

Peter Adamson. *Al-Rāzī*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 256 pages.  
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Studying Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's (d. 313/925) philosophy is a challenging endeavor. Most of his books on philosophy have been lost. In order to uncover his ideas, one needs to reconstruct them through the writings of his ideological opponents as well as the polemical works written in fundamental opposition toward him. Over the years, research on the subject has mostly been restricted to limited comparisons of fragmented sections from al-Rāzī's critics aimed at reconstructing his philosophical and cosmological thoughts.

Most of the literature in this field assumes no clear or direct relationship between al-Rāzī's philosophical views as present in his critics' works and his own ethical, medical, or alchemical works that have survived. However, Peter Adamson's book *al-Rāzī* appears to be one work that has succeeded in overcoming the lack of a holistic view of all of al-Rāzī's writings.

In this book, Adamson also tries to place al-Rāzī's ideas within the context of his society. One of the book's main goals is to explore al-Rāzī's sources, particularly in Greek philosophy. Adamson's methodology can be brought together under the following three approaches:

I- Holistic view: This approach considers all of al-Rāzī's works within a clearly defined philosophical framework. This holistic view enables Adamson to critically read the corpus of works that have survived through al-Rāzī's critics and to place this alongside his other survived writings on ethics, medicine, and even alchemy.

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II- Lateral reading strategy: Adamson contextualizes al-Rāzī within his own society by frequently referring to the prevalent ideas of the time. This notion is important, given that some readings of al-Rāzī, such as his ideas on prophecy, place him far outside the norms of his time.

III- Vertical reading strategy: This method allows Adamson to trace al-Rāzī's ideas back to Greek philosophy. Using a holistic approach here, he also tries to show al-Rāzī to have followed Galen (d. ca. 216 AD) in philosophy just as he had in his medical writings. Similar to his medical works, al-Rāzī doubts some of Galen's ideas. In this book, Adamson also tries to reveal in which subjects and on what basis al-Rāzī had deviated from Galen toward Plato (d. 347 BCE) and even Aristotle (d. 322 BCE).

For the remainder of this review, I will provide a concise summary of the book chapters, enumerate on several of its merits, and then explain a few of its drawbacks.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first chapter is titled "Doubts About al-Rāzī," similar to the name of al-Rāzī's own book *Doubts About Galen*. This chapter is an introduction to al-Rāzī's life, his roots, bullet points about his ideas, and his masters, as well as the direct and indirect sources for his ideas. Adamson here mentions that his "main task in this book will be the reconstruction of a philosophical system rather than a minute exegesis of extant writings" (10).

The following four chapters of the book are dedicated to explaining the well-known theory of the five eternal principles attributed to al-Rāzī. In the second chapter, titled "God," Adamson first attempts to show al-Rāzī's motivations for constructing the theory of the five eternal principles in comparison to the mainstream monotheism of the Islamic world. As a doctor, al-Rāzī was deeply impacted by inequities of the world and the abundance of suffering. Because he assumed God to be perfectly wise, there must be a second active cause of the universe. In Adamson's words, al-Rāzī "sacrifices God's uniqueness (*tawhīd*) to save divine justice (*'adl*)" (28). In fact, al-Rāzī's starting point in constructing his cosmological and metaphysical ideas was based on the reality of the world and not on the perfection of God.

In the third chapter, titled "Soul," Adamson not only talks about the soul as the second principle in al-Rāzī's philosophy but also discusses the relationship of the individual soul with the eternal soul in al-Rāzī's teachings. In this chapter, Adamson also shows al-Rāzī to have been influenced by Plato. In reality, al-Rāzī

had studied Plato in the reflection of Galen's writings. The passages from Plato to which al-Rāzī had direct access show that al-Rāzī normally preferred Plato over Galen, especially in his book, *Doubts about Galen*, where al-Rāzī criticizes the Galenic position toward the soul as being insufficiently Platonic. In the third chapter, Adamson places eschatology and the transmigration of the individual soul within the framework of al-Rāzī's notion toward the eternal soul. Adamson also shows some places where al-Rāzī had deviated from Plato and Galen toward the Aristotelian position that al-Rāzī normally avoided. In this chapter, Adamson furthermore argues against his own previous belief regarding al-Rāzī's thought on transmigration of the soul. In Adamson's 2012 article,<sup>1</sup> he explicitly denied al-Rāzī to have believed in animal transmigration; in the current book, however, he appears to argue the opposite (70).

