

The Ethics of al-Razi (865–925?)

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Among al-Razi's few surviving philosophical works, two, *The Spiritual Medicine* and *The Philosophic Life*, are clearly ethical.¹ For this reason al-Razi's ethics has attracted more attention than his unusual conception of the soul.² The ethics, however, still has not been carefully studied.³ Meir M. Bar-Asher,⁴ who rightly pointed to Galen's enormous influence on al-Razi's ethics, even argues that his ethical views are inconsistent since in *The Spiritual Medicine* the criteria for moral judgment are temporal pleasure and

1. Lenn E. Goodman provides the most recent presentation of al-Razi's work, be it medical, philosophical, or scientific: "Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī," in *History of Islamic Philosophy, Part I*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (Routledge History of World Philosophies, vol. I) (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 198–215. Arabic critical edition by Paul Kraus in *Abi Bakr Mohammadi Filii Zachariae Raghensis (Razis) opera philosophica fragmentaque quae supersunt* (Cairo: Imprimerie Paul Barbey, 1939), pp. 11–96 for *The Spiritual Medicine*, and pp. 99–111 for *The Philosophic Life*. All references to "Arabic text" will be to this edition. Dimitri Gutas published some corrections to this edition of *The Spiritual Medicine* in "Notes and Texts from Cairo Mss. I: Addenda to P. Kraus's Edition of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's *Al-tibb al-rūhānī*," *Arabica* 24 (1977): 91–93. One can find an English translation by Arthur J. Arberry of *The Spiritual Medicine* in his *The Spiritual Physick of Rhazes* (London: John Murray, 1950). As this translation has the same division in brief chapters as Kraus's Arabic edition, I will often simply refer to the chapter. One can find a good English translation of *The Philosophic Life* by Charles E. Butterworth in his "The Book of the Philosophic Life," *Interpretation* 20 (1993): 227–236. This translation is divided into numbered paragraphs which I shall cite as Butterworth.

2. See Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Al-Razi's Conception of the Soul: Psychological Background to his Ethics," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996): 245–63.

3. See M. Mohaghegh, "Notes on the 'Spiritual Physic' of Al-Rāzī," *Studia Islamica* n. 26 (1967): 5–22; and Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Al-Razi (Rhazes) and Normative Ethics," in *Tradition and Renewal*, vol. 2, ed. David A. Boileau and John A. Dick (*Louvain Philosophical Studies*, 6) (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1993): 167–81. Lenn E. Goodman summarizes his views in "Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī" (1996): 206–11, which updates his "The Epicurean Ethic of Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā ar-Rāzī," *Studia Islamica* n. 34 (1971): 5–26, in referring to Galen as a possible source for al-Razi's "Epicureanism" since al-Razi never refers to Epicurus by name and on some issues, such as the immortality of the soul and his conception of the role of God, is very far from Epicureanism.

4. Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Quelques aspects de l'éthique d'Abū Bakr al-Rāzī et ses origines dans l'oeuvre de Galien," *Studia Islamica* n. 69 (1989): 5–38; n. 70 (1989): 130–47.

self-interest, whereas in *The Philosophic Life*, they are the imitation of God and a concern for life after the separation from the body. Moreover, *The Spiritual Medicine* advocates a rather stern asceticism absent and even criticized in *The Philosophic Life*. To these points I would like to add that *The Spiritual Medicine* sharply distinguishes human beings from animals, but *The Philosophic Life*, on the other hand, downplays that difference and develops an ethics of protection of animals.⁵

In order to resolve the problems raised by Bar-Asher, I shall attempt to define al-Razi's conception of ethics and its role in his philosophy. In so doing, I shall explain the specific purposes of *The Spiritual Medicine* and of the ethics of *The Philosophic Life* and determine the relation between these two works. Second, I shall discuss the basic principles of al-Razi's ethics. Finally, I shall analyze the structure of both *The Spiritual Medicine* and the ethical system of *The Philosophic Life* to show their coherence and compatibility.

My detailed study of these texts aims at showing that they cannot be properly understood and appreciated if they are evaluated from an Aristotelian point of view. They are grounded in lively debates typical of Hellenistic philosophy known at least through Galen's enormously influential works.

I. AL-RAZI'S CONCEPTION OF ETHICS

In the few works which have reached us, we do not find a classification of sciences or any other formal statement on the place of ethics in the curriculum. We shall, therefore, use incidental affirmations and their implications to determine the place al-Razi gives to ethics in philosophical education. Since in *The Philosophic Life* he often refers to *The Spiritual Medicine*, and indicates that reading the latter is indispensable for understanding the former, let us begin with an examination of *The Spiritual Medicine*.⁶ In the preface, al-Razi states that this work is a command performance. A prince—very likely al-Mansur ibn Ishaq ibn Ahmad ibn Asad, governor of Rayy from 902 to 908—ordered al-Razi to compile a brief treatise on character reformation and to call it *The Spiritual Medicine* so that it might be a companion piece to his *Bodily Medicine*, the famous *Book of al-Mansur* or, in the Latin form, the *Liber Almansoris*.⁷ The text, therefore, is a general introduction to character reformation and does not assume previous philosophical training.

5. See Druart, "Al-Razi's Conception of the Soul," 253–57.

6. In *The Philosophic Life* there are seven cross references to *The Spiritual Medicine*, see Arabic text p. 100, l. 17; p. 101, ll. 9, 11; p. 102, ll. 14, 20; p. 108, l. 10, and p. 109, l. 1.

