, the idea of moral failure as an "epistemic deficiency," the causal efficacy of knowledge and understanding, and the idea of cognitive therapy.

4 Vice as Epistemic Deficiency

The first thing we must do to lay the ground for thinking in a theoretical vein about al-Rāzī's discussion of the "spiritual afflictions" (which cause and/or manifest themselves in what people do or fail to do) is to introduce the notion of practical reasoning. The notion can be briefly explained thus: people who have desires and goals, and who find themselves in situations where they must make certain practical decisions, or undertake certain actions, often engage in what might be referred to as "practical reasoning." They reason, deliberate, or consider what do, and as a result of this, they either reach a decision to do something, or they do it right away.[4] Aristotle gives a memorable example of such practical reasoning:

> I need a covering, a coat is a covering; I need a coat. What I need I ought to make, I need a coat, I make a coat. And the conclusion *I make a coat* is an action.
>
> ARISTOTLE 1978, 701a10–20

We can reasonably imagine that this bit of practical reasoning takes place in a setting (practical situation) of a certain sort, where one finds oneself needing a covering—perhaps it is getting cold, or perhaps one needs to venture outside the house.

The above is also an example of what Aristotle called "practical syllogism." To give other examples of such practical reasoning which are closer to al-Rāzī's concerns, we borrow two from Donald Davidson:

> Pleasure is to be pursued; this act is pleasant. [So] this act is to be pursued [The agent proceeds to perform the action in question]. No fornication is

4 Practical reasoning thus differs from the kind of reasoning which a mathematician or a logician might engage in, in that the latter does not typically terminate in practical decision or action.

> lawful; this is an act of fornication. [So] this act is not lawful [The agent forthwith refrains from performing the action].
>
> DAVIDSON 2001, 33

Now from the point of view of a moralist (al-Rāzī or anyone else) a given piece of practical reasoning may result in an action that is moral, or it may result in an action which is not. Furthermore, to a moralist like al-Rāzī, concerned as he was with character reformation,[5] the question of why and how someone may fall into moral error must have been ever-present. So, what was al-Rāzī's answer?

The answer, I believe, runs through al-Rāzī's discourse like a subterranean stream which is not visible to the eye, but one whose existence is revealed by the vegetation along its path. In more mundane philosophical language, al-Rāzī's answer is an implicit background assumption which explains his almost exclusive recourse to a certain way of diagnosing and treating spiritual ailments. I submit that according to al-Rāzī, spiritual ailments are, at root, a manifestation of a certain type of deficiency, a deficiency in the knowledge which people bring to bear on their affairs. To use a catchy modern phrase, the cause of spiritual ailment lies in an epistemic deficiency of sorts.[6]

To explain further: epistemic deficiency may reside in not fully knowing the consequences of what one is doing, or it may reside in failure to adopt the right values, or choose for oneself truly moral and/or rationally justifiable goals. To give an example of the first type, suppose I have a goal of helping poor people. Coming upon a poor family sitting at a table for a modest supper, I proceed to destroy their food, in the belief that this will only serve to make them join in a revolution against an unjust social order. Here, it is arguably the case that my goal is moral, but that my knowledge of the nature and consequences of my action was deficient. Not only did my action cause people to go hungry for a night, but it is very doubtful that it was one that could be justified as a way to help poor people.

To illustrate the second type of epistemic deficiency, suppose I have a goal of putting an end to human life on the planet, and I am in a position to push a button which would start a nuclear world war. Putting the two together, I push the nuclear button. It is obvious here where I went wrong. The trouble lies in my goal. In and of itself, it was not a moral goal. I was not ignorant on the score

5 Review al-Rāzī's definition of the goal of "spiritual physick" as "the reformation of the soul's character" (al-Razi 1950, 22).

6 The term is borrowed from Mele (1985, 375).

of the chosen instrument, or the consequences of my action, but on the score of the goals and values that a moral being can set for himself.

In *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, we find instances of both kinds of moral failure, sometimes relating to one's values and goals, while at other times relating to the actions one chooses to perform. Invariably, we find that some sort of epistemic deficiency causes the failure (alike in thought, desire, or action), as I seek to illustrate in the next section.

5 Knowledge and Psychic Ailments

In the previous section, I made two claims about al-Rāzī's understanding of moral failures. These were: (1) vice is explained by reference to a certain kind of epistemic deficiency, and (2) epistemic deficiency manifests itself, at least, on two levels—the level of goals and values which regulate one's life, and the level of actions which one may undertake. Let us now see how al-Rāzī's texts can be read in this light. The two claims are generalisations of a certain kind; hence they are best supported inductively, in view of the fact that al-Rāzī does not make them explicitly, much less argue for them.