The fourth chapter is titled "Matter" and covers the third principle. In this chapter, Adamson discusses al-Rāzī's thoughts on atomism and the possible sources for this thought. Adamson's discussion here is extensive and very precise in tracing the Greek theory of atomism and its relationship with al-Rāzī's. He accepts that, although several similarities exist between al-Rāzī's theory and that of various Greek philosophers, Plato in particular, some points of disagreement are still present.

One of Adamson's remarkable advancements in this book is his discovery of certain correlations between al-Rāzī's philosophy and his writings on alchemy. Even the judgment of such a prominent scholar as Julius Ruska (d. 1949), who "thought that al-Rāzī's alchemy and philosophy bear no relationship to one another at all" (92), did not prevent Adamson from exploring al-Rāzī's alchemical writings in order to construct his holistic framework regarding al-Rāzī's ideas.

Before moving on to the fifth chapter, this book should be noted to have properly cited all the direct quotations from the primary sources to the relevant original references and to have provided the key terms and phrases in their original language. However, some minor errors have been found. For example, on page 78, Adamson quotes a passage from Nāsir Khusraw (d. after 465/1073) that is originally in Persian; in the book, however, he quotes the phrase in Arabic as *makān ḍayyiq* instead of as *Jāye tang*, based on Kraus's translation.<sup>2</sup>

1 Peter Adamson, "Abū Bakr al-Rāzī on animals" *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 94.3 (2012): 249-73.

2 Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, *Rasā'il falsafiyā*, ed. P. Kraus (Cairo, 1939), 223.

In the sixth chapter, titled “Prophecy”, the author argues the extreme attacks on prophecy and rejection of religions that have been attributed to al-Rāzī to appear unreasonable, using his lateral reading strategy. He states, “Even though it was far easier to express eccentric and even shocking views in the medieval Islamic world than it was in Latin Christendom, this position would surely have pushed the boundaries of the acceptable” (121). In this chapter, Adamson shows how al-Rāzī’s explicit criticism against *taqlid* and imamate caused the Ismāīlis to attribute such ideas to him. Adamson analyzes all the parts that Abū Ḥātim (d. 322/933-34), his Ismāīlī opponent in one debate, had reported, which is the main source in this regard. Adamson does not reject the authenticity of Abū Ḥātim’s quotation from al-Rāzī but instead offers a different reading of it that contradicts the meaning that Abū Ḥātim had himself suggested. Adamson then brings forth cases from other contemporary scholars to show how al-Rāzī’s attitudes historically had some roots in his own society. In the end, Adamson concludes, “Razi was doing nothing radical” (148) in terms of his society.

In the seventh chapter, titled “Medicine”, Adamson attempts to explain al-Rāzī’s philosophical attitudes toward medicine, relating them to his other theories such as atomism and the subject of suffering/pleasure in the world. In addition, Adamson explains al-Rāzī’s dual approach toward medicine (i.e., empiricism and rationalism) using examples from his own medical notes.

The last chapter is titled “Ethics”, and in it, Adamson clarifies the central claims of al-Rāzī’s ethics. The ultimate goal of ethical life as put forth by al-Rāzī is to imitate God. This imitation is achieved by following the path of wisdom and justice throughout life. Here again, Adamson flashes back to al-Rāzī’s ideas on the creation and his eschatological approach and suggests al-Rāzī to have believed that, once this ethical goal is fulfilled, the soul’s pre-cosmic and current ignorance finally becomes replaced by God-like wisdom. However, this was not an instruction for the common people. Al-Rāzī believed another rule could be applied to them, “decreasing pain and increasing pleasure.” However, what al-Rāzī means by pleasure is the pleasure that can only be obtained by applying one’s faculty of reason, with ultimate pleasure being unattainable except in the other world after death.