7. Arabic text, p. 15; and Kraus's intro. to Arabic Text, p. 12; Arberry's English trans. p. 18.

In chapter V on infatuation, a particularly grievous spiritual disease, al-Razi relates a story that reveals the place and role of character reformation. One of Plato's pupils was skipping classes because he had fallen madly in love with a girl. Plato summoned the hapless youth and made him understand that since he would inevitably have to part from his girlfriend, the best way to shorten the painful anticipation of this sad event was to give her up at once. Surprisingly, the young man gratefully accepted this advice and subsequently had a perfect attendance record in Plato's classes.⁸ Yet, this was not enough for Plato who went on to scold the other students for having left the infatuated boy to his own devices and allowed him to devote his full energy to all the philosophical disciplines *before* reforming his appetitive soul by curbing it and subjecting it to the rational soul.⁹ This shows that, for al-Razi, character reformation is a spiritual medicine curing the soul of diseases caused by passion's overruling of the intellect. The reform intended is the liberation of the intellect ('*aql*, a technical philosophical term) from the snare of passion,¹⁰ a major theme in al-Razi's ethics. As for the fully trained philosopher, he is the one who "knows the conditions and canons of demonstration (that is, logic) and grasps and attains as much mathematics, physics, and divine science (metaphysics and philosophical theology) as is possible for a human being."¹¹ This order of the disciplines reflects the standard Alexandrian curriculum, as well as the views of other early Islamic philosophers, such as al-Kindi and al-Farabi.¹²

Since character reformation, or at least a fair amount of it, must precede philosophical training, al-Razi is at pains to provide for his arguments a fairly neutral or minimalist philosophical framework which does not take a stance on difficult issues such as the nature of the soul and its immortality or God's attributes and causation. Some arguments in fact rest simply on fairly obvious self-interest and on the superiority of human beings over animals; they do not seem philosophical at all. Other somewhat more sophisticated arguments use the philosophical position that "pleasure is simply return to nature and a respite from pain," a view attributed to the "natural" philosophers.¹³ Most of the arguments derive in some way from a

8. Arabic text, p.41.

9. Arabic text, p. 42, ll. 1–3. Al-Razi makes also the same point in his own name in chap. II, p. 21.

10. See Arabic text, chaps. I and II.

11. Arabic text, chap. V, p. 43, ll. 7–8. Translations are mine.

12. See Thérèse-Anne Druart, "La philosophie morale arabe et l'Antiquité tardive," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 48 (1996): 183–87; "Al-Kindi's Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (1993): 329–57; "Al-Farabi, Ethics, and First Intelligibles," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 8 (1997): 405–423.

13. Arabic text, chap. V, p. 37, l. 3. Al-Razi wrote a treatise, now lost, on pleasure. Kraus's edition includes what could be recovered from it on pp. 139–64. A partial English translation can be found in Franz Rosenthal's *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, trans. by Emile and Jenny Marmorstein (London: Routledge, 1975), pp. 103–6.

conception of the soul “provisionally” accepted and deemed to be Platonic.¹⁴

Though al-Razi calls Plato the leading philosopher, he refuses to discuss the validity of his conception of the soul. Al-Razi’s Plato claims that human beings have three souls: the rational or divine, the animal or irascible, and the vegetative or appetitive. The two inferior souls are for the sake of the rational, and the irascible in particular helps it to control the appetitive.¹⁵ According to al-Razi, Plato thinks that people should discipline the actions of the three souls in such a way that they be neither excessive nor defective. Such discipline or equilibrium is ensured by means of both bodily medicine, the garden variety, which modifies humoral excesses and defects, and of spiritual medicine defined as persuasion through arguments and demonstrations.¹⁶ Since character reformation precedes true philosophical education, such arguments cannot rest on sophisticated and complex philosophical positions requiring extensive discussion and justification. Deliberately, al-Razi often limits himself to arguments based on self-interest in this life. At times he will supplement them with *a fortiori* ones based on the immortality of the rational soul and God’s rewards and punishments in the afterlife. Yet, such *a fortiori* arguments are generally presented as “if this be true, then *a fortiori* . . .” Less sophisticated arguments will prick the irascible soul into curbing the appetitive through stressing the greater dignity of human beings over animals. *The Spiritual Medicine* uses arguments and not simply emotional appeal or authorities, and, therefore, assumes, as well as provides, some intellectual training.

Al-Razi is fully aware that some arguments are more effective for a certain type of people. In his chapter on greed, he tells a simplistic story of a young man who had invited a philosopher to dinner and then gorged himself on dates. The philosopher shamed the young man by convincing him that greed is harmful since it makes one heavy and may lead to indigestion. He adds that the young man grasped the point because this kind of argument satisfies those who have not been trained in philosophy more than arguments based on philosophical principles. As an example of the latter, he states that anyone who adopts Plato’s view that the appetitive

14. On al-Razi’s Platonism, see Pines’s Appendix to his *Nouvelles Etudes sur Ahwād al-Zaman Abu’l-Barakat al-Baghdadi, Mémoires de la Société des Etudes Juives, I*, (Paris: 1955), pp. 56–58. This text has been included in *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, vol. I: *Studies in Abu’l-Barakat al-Baghdadi. Physics and Metaphysics* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979).

15. Chap. II, p. 27, l. 14–p. 28, l. 6. This presentation which combines views of Plato and Aristotle leads to problems for al-Razi since he accepts transmigration and, therefore, that the rational and animal souls cannot be fully distinct. Besides, al-Razi’s Plato claims that only the rational soul survives the body, and one may wonder then how to explain transmigration, particularly from a human body to an animal one. A solution to these questions can be found in Druart, “Al-Razi’s Conception of the Soul.”