There is hardly a place where al-Rāzī talks about spiritual ailments without reference to the concept of knowledge, either directly, or indirectly (as when he employs concepts such as reason, persuasion, error, intelligence, and understanding, all of which are related to *knowing* in one way or another). He begins his book, quite appropriately, by praising reason: "Reason is the thing without which our state would be the state of wild beasts, of children and lunatics" (al-Rāzī 1950, 20). In essence, we are rational creatures—elsewhere al-Rāzī unequivocally states that the rational soul *is* "the true man" (al-Rāzī 1950, 41). Fairly early on in the book, he goes as far as to define "spiritual physick" as "persuasion through arguments and proofs" (al-Rāzī 1950, 30). Persuasion and proof, of course, do or can yield knowledge of how things are, and may involve giving up mere opinions which do not amount to knowledge. A close look at a few examples of the way al-Rāzī explains the nature of spiritual ailments, and the errors which we may fall into as we deliberate over (sometimes dash into) actions to fulfil our goals, will amply illustrate the structural role of knowledge in al-Rāzī's thinking about these matters.

Let us begin with the matter of the values and goals which we set for ourselves. It goes without saying that one will, normally and for the most part, act in light of the values and goals which one has. Consequently, if these values and goals are of a morally inferior or simply wrong sort then it can hardly be expected that the moral quality of the actions which one undertakes will

be any better. Thus, it behoves the rational agent ("the true man," according to al-Rāzī (1950, 41)) to know what his values and goals are. He may seek the advice of an intelligent, experienced man to help him discover what is amiss in this thinking or practice (al-Rāzī 1950, 32), and failing that, *we* may (not unreasonably) presume on al-Rāzī's behalf, that he must rely on his reason. This is not too much to expect, for a man who is willing and able to find another intelligent and experienced man who can diagnose his faults, must already possess enough reason to help himself diagnose his own faults, to some degree at least. For how else would he be able to recognise the intelligent and experienced man in the first place?

We can ask now: What kind of knowledge does one need to have about values and goals, to close at least one path to moral error? Al-Rāzī, in his exploration of human psychology and ethics, sheds light on areas where individuals may fail to have the proper understanding.

Firstly, individuals may fail to know the fact that reason is the noble part of the self and should reign instead of being reigned by the base instincts (without this knowledge, all other types of knowledge would not be accepted nor acquired).

Secondly, concerning pleasure, al-Rāzī emphasises that "Most of those who incline after pleasure and follow it blindly do not know it for what it really is" (al-Rāzī 1950, 40). Thus he argues that pleasure should not be viewed as additional good to what one already has in the natural state. Properly understood,

> Pleasure consists simply of the restoration of that condition, which was expelled by the element of pain, while passing from one's actual state until one returns to the state formerly experienced.
>
> AL-RĀZĪ 1950, 39

For instance, the pleasure of eating follows the pain of hunger but diminishes once one is sated. The reasonable conclusion one should draw from this is that pleasure is not to be sought after; at most one may seek to avoid pain whose removal constitutes pleasure in that one is "restored" to one's natural state.[7]

Thirdly, considering the value of love, one can also be the victim of conceptual (hence broadly epistemic) error. Here, al-Rāzī offers the corrective: one ought to know that love is not what ignorant people take it to be, viz. "a habit [...] of refined natures and subtle brains, [which] encourages cleanliness, elegance, spruceness and a handsome turn-out" (al-Rāzī 1950, 44). On the contrary, "Love is in fact the habit of gross natures and stupid minds" (al-Rāzī 1950,

7 In his recently published book Adamson aptly refers to this as "the restoration theory" of pleasure (Adamson 2021, 185).

45). The things to which it is supposed to lead are not "signs of perfect intelligence and wisdom" (al-Rāzī 1950, 45); and in its carnal form, it is a beastly function which animals (to their credit, one may say) engage in according to nature—"so much and no more" (al-Rāzī 1950, 41).

Fourthly, with regard to miserliness, it is sometimes rational—as when one saves to guard against misfortune and future hardships. But when one is a miser because one "take[s] pleasure in keeping things to [himself] purely for its own sake" there is a difference (al-Rāzī 1950, 64). One catches a glimpse of the inherent irrationality of this type of miserliness "when one asks a person what reason he has for holding on to his possessions and he cannot find any clear and acceptable argument" (al-Rāzī 1950, 64). Clearly, such a person does not understand the nature of the values and goals which he sets for himself. He does not know the proper attitude to take when it comes to acquiring material possessions. If he were to listen to the voice of reason, he would know that the proper attitude towards spending would be one of moderation.