After this short review of the main subjects of the book, I would like to put forward my main criticism. In this book, Adamson shows that he likes to become entangled with different ideas and critically discuss them over each subject in order to arrive at the best solution. He bravely introduces controversial ideas and engages in a vivid dialogue through al-Rāzī’s contemporary scholars. One of Adamson’s

main goals in the book is to find possible roots of al-Rāzī's ideas. However, there are still some ideas that Adamson failed to truly trace back, such as al-Rāzī's thoughts on atomism, especially the geometrical shape of atoms, transmigration of the soul, and the void.

The problem is that Adamson never discusses any possible non-Greek sources for al-Rāzī in his book. This point had been mentioned by some pioneering authors such as Shlomo Pines (d. 1990). In his book, *Studies in Islamic Atomism*,<sup>3</sup> Pines stated Indian philosophy to have possibly influenced al-Rāzī's atomism. Adamson's extensive usage of different sources in various languages such as Italian, German, French, Arabic, and Persian is truly incredible. Nevertheless, some sources still remain that he did not discuss, including Parvīz Azkāi's comprehensive monograph on the subject, titled *Hakīm Rāzī* in Persian. In his English preface, Azkāi considers his book as "a history of Iranian philosophy" and later in the book presents arguments for the Persian origins of al-Rāzī's atomism.<sup>4</sup> Although neither Pines's nor Azkāi's proofs appear promising, a book that states one of its goals to be finding the possible sources of al-Rāzī's philosophy is expected to have some discussion or at least mentioning possible non-Greek sources of al-Rāzī's philosophy. In the book, Adamson persuasively presents al-Rāzī as a critical thinker. While al-Rāzī's main source had been Galen, or Plato within Galen, he has some criticisms toward them. Adamson further shows some occasions to have occurred where al-Rāzī even accepted Aristotelian thought. Therefore, it is possible that al-Rāzī had taken some ideas from Persian or Indian philosophy, which was something that could have been found in his society in the ninth century.

In the third chapter, Adamson discusses the idea of transmigration of the soul in al-Rāzī's philosophy but makes no discussion of any possible root for it. For instance, the 11<sup>th</sup> century thinker Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) had mentioned a relationship between al-Rāzī's belief toward transmigration and the Qaramatians (*Qarāmiṭa*),<sup>5</sup> which can again be further traced back to Indian or Persian philosophy. Mehdi Mohaghegh also mentioned this relationship.<sup>6</sup>

3 Shlomo Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen atomlehre* (Berlin, 1936), 49-123 and Parvīz Azkāi, *Hakīm Rāzī* (Tehran, 2005), 306.

4 Azkāi, *Hakīm Rāzī*, 306-10.

5 Ibn Hazm, *al-Faṣl fi l-milal wa l-ahwā' wa l-niḥal*, Cairo, I, 77.

6 M. Mohaghegh, "On theology of al-Rāzī and the five principles" (in Persian), *Journal of the faculty of literature and humanities*, 5-6 (1968): 437-74.

The fifth chapter discusses time and place within al-Rāzī's philosophy. After tracing al-Rāzī's ideas to Greek philosophers, Adamson affirms that al-Rāzī's view on the void "is a curious hybrid, which cannot be perfectly aligned with any ancient cosmology" (117). "Any ancient cosmology" here appears to only mean Greek cosmology, because no reference to or discussion of Indian or Persian cosmology takes place. Here, one can refer back to Azkāī's book, which links the subject to Persian philosophy and the Pahlavi literature.<sup>7</sup>

In general, Peter Adamson's book *al-Rāzī* is a fascinating narrative of the philosophical views of al-Rāzī, a ninth- and tenth-century Persian polymath. With a broad and deep view on the different strands of Islamic thought and prominent knowledge of Greek philosophy in this book, Adamson reconstructs al-Rāzī's philosophical system by critically reading the writings attributed to al-Rāzī through his critics and comparing them to few books from al-Rāzī that have survived.

7 Azkāī, *Hakīm Rāzī*, 344-46.