16. Arabic text, chap. II, p. 29, ll. 2–3.

is simply at the service of the rational soul would necessarily suppress the appetitive and limit oneself to eating little.¹⁷

Since only an excellent philosopher can reach the summit of curbing his passion, *The Spiritual Medicine*, with its elementary philosophical arguments, will not only ensure an attempt at character reformation for those hovering at the brink of philosophy but will also invite them into serious philosophical training beginning with logic.¹⁸ So curbing passion does not simply precede philosophical training but accompanies it, and reaches its peak only at the completion of training. I shall show that a careful examination of *The Spiritual Medicine* reveals, under the first layer of arguments, some of al-Razi's most important positions.

The Spiritual Medicine does not simply assume some basic intellectual training; it also requires some elementary moral development. In the chapter on lying, al-Razi explains that someone who looks for self-aggrandizement through false boasts will be cured when he realizes that his inflated claims may lead to acute embarrassment if their falsity is made manifest. He then drily adds that such an argument will be effective only if the person to whom it is addressed "is not utterly base and vile."¹⁹

The Philosophic Life is al-Razi's defense against two accusations: (1) that he does not live as a philosopher should and, in particular, as Socrates his Imam, that is either simply the prayer leader at the mosque or, more grandly, the leader of the Shi'ite community; and (2) that Socrates' way of life is harmful to society. The use of the religious technical term "Imam" to speak of Socrates clearly shows that for al-Razi, who objects to any form of religion, philosophy is the only way to truth and salvation from irrational passion.

Al-Razi explains that true philosophic life rests on principles which have been made clear in previous works—among them, first, *Divine Science* and, second, *The Spiritual Medicine*.²⁰ From these al-Razi adopts six principles to build his normative ethics.²¹ These principles are specific philosophical positions and include the survival of the soul after its separation from the body, as well as God's creation (or, more exactly, demiurgic action) and attributes. After explaining these principles and deriving some of their implications and applications, al-Razi concludes that the whole philosophic life may be summed up in the following claim, which is common to all philosophers: "philosophy is the imitation of God as far as is possible for a human being."²² So the normative ethics of *The Philosophic Life* derives from

17. Arabic text, chap. XIII, p. 71.

18. Arabic text, chap. II, p. 21.

19. Arabic text, chap. IX, p. 57, l. 8.

20. Arabic text, p. 101; Butterworth, n. 9.

21. See Druart, "Al-Razi . . . and Normative Ethics."

22. See Arabic text p. 108, ll. 7–9; Butterworth, n. 29. That this view is shared by all philosophers guarantees its truth. See *The Spiritual Medicine*, chap. XV, on sex, p. 77, ll. 4–6: "For it is said in the canons of demonstration that opinions the validity of which should not be doubted are those on which all human beings agree or most of them or the wisest."

divine science and, therefore, from the whole philosophical curriculum, even if immediately afterwards al-Razi refers to *The Spiritual Medicine*.²³ This raises the question of the relationship between these two texts.

As we said previously, reformation of character is not a mere prerequisite to philosophy which should be outgrown. *The Spiritual Medicine*, for instance, explains and illustrates the third principle derived from metaphysics: "Nature and passion call us to prefer immediate pleasure whereas intellect often calls to give up immediate pleasures for the sake of things it prefers over them."²⁴ In the second chapter of *The Spiritual Medicine*, al-Razi claims that, what concerns the state of the soul after it has left the body would take the reader beyond its scope. It would exceed it "in breadth because the aim of these researches is the well being (*ṣalāḥ*) of the soul after its separation from the body even though the discussion would include most of character reformation (*iṣṭāḥ*)."²⁵ The Arabic use of two words from the same root exhibits clearly that the former encompasses and crowns the latter. As character reformation is a lifetime project, it is in some way part of a proper philosophical ethics that provides its principles and brings better justifications. Needless to say, a technical treatise on character reformation would use far more sophisticated arguments and would eschew both overdrawn presentation of essential points and the rhetorical lure of tales and quotations from the poets which are common in *The Spiritual Medicine*. Let us remember that philosophical positions are lurking behind the literary appearance.

In conclusion, from the Alexandrian tradition al-Razi derives the view that there is a pre-philosophical ethics that calls for reforming one's character and gently invites the critical reader to pursue philosophical studies. This is the purpose of *The Spiritual Medicine*. There is also a theoretical ethics deriving from metaphysics and encompassing a revised and refined version of character improvement as well as a normative ethics. Such a truly philosophic ethics is presented in *The Philosophic Life*. That for al-Razi such a philosophical ethics is theoretical rather than practical is attested by the way he distinguishes between the scientific and practical parts of philosophy.²⁶ He does not understand theory and practice as Aristotelians do. His defense of his right to be called a philosopher in what concerns philosophy's scientific or theoretical aspect rests on works such as *The Philosophic Life*, *On Demonstration*, *Divine Science*, and *The Spiritual Medicine*, as well as texts on

23. See Arabic text, p. 108, l. 10; Butterworth, n. 29.

24. Arabic text, p. 101, ll. 17–19; Butterworth, n. 9.

25. See Arabic text, p. 27, ll. 9–11.

26. Arabic text, p. 108, l. 16; Butterworth, n. 30. Al-Farabi too has an understanding of the practical and theoretical that is different from the traditional Aristotelian one. See, Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Al-Farabi on the Practical and Speculative Aspects of Ethics," in *Les philosophies morales et politiques au Moyen Âge. Moral and Political Philosophies in the Middle Ages*, vol. I, ed. B. Carlos Bazán, Eduardo Andújar, and Léonard G. Sbrocchi (New York: Legas, 1995), pp. 476–85.

medicine. As for the practical part of philosophy, it consists exclusively of the philosopher's own deeds and actions.

II. THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF AL-RAZI'S ETHICS

If my contention that *The Philosophic Life* provides the ultimate philosophical justification for the basic principles of *The Spiritual Medicine* is correct, there should not be serious discrepancies between the two texts. Yet, as we have already seen, *The Philosophic Life* boldly asserts that the whole of philosophy and ethics rests on "the imitation of God as far as is possible for a human being," whereas *The Spiritual Medicine* contains no such statement, it even seems to exclude this position since the arguments are grounded first and foremost on the superiority of the intellect and secondarily on a conception of pleasure as mere rest from pain. Besides, *The Philosophic Life*, in the first of its six principles, asserts that there is an afterlife and that its quality depends on our actions in the here below,²⁷ whereas *The Spiritual Medicine* tries carefully to push aside the question of the survival of the soul after death and argues in terms of advantages in this life. Finally, *The Philosophic Life* clearly speaks of transmigration, even if it confines to human beings the possibility of complete liberation from the body, while *The Spiritual Medicine* highlights the difference between animals and human beings and downplays the kind of continuity between these two realms required to explain transmigration. Are we, therefore, faced with irreconcilable differences? I think not. If the themes of God, the survival of the soul, and the possibility of reincarnation are stowed in the background and the survival of the soul is even officially bracketed out from *The Spiritual Medicine*, it is because this work is introductory and cannot handle them properly. Yet a close examination shows that they are present and play some role.

Once we have made our case for the close link between the two texts on these issues, we will examine the theme of the mean and its association with stern asceticism in *The Spiritual Medicine* and the rejection thereof in *The Philosophic Life*. Here again is a connection with the imitation of God.

A. *The Spiritual Medicine*, the imitation of God and the survival of the soul after death.

Chapter I begins and ends with references to God and his greatest blessing, intellect, bestowed on us. The very first sentence is a profession of faith: "The creator gave us the intellect and bestowed it upon us in order that by means of it we may reach the utmost benefits the attainment of which

27. See Arabic text, p. 101, ll. 13–14; Butterworth, n. 9.

lies within our nature in this life and the next.”²⁸ Thus our intellect derives from God’s generosity and is equally given to all of us since, al-Razi claims, all human beings are equal in intellect and, therefore, do not need any kind of revelation.²⁹ At once, in one single sentence, al-Razi has spelled out God’s role, the existence of an afterlife, and, by proclaiming that intellect is enough to ensure our salvation, he denies implicitly the necessity and importance of prophecy while affirming the indispensability of philosophy. He then lists the advantages intellect confers: (1) superiority over animals; (2) knowledge of crafts and skills, such as shipbuilding and medicine,³⁰ and (3) grasp of hidden matters, such as astronomy and knowledge “of the creator who is the greatest object we have grasped and the most useful achievement we have obtained.”³¹ So philosophy yields proper knowledge of God; therefore it is the most useful science presumably because it grounds true imitation of God. Al-Razi goes on to explain the intellect’s power and proclaims in the final sentence that if we submit passion to the rule of intellect then “we shall be happy with God’s gift of intellect to us and what he bestowed on us through it.”³² So the whole chapter of praise to intellect is neatly bounded by acknowledgments that it is God’s gift to us.

The theme of the afterlife spoken of in the first sentence reappears at the very end of the chapter on the fear of death. Most of the chapter examines the first position on death: that it is truly final. The chapter’s closing brings in the other view: that there is a state to which the soul comes after death. Anyone “who has performed the duties of the true *sharī’a*”³³ should not fear death since this *sharī’a* promised him victory, rest, and attainment of eternal felicity. If anyone has some doubts about the *sharī’a*, or does not know it or is not certain of its validity, he must search and examine to the utmost of his effort and capacity.”³⁴ For, if he does so, he will find out, and even if he should not—and this is nearly impossible—God will forgive him since he does not require from human beings what is not

28. See Arabic text, p. 17, ll. 16–17.

29. For his dispute with Abu Hatim al-Razi, see Arabic text, p. 296, ll. 19–20. If God is merciful to all people He must give to all of them the intellectual ability to do philosophy since for al-Razi there is no prophecy or revelation which would favor one people more than another and philosophy alone liberates from this world. See Arabic text, p. 302, ll. 9–15.

30. This point is also made in principle six of *The Philosophic Life* and justifies al-Razi’s contention that everyone, if at all possible, should exercise a profession. Attributing the origin of skills and crafts to intellect alone goes against a view common at the time that their discovery arises from revelation or prophecy.

31. See Arabic text, p. 18, ll. 8–9.

32. See Arabic text, p. 19, l. 4.

33. The true *sharī’a* seems to be philosophy since (1) al-Razi proclaims the impossibility of any revealed religion and (2) states that there is neither revelation or prophecy nor salvation, except through philosophy.

34. See Arabic text, p. 95, l. 16–p. 96, l. 3.

in their capacity, but rather, imposes on them much less than that.³⁵ The text, therefore, closes with a call to investigate the question of the condition of the soul after death, and a reminder of God's justice and mercy. So the whole book based on the greatness of intellect is carefully encased between two affirmations of God's generosity and two statements on the issue of the soul's survival after death.