Fifthly, greed stems from erroneous evaluative beliefs, causing individuals to prioritise material desires over rational considerations. The greedy man does not set his priorities correctly; he seems to believe that one lives in order to eat, whereas he should rightly believe that "the appetitive soul is united with the rational soul only in order that it may supply this body, which serves the rational soul as an instrument" (al-Rāzī 1950, 76).

In addition to the aforementioned examples of qualities and activities, one may also consider the goal of ambition—the yearning to ascend to higher ranks and positions in life. A person who is ambitious has simply chosen the wrong goal endeavours for his life: he ought to know that value and the worthy goal do not lie in these endeavours. What is superior to higher rank and social prestige? According to al-Rāzī, the person afflicted with ambition ought to "remember and keep in mind [...] the superiority of reason and rational action" (al-Rāzī 1950, 93).

The cases of pleasure-seeking, love, miserliness, greed, and ambition which we have discussed illustrate the bearing of knowledge (and ignorance) on the values and the goals one sets for oneself.[8] One can be wrong in one's choice of values and goals. The antidote is nothing but proper knowledge.

Life goals and values are not the only areas where knowledge is relevant for al-Rāzī. Action is another field where knowledge matters a great deal. Here we find a strain of a consequentialist line of argument that runs through al-Rāzī's book from beginning to end: actions have consequences, and agents who undertake wrong actions are ones who do not fully appreciate (that is,

8 Review al-Rāzī's constant invocation of such terms as *knowing*, *remembering*, *intelligence*, *reason*, and *rationality*.

know) the consequences of their actions. In other words, they have a case of epistemic deficiency with respect to knowledge of (the consequences of) their actions, regardless of their epistemic situation with respect to the values and goals which they may have set for themselves.

Let us go further into some of the examples explored by al-Rāzī. One such example is love, a potent emotion that often leads individuals to partake in intense and passionate activities. Yet, as al-Rāzī points out, "Many [lovers] are reduced by prolonged insomnia, worry and undernourishment to a state of madness and delusion, of consumption and wasting away" (al-Rāzī 1950, 42). The pleasure derived from love, like any other pleasure, is such that "when it is attained, [it] is in strict proportion to the degree of suffering and pain that stimulate and incite to such pleasure" (al-Rāzī 1950, 42). Moreover, it is a consequence of being in love that it must eventually come to a painful end, for "to part from the beloved is an inescapable necessity, that is to say at death, even if one be secure from all the other mundane accidents and incidents that scatter friends and divide lovers" (al-Rāzī 1950, 42). These are all things which lovers ought to know. To fail to know them is to miscalculate, and miscalculation is an epistemic deficiency.

Another example is conceit, which involves placing a high value on oneself and one's achievement while underestimating one's shortcomings (al-Rāzī 1950, 50). What are the consequences of being conceited, and thus engaging in all manner of conceited actions? "One of the calamities of conceit is that it leads to the diminution of the very thing about which a man originally became conceited; for a conceited man never seeks to increase or improve, or acquire from others, the quality about which he is conceited" (al-Rāzī 1950, 50). This self-inflated perspective proves to be detrimental, hindering personal development and fostering stagnation.

Moreover, the adverse effects of envying others warrant our attention. Al-Rāzī denounces envy as a "hurtful disease of the soul" that invites both divine and human wrath upon the envious individual (al-Rāzī 1950, 52). The envious soul bears the burden of "prolonged sorrow, anxiety and care," while the body endures "prolonged insomnia and malnutrition" (al-Rāzī 1950, 56). In sum, envy "fuddles [the envier's] mind and tortures the body; by preoccupying his soul and weakening his body it enfeebles his cunning and endeavours against the envied if it continues long enough" (al-Rāzī 1950, 56). As we contemplate these examples, it becomes evident that proper knowledge of values and goals is indispensable for a life lived virtuously.

Action undertaken in anger is a straightforward case of regrettable consequences. For example, the angry person strikes, but being blinded by his

anger, he does not know the right measure in retaliation. "Upon my word," says al-Rāzī, "there is no great difference between the man who loses his powers of thought and reflection when he is angry and a lunatic" (al-Rāzī 1950, 59). Action undertaken in a fit of anger may have consequences for the person himself too; al-Rāzī, for example, reports seeing a man "get into a rage and scream and spit blood on the spot" (al-Rāzī 1950, 59).