If one looks at the rest of the book, one discovers that the same themes repeatedly appear. For instance, at times considerations about God are used to reinforce an argument. In Chapter II, on suppressing passion, al-Razi argues that if excellence rested on gratification of pleasures and sensual desires, then bulls and asses would be superior not only to human beings but even to God, to whom pleasure and sensual desire do not belong.³⁶ This, of course, implies that greatness lies in imitating God and, therefore, in curbing pleasures and sensual desires.³⁷ It also presents the views of philosophers who hold that the soul survives death and that there may be transmigration, and attributes them to Plato and his predecessor Socrates (*al-mutakhallī al-muta'allih*), the one "who withdrew from people³⁸ and lived a godly life." For al-Razi, Socrates' greatness is grounded in his "godly" life which imitates God's own life.

Allusions to the afterlife also occur.³⁹ Al-Razi reports that philosophers who hold the soul's self-subsistence and view the body as its instrument think that those who follow passion and hurt animals to satisfy their pleasures will endure a painful afterlife.

To Plato, too, al-Razi attributes the view—which he himself defends at the very end of the text—that one needs to investigate the world, that is, physics, and one's state after death. Failure to do so manifests a defect in

35. See Arabic text, p. 96, ll. 4–6. This is a Koranic principle (2:385–86 [al-Razi echoes its wording while making God still more gentle]; 6:152;7:42; and 23:62). Al-Razi, who emphasizes God's justice and mercy, has already referred to this principle in Arabic text, chap. XVI, p. 80, l. 4, to criticize some of the Islamic prescriptions for ritual purification.

36. See Arabic text, p. 25, ll. 6–9. In contrast, sensual desire is not foreign to the cosmic soul which succumbed to it.

37. Chap. VII, on envy, states that the evil person deserves the hatred of both the creator and human beings for the creator opposes malice by his will since he is generous to all and wills the good for all (Arabic text, p. 48, ll. 11–12). Chap. XVI, partially on irrational and unreasonable rituals, addresses the issue of purification and rejects some of the relevant Islamic prescriptions because God would not impose them on his servants since they are not in their capacity and power (Arabic text, p. 80, ll. 3–4).

38. See parallel passages for the first term, Arabic text, p. 27, l. 13, and in *The Philosophic Life*, Arabic text, p. 106, l. 1; Butterworth, n. 21.

39. See Arabic text, chap. II, p. 24, ll. 4–11. Chap. VIII, on anger, ends with a statement on just punishment and asserts that the one who follows intellect and curbs passion will maintain a just proportion in his anger and revenge and, therefore, will escape injury to his soul and body in his life and the next (Arabic text, p. 56, ll. 7–9).

the action of the rational (*al-nāṭiqā*) soul. For anyone in that condition, “his share of rationality (*al-nuṭq*) is that of cattle, nay of bats, vipers, and worthless things which do not cogitate or remember at all.”⁴⁰

The general structure of *The Spiritual Medicine* also reflects the three main attributes of God: science, justice and mercy, and their imitation. It highlights science in focusing on the intellect and it is noteworthy that the model human being is described time and again as the one who follows intellect (*al-ʿāqil*).⁴¹ The first sixteen (of twenty) chapters advocate the domination of intellect over passion. Then the text moves to justice⁴² while dealing with the necessity of exercising a profession since intellect allows for mutual helpfulness. In the description of the excellent or virtuous life in Chapter XIX, al-Razi states that the most excellent or virtuous philosophers have defined such a life as treating human beings not only justly but also “with kindness, feelings of temperance, mercy, goodwill to all, and striving for the advantage of all,”⁴³ except, of course, of those who deserve to be punished. This chapter ends with the definition that justice ensures one’s safety from other people but that goodwill and mercy earn us their love. Mercy then is presented as going beyond justice.

Our reading of *The Spiritual Medicine* reveals that it is very much attuned to *The Philosophic Life*, even if its different focus and audience may overshadow this fact.

B. The mean, asceticism or the lack thereof, and the imitation of God

Bar-Asher has already shown that the doctrine of the mean is present in both *The Spiritual Medicine* and *The Philosophic Life*. Yet, al-Razi associates it with a stern asceticism in the former and with a clear condemnation of asceticism in the latter.⁴⁴ Although the contrast may not be as stark as

40. See Arabic text, p. 29, ll. 11–17. *Nuṭq* normally means “speech,” but for al-Razi it seems to be more encompassing and includes all forms of awareness and determination of what is useful or harmful. For him, most animals have some share in rationality. Their various levels of faculties and usefulness determine their rank in a hierarchy which reflects their closeness to God’s three main attributes: science, justice, and mercy (Arabic text, p. 108, ll. 4–9; Butterworth, n. 29). See Druart, “Al-Razi’s Conception of the Soul.”

41. As al-Razi thinks that all human beings are intellectually equal and have the same share of rationality, it seems inappropriate to translate *ʿāqil* as “intelligent” or “rational” and preferable to focus on the use of this intellect since not all human beings follow their intellect equally. Though al-Razi’s work is very male oriented, there is one specific reference to a woman who follows her intellect in chap. XII, on grief, pp. 65–66. Arabic text, chap. I, p. 18. ll. 6–7, makes it clear that not only lunatics, but also children, cannot be among those who follow their intellect.