To give one final example, consider ambition and the consequences of embarking on its path. To begin with, there is the emotional strain involved when we "press and exhaust ourselves, in order to rise to a grander state" (al-Rāzī 1950, 95). Having reached his goal "it is not long before [the ambitious person] loses all happiness and enjoyment of it; for his new circumstances become like all other customary and usual conditions" (al-Rāzī 1950, 95). As he rises higher and higher in rank, he becomes weary from his continuous exertions, fearful about the loss of rank, and stressed by the need to adapt to new situations (al-Rāzī 1950, 92).

In all of these examples al-Rāzī leaves us with the strong impression that the victims of these various ailments do not fully know what their actions mean, what their consequences are. To al-Rāzī, not only are these types of action misguided, but their consequences are foreseeable by any man who is willing to consult reason. This follows from the very nature and function of reason, as al-Rāzī conceives of it. For it is the function of reason to put knowledge of consequences at our command. In the very first chapter of his book entitled *Faḍl al-ʿAql wa-Madḥuh* ("On the Excellence and Praise of Reason"), al-Rāzī credits reason with quite a few things, including useful inventions, medical knowledge, knowledge of the physical world, knowledge of "obscure and remote matters," but, more interestingly, being able to "picture our intellectual acts before they become manifest[ed] to the senses, so that we see them exactly as though we had sensed them [...]" (al-Rāzī 1950, 20–21). Thus, for him, it is a mark of reason that we should be able to conceive of the consequences of our actions before we undertake them. Failure to put reason to use in regard to consequences is thus an epistemic failure because reason is a source of knowledge; to lapse out of reason is to lapse into ignorance, which can straightforwardly lead to engaging in misguided action.

Thus, we can see how it is that, for al-Rāzī, vice, moral failure, and other spiritual ailments have their source in our failure to make use of reason, or in his words, allowing ourselves to be ruled by passion rather than reason. As reason is a spring (if not *the* spring) of knowledge, failure to be guided by it is an epistemic deficiency. It remains for us to see how al-Rāzī makes use of these insights in his method of treating spiritual ailments.

6 Al-Rāzī's Cognitive Therapy

We begin by drawing attention to an idea on which al-Rāzī's type of therapy is based, one whose importance cannot be overemphasised. This is the idea that sheer knowledge (belief, understanding, realisation) is causally efficacious, in the sense that it can bring about changes in desires and behaviour, including, of course, actions which one may undertake or refrain from undertaking. There is no explicit acknowledgement of this idea, but we see it very much at work in the recommendations which he offers for treating psychic ailments of different kinds.

Typically, we find al-Rāzī using several techniques, singly or in combination. Firstly there is a narrative technique, which involves telling stories, anecdotes and giving examples; secondly, there is the imaginative technique where al-Rāzī invites the "patient" to picture or imagine situations; thirdly, there is a conceptual technique where al-Rāzī analyses concepts, offers definitions, and asks the patient to dwell on thoughts of consequences; finally (at his best) al-Rāzī employs a demonstrative technique in the course of which he provides arguments and proofs that recommend wise choices or right actions.

Now all of these activities which we have just mentioned are (to varying degrees) cognitive, in the sense that they put the mind of the patient in a thinking mode. For what are illustrative stories, examples, imaginings, analyses of concepts, and arguments but different modes of ideation? A patient who is paying attention to any of the things which his "spiritual doctor" is doing is bound to think and put things together, and if all goes well he comes to believe, know, or even desire certain things which he did not hitherto believe, know, or desire. All of this is a thinking (which is to say, a cognitive) activity in the broad sense of the term. If al-Rāzī's method of treatment involves some or many of the activities which we have just enumerated, then it is, by definition, a cognitive type of therapy.

To complete our reconstruction of al-Rāzī's therapeutic strategy, we need only to mention the rather uncontroversial idea that we are normally moved to act by our motivations, incentives, and desires. Not all the time, of course, but certainly in normal situations where there are no obstacles, internal or external, to stand in the way of our acting. You desire to drink, and in the right situation, this desire moves you to reach out for a glass of water before you—unless your hands are tied, or you believe the water is not fit for drinking, and so on. Al-Rāzī's therapy tacitly implies that when our beliefs are set right (i.e., when we have knowledge of how things are) and when our motivations fall in line with our right beliefs, right actions will follow. Vice will have no place in the system of things. Without this assumption (this rather uncontroversial idea) it

is hard to imagine what good it would be to reason with someone about making a decision or taking an action.

We can now look at some examples of al-Rāzī's therapy at work. We begin with one, perhaps simplistic, example of how knowledge (vouchsafed in this instance by storytelling) provides an incentive for action. Al-Rāzī tells a story of an encounter between a learned *shaykh* (a philosopher) and an ostentatious aesthete who sets high store on love, eloquence, literature, lexicography and artistic achievement, thinking that this is what science really is. Initially proud and confident, the fellow is asked to answer questions about what we nowadays would call the philosophy of science—e.g., whether the truths of science were necessary (objective) or conventional (al-Rāzī 1950, 45–46). The fellow is made to contradict himself several times in a short space, revealing the superficiality of his learning, as well as the activities which he greatly values. Having been reduced to a "state of shame and great confusion and dismay," he is admonished by the *shaykh* to taste the real science (al-Rāzī 1950, 47).

Al-Rāzī states the purpose of this story thus: "We have only recounted this story so that it may serve as an additional *encouragement and incentive* to the nobler part [of the soul]" (1950, 47, emphasis added). Encouragement and incentive: these words are significant, for as we have said, if all goes with the spiritual therapy of the type which al-Rāzī espouses, new motivations, incentives, and desires may be created in the soul, with the expectation that these motivations will eventually lead to actions that are different from those based on a cognitively unenlightened state. Simple-minded as the story may appear to our modern sensibilities, there is no reason for us to belittle its significance. It is an edifying story, for sure, but who is to say that edifying stories have no role in our lives, in our educational practices, and the way we tend to learn from the experiences of others about whom stories are told? Simple-minded or not, what matters to us is that it reveals the cognitive, mind-involving nature of al-Rāzī's therapy.

Another, perhaps more compelling example is provided by al-Rāzī's treatment of envy. Al-Rāzī's attack here is frontal: "A method of *repelling* it is for the intelligent man *to examine* envy" (al-Rāzī 1950, 52, emphasis added). *To repel* is (or is eventually) a type of action, while *to examine* is a type of cognitive activity. How does one engage in the latter, and what outcome can expected? Al-Rāzī uses a battery of arguments designed to show how irrational envy is. Over and over again al-Rāzī makes the point that the envier has no rational grounds for resenting those who are more fortunate than him. "[T]he envious man is stamped as resenting what happens to the advantage of those who never injured or offended him" (al-Rāzī 1950, 52). Further, "[…] the person envied has never deprived the envier of any of his possessions, or prevented him from

achieving anything that he might have gained, or used him in any way to his own advantage" (al-Rāzī 1950, 53). Besides, why should he, the envier, envy only the more fortunate neighbour whom he sees? In all consistency, "[…] should he not envy those living [in the lap of luxury] in India and China?" (al-Rāzī 1950, 53). If it is "folly and madness to grieve over what [the Indian and the Chinese] have obtained," it should be equally folly and madness to grieve over what your neighbour has achieved (al-Rāzī 1950, 53). For the fact that you can see him but not them should make no difference (al-Rāzī 1950, 53), or at least no rationally acceptable difference (as we might more guardedly add). Furthermore, it is not true that the envier has a greater right to, or need of, the goods which the envied party has (al-Rāzī 1950, 55). Lastly, there are various ways in which the fortune of the envied may work to the benefit of the envier (al-Rāzī 1950, 55).

In short, envy is against reason. It is an irrational attitude to take towards others. Al-Rāzī expects that dwelling on these very reasonable arguments will *repel* envy. But how can this happen, unless it is thought that knowledge is something that can, in and of itself, move us to desire or act in a certain way? This is how it is normally—we act on what we know, believe, or desire. Thus, it would be a mistake to think that reasoning is *inert*, in the sense of leaving everything as it is. Reasoning isn't and doesn't: "[…] the reasonable man *will rein* his animal soul by means of the perspicacity of his rational soul" (al-Rāzī 1950, 5, emphasis added). *To rein in* is a power which the rational soul has.