42. See Arabic text, p. 80, ll. 12–13.

43. See Arabic text, p. 91, ll. 7–9.

44. Bar-Asher, “Quelques aspects de l’éthique d’al-Razi,” 26–38.

Bar-Asher would have us believe, it is nevertheless a fact. It is unclear whether al-Razi's change of attitude lies in the discovery of other Socratic traditions, in his own personal evolution, in an inability to criticize asceticism as long as God's mercy has not been established, or even a pedagogical device to incite beginners to the extreme opposite of their natural tendency in the hope they will settle for the mean. Yet, in *The Philosophic Life* criticism of Socrates' early excesses is grounded in a theme already highlighted in *The Spiritual Medicine*, that is that one can go too far in one's zeal for philosophy. This again points to the importance of the mean.

Already in Chapter II of *The Spiritual Medicine*, al-Razi, while adopting provisionally Plato's view of the soul, indicates that Plato also advocates a balance between the three souls and that each should neither fail nor exceed what is expected from it,⁴⁵ and at once spells out what are the failure and excess for each soul. Failure in the rational soul is lack of interest in philosophical issues, medicine, and, in particular, in the state of the soul after death.⁴⁶ Excess leads to engrossment in philosophical studies one wants to complete in too short a time. The neophyte philosopher intent on not wasting a moment skips maintaining proper food and sleep. This affects the humors of the brain, the instrument of the rational soul, and even of the whole body. "Melancholy" ensues and the victim can no longer reach his purpose. Al-Razi even adds that, according to Plato, there is no need to hurry after philosophical pursuits since human life is long enough for their completion.⁴⁷

Seasoned philosophers who go beyond reining in the passion and opposing it to partake only of a minimum of food and drink and to eschew possessions are not criticized even if they go so far as to withdraw from people to live in desolate areas.⁴⁸ And let us recall that Socrates "withdraws from people and lives a godly life."⁴⁹ Maybe Socrates who was rightly trying to imitate God had not yet reached the conception of a merciful God interested in all aspects of human life. In *The Spiritual Medicine* there is only one indirect criticism of Socrates' attitude since chapter XVII, on earning, acquiring, and spending, states that the loner in the desert would not really enjoy human life but rather prefers the life of a beast.⁵⁰ Such a life is even presented as difficult to imagine. Besides, in this chapter al-Razi argues for the necessity and duty to exercise some profession. We should note that *The Spiritual Medicine* gives only a one sided portrait of Socrates since it is limited to his "Cynic" ascetic life.

45. See Arabic text, p. 29, ll. 2-4. This is the very purpose of spiritual medicine.

46. See Arabic text, p. 29, ll. 11-17.

47. See Arabic text, p. 29, l. 17-p. 30, l. 12. Chap. XI on repelling harmful excess of cogitation and anxiety gives the same warning to a naive beginner (Arabic text, p. 62, l. 16-p. 63, l. 5).

48. Arabic text, chap. II, p. 26, l. 17-p. 27, l. 4.

49. Arabic text, chap. II, p. 31, l. 3. See our note 38.

50. See Arabic text, p. 81, ll. 4-8.

The Philosophic Life, on the other hand, offers a well-rounded Socrates who, mellowed by age or better philosophical understanding, gives up living in solitude in the desert, buys a house, starts a family, and so on. Al-Razi, though, tells us that Socrates led an ascetic life for quite some time⁵¹ and so his excess was not the result of youthful impatience but rather stemmed from a more deep-seated problem. Its cause was “the intensity of his admiration and love for philosophy, the desire to consecrate to it time that could be occupied with sensual desires and pleasures, and, finally, from his natural inclination.”⁵² And for al-Razi, as we know, there is much for which to blame natural inclination. Al-Razi does not hesitate to accuse Socrates of excess.⁵³

A more general condemnation of asceticism rests on God’s mercy and justice.⁵⁴ Al-Razi first derives from them the prohibition to cause useless pain to other beings but afterwards argues that “since the judgment of the intellect as well as justice forbids the human being to hurt another, it follows from this that he is also forbidden to hurt himself.”⁵⁵ Al-Razi then criticizes the Hindus, who in their desire to become close to God burn their bodies; the Manicheans; the Christian monks who withdrew⁵⁶ from people; and many Muslims who stay in mosques and stop earning their bread.⁵⁷ All these excesses should be abandoned since they are forms of injustice to oneself and the useless inflicting of pain.⁵⁸ He then adds that Socrates’ first life was of this kind but that he later gave it up.⁵⁹ Al-Razi then establishes proper control of passion between two limits. Giving passion the bare minimum, that is, looking for the lower limit—as *The Spiritual Medicine* does—is more praiseworthy than to give it the maximum allowable, that is, the higher limit. Yet, anyone who falls below the bare minimum is no longer worthy to be called a philosopher. Such is the sad case of the Hindus, Manicheans, monks, and hermits who deserve God’s wrath.⁶⁰

One may wonder whether *The Spiritual Medicine*, which adopts a provisional minimal philosophical stance, was unable to oppose asceticism, which can only be refuted on the basis of God’s mercy and justice. Justice and mercy

51. See Arabic text, p. 99, ll. 16–17; Butterworth, n. 4.

52. See Arabic text, p. 99, l. 19–p. 100, ll. 1–2; Butterworth, n. 5.

53. On p. 100 al-Razi claims no less than four times that Socrates’ conduct was excessive (ll. 4, 6, 8, and 19).

54. See Arabic text, p. 103, ll. 14–15; Butterworth, n. 15.

55. See Arabic text, p. 105, ll. 15–16; Butterworth, n. 21.

56. See Arabic text, p. 106 l. 1: same term as for Socrates’ withdrawing in *The Spiritual Medicine*, Arabic text, chap. II, p. 31, l. 3.