The causal efficacy of right reason is even more patent in al-Rāzī's treatment of grief. Various cognitive terms are invoked in the process of reasoning and are followed by claims, or expectations, regarding the practical behaviour-involving outcome of reasoning about grief. Initially "the intelligent man" is invited to examine and consider that "nothing is constant or permanent as an individual, but rather that all things pass away and perish and change and decay and vanish" (al-Rāzī 1950, 72). These cognitive premises, derived from logical and natural laws, are immediately followed by an assertion concerning the affective state of the patient: "When he reflects on all of these things, he ought not to take too much to heart or feel too outraged or stricken by the sudden deprivation of anything" (al-Rāzī 1950, 72). Furthermore, accepting the non-permanence of good things is a rational thing to do "So long as [one] goes on desiring that they should survive forever, he is yearning for the impossible" (al-Rāzī 1950, 72), which is arguably an irrational desire. Recognition of the irrationality of this desire may go some way toward unsettling the feeling of grief. Such a realisation is expected to be followed by such a state of feeling, which can naturally be translated into appropriate action.

There are, moreover, at least two other less logic-involving but equally cognitive considerations which al-Rāzī brings to bear on his treatment of grief

here. Both can be expected to "assuage the impact of grief" (al-Rāzī 1950, 73). One of them is for the intelligent man "to remind himself, when the misfortune is upon him, how it will presently pass and give way and he will return once more to normality" (al-Rāzī 1950, 73). This is obviously a cognitive act of looking at the bright side, saying to oneself, as it were, that the sun will rise tomorrow. The other, equally cognitive, act is to derive some consolation "by reminding oneself how many there are that share one's misfortunes, and how scarcely a single man is free of them" (al-Rāzī 1950, 73).[9]

The treatments of love, envy, and grief are but three examples of al-Rāzī's therapy at work. They may be more perspicuous than some of the other examples to be found throughout al-Rāzī's book. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the book as a whole sustains a simple argument: Ailments of the soul result from lack of proper knowledge (discussed in section 3 above); when ignorance is replaced by proper knowledge, the ailing patient is set on the path to healing (discussed in section 4). What we did in the present section is illustrate how the principles on which the argument is based can be applied in therapeutic practice.[10]

7 Al-Rāzī and the Problem of Incontinence

Al-Rāzī was not the first to think of vice and "spiritual" ill-being in terms of ailment, disease or malfunction. This view goes back to Plato and Aristotle (and Socrates). Thus, we find Aristotle describing the incontinent man, who might "follow pleasure blindly" (to use al-Rāzī's words), as someone who is "asleep or drunk" (Aristotle 2000, 1152a14–15). Plato is even more forthright about describing virtue and vice in terms of health and disease:

> And injustice [...] is the opposite of justice, and is inharmonious and unnatural, being to the soul what disease is to the body [...] And virtue is the health [...] and well-being of the soul, and vice is the disease and weakness and deformity of the soul.
>
> Plato 1982b, 444A

9 Much of what we find in al-Rāzī's chapter "Fī al-Ghamm" ("On Grief") repeats what al-Kindī says in his *al-Ḥīla li-Dafʿ al-Aḥzān* (al-Kindī 2007). Influence cannot be ruled out, but it is probable that they were both drawing on the Greek and Hellenistic traditions of their time.

10 According to Adamson, al-Rāzī viewed ethics as "a kind of medicine" (Adamson 2021, 181). This is not inconsistent with our interpretation of al-Rāzī. What we are saying is that al-Rāzī's medicine was a kind of *applied knowledge* of ethics.

A-Rāzī as also not the first to think of vice, and psychological ill-being in terms of lacking the right knowledge that is vouchsafed by the use of reason. Thus, according to Aristotle, "The same person cannot be practically wise and incontinent at the same time" (Aristotle 2000, 1152a9–10). And while the "rest of the world" may believe "that knowledge is [not] a principle of strength, rule, or command," Plato is of the view that

> [...] knowledge is a noble and commanding thing, which cannot be overcome, and will not allow a man, if he only knows the difference of good and evil, to do anything which is contrary to knowledge, but that wisdom will have strength to help him.
>
> Plato 1982a, 325B

Al-Rāzī is thus following a Greek tradition of thinking about virtue and happiness being the fruits of having knowledge and living under the guidance of reason. Nevertheless, there is a difficulty which al-Rāzī does not address in his *al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*. This difficulty is much discussed in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and it continues to be discussed now, not just as a problem of how Plato and Aristotle are to be interpreted, but also as a problem that deserves interest in its own right. That al-Rāzī does not recognise the problem may be a reflection of a cursory or incomplete knowledge of the tradition, or it may be due to the fact that, being a physician, his interest lies more in treatment than in philosophical theory.