57. In his famous autobiography, al-Ghazali tells us that it is exactly what he did for some time.

58. See Arabic text, p. 105, l. 16–p. 106, l. 3; Butterworth, n. 21.

59. See Arabic text, p. 106, ll. 3–5; Butterworth, n. 22.

60. See Arabic text, p. 107, l. 13–p. 108, l. 1; Butterworth, n. 28. In chapter XIX of *The Spiritual Medicine* on the virtuous life, al-Razi blames followers of evil Sharias, such as some Muslim heretics and, again, the Manicheans, but the brunt of the attack falls on their treatment of others and only secondarily on their bad treatment of themselves (Arabic text, p. 91, l. 11–p. 92, l. 3).

are not common attributes of God in the Greek or Hellenistic tradition. For instance, Aristotle's prime mover and the Epicurean gods are far too remote to meddle with human affairs. The emphasis on God's mercy is striking in Islamic context and its imitation yields a more altruistic perspective.

God's merciful action of rescue of the cosmic soul in giving it intellect becomes a model to imitate, particularly in the way we treat animals.⁶¹ In *The Spiritual Medicine* the distance between animals and human beings is deliberately highlighted to help the beginner focus on intellect; however, in *The Philosophic Life* animals are granted their proper place because that text has the metaphysical and psychological grounding for such an action.⁶²

III. STRUCTURE OF *THE SPIRITUAL MEDICINE*

Since *The Spiritual Medicine* is intended for beginners, its tone is pedagogical, introducing themes gradually, and its style is attractive. Obviously this text fits in the tradition of the Hellenistic Therapeutic arguments and Spiritual Medicine.⁶³ As one might expect, its chapter on grief centered on mourning has affinities to al-Kindi's famous *Art of Dispelling Sorrows*. Yet, al-Razi's way of proceeding is rather different since he does not intend to cure false beliefs on a given topic, but rather to map the principles on the basis of which one is enabled to cure any spiritual disease. *The Spiritual Medicine* is a general self-help manual. To make it more palatable, al-Razi provides catchy tales to illustrate the applications of the principles and even quotes poetry; philosophers do not have to be Philistines.

In composing this text al-Razi has two goals in mind: (1) to develop a general spiritual medicine, and (2) to incite to the pursuit of philosophy by showing the necessity of studying logic and by raising the question of the soul. These two themes are interwoven in the following manner:

1. A self-help book for treatment of the soul's diseases necessarily involves some kind of study of the soul and its normal health. Al-Razi, therefore, endorses a provisional view of the soul; however, he argues, as I have already shown, that only a soul that is aware, thanks to logic, of passion's tricks and lures will be able to confront squarely and handle properly the investigation of the survival of the soul after death. It is

61. See Druart, "Al-Razi's Conception of the Soul," 258–63.

62. See Druart, "Al-Razi's Conception of the Soul," 253–57.

63. See, for instance, *The Poetics of Therapy*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum, special number of *Apeiron* 23 (1990); Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); André-Jean Voelke, *La philosophie comme thérapie de l'âme. Etudes de philosophie hellénistique* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1993); and Druart, "La philosophie morale arabe et l'Antiquité tardive."

important to remember that the text ends with a call to start such an investigation.

2. In the penultimate chapter al-Razi lays down as a means to diagnose and treat all spiritual diseases, the art of distinguishing purely intellectual reasoning from mere rationalizations since passion can counterfeit intellect. This art, of course, is logic that alone separates good arguments from bad. And we should remember that in the Arabic tradition, as well as in the Alexandrian tradition, *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* are full citizens of the *organon* wherefore logic encompasses not only scientific and dialectical reasoning, but also rhetorical and poetic arguments.⁶⁴

Let us now go through the text to see how al-Razi proceeds to reach his two goals.

A. The basic principles (Chapters I–II)

After a brief introduction relating the circumstances of the text's composition, al-Razi uses the opening chapter to praise intellect as God's gift that will bring us salvation in this world and the next, if it is not ruined by passion. In the following chapter, he draws the conclusion that we should, therefore, rein passion. He contrasts passion's immediate and pleasurable appeal to its long term evil consequences which intellect alone can foresee and judge. Only an excellent or virtuous philosopher can reach perfect reining of passion.⁶⁵ The implication is clear that only philosophy can ensure a fully successful treatment and the study of philosophy proper begins with logic.

The necessity of curbing one's passion is argued first on the ground that all philosophers, be they convinced of the survival of the soul or not, recommend and prescribe it. The issue of the essence of the soul and its survival is at the heart of the matter but, as we saw earlier, beyond the scope of this work.⁶⁶ Al-Razi, therefore, adopts a provisional conception of the soul dubbed Platonic, or even Socratic but which is also his own. It encompasses the hierarchy of the three souls and their respective bodily location, the necessity for each to keep the mean, the self-subsistence of the rational soul whose activities include sensation and voluntary motion, its survival after death and transmigration leading to a final liberation from the body, and the soul's return to its native realm. In case the philosophical consensus

64. See Deborah L. Black, *Logic and Aristotle's "Rhetoric" and "Poetics" in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), part. chap. II, pp. 17–51.

65. See Arabic text, p. 21, ll. 3–4 (*al-rajul al-faylasūf al-fādil*). The term "al-rajul" may imply that only males can fit this category.

66. See Arabic text, p. 27, ll. 3–6, and its echo in Arabic text, chap. XX, p. 93, ll. 2–4.

might not be enough to sway the reader, al-Razi clinches his argument by claiming that every thinker, everyone who follows intellect, and even every religion proclaims the necessity of curbing passion.⁶⁷ The chapter ends by encouraging the reader to acquire progressively this habit.