A good (albeit somewhat literary) way of stating the difficulty is the challenge posed by Fyodor Dostoevsky (d. 1881) in his *Zapíski iz Podpól'ya* ("Notes from the Underground"), which Davidson also makes use of in his text (Davidson 2001). Alluding probably to the Greeks, Dostoevsky asks:

> Oh, tell me, who was the first to proclaim that man does dirty only because he doesn't know his real interests; and that were he to be enlightened [...] man would immediately stop doing dirty, would immediately become good and noble? What is to be done with the millions of facts testifying to how people knowingly, that is, fully understanding their real profit, would put it in second place and throw themselves onto another path, a risk, perchance, not compelled by anyone or anything?
>
> DOSTOEVSKY 2004, 19–20

Even if not borne by "millions of facts" as Dostoevsky claims, the problem is one of those "appearances" which theory of virtuous behaviour that is worth its salt must try to account for. In the case of the theory that Plato, Aristotle,

and al-Rāzī subscribe to, the problem is particularly acute in that the theory seems to make unvirtuous action practically impossible in the presence of knowledge. According to the Aristotelian account of practical syllogism which we briefly explained earlier in this chapter, the agent (say, a diabetic) believes that: such-and-such (eating a large quantity of dates) ought not to be done; this is an instance of such-and-such (e.g., the option of eating a large quantity of dates); therefore, this ought not to be done. And the conclusion, says Aristotle, is an action, of avoidance. How can we then explain the fact that many diabetic agents nonetheless proceed to eat a large quantity of dates? This ought not happen, but it does. We need to explain this.

Plato grapples with this problem in his dialogue *Protagoras* where his Socrates (d. 399 BC) seems to think that the problem is only apparent, it being the case that that the *truly* knowledgeable man would not indulge in unvirtuous action. The idea that one (or one's reason) may be overcome by a near-to-hand pleasure, which leads him to do something against his long-term interest, does not apply to the man who truly has knowledge, because "knowledge is a noble and commanding thing, which cannot be overcome" (Plato 1892a, 352B). The true knower who places himself under the guidance or reason will perform a strict calculus of good and evil, pleasure and pain, present and future, and will figure out the balance and act accordingly. When present pleasures appear great to us while distant evils appear small, "the art of measurement would do away with the effect of appearances" (Plato 1892a, 356D). Thus, it emerges that knowledge of measuring, "when the question is one of excess and defect," is the "saving principle of our lives" (Plato 1892a, 356D). The incontinent man who is deceived by appearances is not good at measuring. His is a case of epistemic deficiency. He does not have knowledge, despite what he may be thinking. This, we may presume, is how Plato would respond to Dostoevsky's challenge.

Aristotle may also be taken to be referring to "deceptive appearances" which can addle the mind and thus lead to epistemic deficiency. He discusses "the influence of the ways [people] are affected," and mentions such "ways" as drunkenness, spirited feelings, sexual appetites and "some other such things [which] clearly alter our bodily condition as well, and in some people even produce attacks of madness" (Aristotle 2000, 1147a13–24). These "deceptive appearances" serve as a reminder of the complexities inherent in human cognition and the importance of critical self-awareness in navigating the intricacies of knowledge and understanding.

According to Aristotle, incontinent people "succumb [...] to [temptations] that most people rise superior to" (Aristotle 2000, 1150a13–14). But, clearly, this may be the case with other people who are not affected in the aforementioned

"ways." Aristotle's intervention at this point constitutes the progress which he makes beyond Socrates and Plato. According to him, in addition to knowledge, *character* is an important consideration for understanding continence, self-control, and temperance. As Alfred Mele rightly observes, Aristotle describes the continent person, "not as a person whose 'good' desires outweigh his 'bad' ones with a commendable frequency, but rather as one whose 'desiring element' [...] is obedient to his 'rational principle'" (Mele 1985, 381; cf. Aristotle 2000, 1102b26–28).

Aristotle's "dispositional account of continence" (Mele 1985, 380) is borne out by several statements such as the following:

> [R]ational choice involves not only intellect and thought, but a state of character; for acting well and its contrary require thought and character.
>
> ARISTOTLE 2000, 1139a45–47

> [The] practically wise person is at the same time good in character. Again, a person is practically wise not only by knowing, but also by being disposed to act; and the incontinent person is not disposed to act.
>
> ARISTOTLE 2000, 1152a11–15

Is any of this to be found in al-Rāzī? To be fair to al-Rāzī, in working out the details of his cognitive style of therapy, he *does* refer to character. Moreover, one may charitably interpret his many discussions of the consequences of incontinent action as hinting at errors of calculation, which would allow us to say, for example, that the diabetic agent who embarks on eating a large quantity of dates is deceived, by the nearness of the lesser pleasure, into thinking that it outweighs the distant greater pain. While we are not able to prove the second claim by a reference to al-Rāzī text (it is merely a conjecture, after all), the first claim can be amply supported. Speaking of character in his chapter about anxiety, al-Rāzī says:

> Because men differ so much in temperament and habit, there is also a difference in the amount of anxiety and worry they can stand; some can endure a great deal of them without being adversely affected, while others are unable to put up with so much. This power of endurance needs to be looked after and taken care of and gradually increased as much as possible before the matter becomes too difficult; habit is of great help and assistance here.
>
> AL-RĀZĪ 1950, 66

Moreover, al-Rāzī's talk of the reasonable man being able to "rein his animal soul by means of the perspicacity of his rational soul" (al-Rāzī 1950, 55) bears more than a slight resemblance to Aristotle's idea of the "desiring element" being obedient to the "rational principle". Al-Rāzī, lastly, devotes an entire chapter to "al-Sīra al-Fāḍila"("The Virtuous Life") in his book, where he outlines a virtuous way of living that is inseparable from possessing a virtuous character.

Nevertheless, al-Rāzī does not offer these ideas as a conscious response to the problem posed by the fact that it is possible for one to knowingly do what is wrong (Dostoevsky's challenge). The idea of this possibility does not seem to have crossed his mind, and so when invoking character, or hinting at errors of calculation, this comes across as something which common sense might have suggested, not as something which can be used to alleviate the pressure of the possibility of knowingly doing that which is wrong. Is there a way to explain the omission other than by reference to his possibly cursory or incomplete knowledge of the Greek tradition, or his overwhelming interest in medical practice, rather than theory?

In his discussion of Aristotle, Mele (1985) considers why Aristotle stopped short of taking seriously the notion of full-blown *akrasia*, which can be explained as someone undertaking, with full knowledge, and with no rational explanation or natural cause, a course of action which is against his own happiness or interest. Precisely this is what seems to be contemplated in Dostoevsky's text, where Dostoevsky speaks of people who "fully understanding their real profit [...] throw themselves onto another path [...] not compelled by anyone or anything [...]" (Dostoevsky 2004, 19–20). Mele (1985, 89) suggests that that it may have been an inability on the part of Plato, Aristotle and the Greek tradition, in general, to think that humans could be so irrational as to do in *full* knowledge what is against their good. Mele glosses this as a kind of optimism about the human condition, or "men as they are," as he puts it (Mele 1985, 89).

Here we find something that al-Rāzī can identify with. Al-Rāzī is well-known for his whole-hearted espousal of the Greek philosophical tradition, and he may thus come under the scope of the suggestion offered by Mele: perhaps it was beyond his kin to think of *akrasia* to begin with, much less full-blown *akrasia*. To Mele's suggestion, we can add another which applies to al-Rāzī and the Greeks equally: theirs was a culture that had no place for any conception or doctrine of original sin, a doctrine that implies that man has a corrupted nature which is inherently prone to sin. Neither Islam nor the Greek tradition had a place for the notion of fallen man, which took root in Western thought after the advent of Christianity.

The experiences of modern man, and the atrocities of recent times may tell a story which is closer to the one which Dostoevsky tells than what we find in al-Rāzī, Plato and Aristotle. But this is a long discussion which we cannot engage in. We shall thus conclude by saying that Plato, Aristotle, and al-Rāzī, breathing the same air, bequeathed to us a view of man as an essentially a rational creature who can live happily, if only he would follow the path of reason.

8 Conclusion

In conclusion, our analysis has demonstrated that al-Rāzī's work revolves around three interconnected claims: firstly, psychic ailments are caused by epistemic deficiencies; secondly, reason and understanding are causally efficacious in guiding one towards virtuous behaviour; thirdly, in order to lead a virtuous and happy life all one needs to do is to place oneself under the governance of reason which will provide him with necessary knowledge. In this chapter we sought to show that these three propositions constitute the overarching argument of al-Rāzī's work: the first two claims are the two premisses from which the third claim follows.

Viewed in this light, al-Rāzī appears to have been a unique figure. He did not only formulate a system of philosophical ethics, but he sought to show how psychological well-being is related to physical well-being, knowledge, and the use of reason. It is thus to his great credit that he made contributions to physical therapy as well as psychological therapy.

It is hoped that by contextualising al-Rāzī within the philosophical tradition and exploring these key aspects of his work, this chapter has provided an adequate understanding of his philosophical insights and intellectual legacy.

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