B. Transition (Chapters III–IV)

In Chapter III, al-Razi asserts that all bad dispositions of the soul arise from following passion and sensual desires,⁶⁸ and since all can be medically treated according to the principles stated earlier, al-Razi announces that he will give ample illustrations of their application, although it will not be exhaustive. As successful treatment must fit the disease, we must first discover our own evil dispositions. As self-love blinds us, we will carefully choose someone who follows intellect and ask that person to tell us which evil dispositions afflict us.⁶⁹

C. Treatment of personal evil dispositions (Chapters V–XVI)

a) undiluted passions (Chapters V–VII) Conceit, envy and infatuation are three passions without redeeming features. The case is clear for conceit and envy, which are both caused by excessive self-love,⁷⁰ but more problematic for infatuation, since not only does everyone not disapprove of it, but some people even recommend it. So in Chapter V, al-Razi will have to argue that infatuation is intrinsically evil.⁷¹ As infatuation is a form of excess, and excess is a sign of passion, al-Razi might have decided to begin with infatuation as a showcase for his methods. As excess stems from the attractiveness of immediate pleasure, he introduces another basic principle of his spiritual medicine, that is, that pleasure is mere respite from pain, a point already discussed at some length in his *On Pleasure*.⁷² This gives him an opportunity to discredit the claims of literati to true knowledge because they are among those who foolishly recommend infatuation. Literati cannot compete with philosophers because they lack any tincture of logic. As this

67. See Arabic text, p. 31, l. 5. The logical basis for the validity of this argument is explained in Arabic text, chap. XV, p. 77, ll. 4–6.

68. Sensual desires are a subset of passion. See chap. XIII, on greed, Arabic text, p. 70, l. 8.

69. See Arabic text, p. 34, l. 1, and p. 33, l. 10. How passion blinds us to our faults is explained in ch. XVIII, p. 89, ll. 8–10.

70. See chap. VI, on conceit, Arabic text, p. 46, l. 11, and chap. VII, on envy, Arabic text, p. 50, ll. 5–6.

71. Though nearly the whole chapter focuses on amorous infatuation, al-Razi indicates that there are other types of infatuation, such as love for power, etc. (Arabic text, p. 38, ll. 11–14).

72. See Arabic text, p. 38, l. 5, and n. 13 above.

chapter is a good instance of al-Razi's ways of proceeding, I shall analyze it at some length.

The chapter begins very rhetorically with a statement that great men are innately spared this abject affliction which leads to humiliation. They, as well as other people seriously engrossed in some worldly or otherworldly pursuit, realize how detrimental infatuation is. Effeminate idlers, those who follow sensual desires, on the other hand, if afflicted, are nearly incurable, particularly if they are addicted to love stories, amorous poetry, and emotional tunes and songs.⁷³ Of course, infatuation is pleasurable; to detract from it al-Razi presents his conception of pleasure as a mere release from pain and, therefore, as a rather sad business.⁷⁴ Al-Razi concludes the philosophical exposé with a rhetorical diatribe against lovers, whose behavior, he contends, is worse than most animals.

Al-Razi then seizes the occasion to attack the literary elite who hold infatuation as a sign of refinement and mental subtlety, and think that grammar, literature, and the study of Arabic are the only true sciences. Moreover, they assert infatuation's value on the ground that even prophets fell in love and that it leads to sartorial elegance (sic). For al-Razi, true refinement and mental agility belong not to the literati, but rather to those who comprehend obscure matters and express them clearly and to those who invent useful and profitable arts, that is to say, the philosophers who all despise infatuation.⁷⁵ In fact, those who make much of infatuation are simply uncouth people such as Bedouins, Kurds, and the like. As for the Greeks, who are the most subtle and wisest people, they by and large are the least interested in infatuation. (This last claim certainly shows that translating from Greek into Arabic had been rather selective.)

To buttress his views against the false pretensions of literati, al-Razi tells with great relish the story of a pompous ass of a literary aficionado who makes a fool of himself in front of a cultured sheikh. His lack of rudimentary logic, not to say common sense, hinders his ability to give a sensible answer to al-Razi's question of whether all sciences are conventional or necessary. The poor fellow first says that all are conventional and, when faced with the counterexample of the calculation of the lunar eclipses, switches to the other extreme claiming that all are necessary. This involves him in an absurd claim about peculiarities of the vocative case in Arabic. He does not realize when he is contradicting himself and cannot think of the third possibility that some sciences are conventional and others necessary.

73. For al-Razi the three most powerful objects of sensual desire are women, wine drinking, and listening to music, Arabic text, chap. II, p. 23, ll. 1–2. On the views on music of Medieval Islamic philosophers and religious thinkers, see Fadlou Shehadi, *Philosophies of Music in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

74. See Druart, "Al-Razi . . . and Normative Ethics," 175–77.

75. Al-Razi must be unaware of at least some aspects of Plato's *Symposium*. On knowledge of the *Symposium* in Medieval Islam see Dimitri Gutas, "Plato's *Symposium* in the Arabic Tradition," *Oriens* 31 (1988): 36–60.

Al-Razi dismisses summarily the argument that since prophets fell in love infatuation is to be recommended. Infatuation being a defect, the fact that it afflicted even some prophets simply shows the human frailty of these so-called prophets.

As for infatuation's inducement to sartorial elegance and the like, al-Razi counters that only women and the effeminate care for such trivial things. He then rounds out his attack on effete refinement by telling the colorful story of a philosopher who, invited to the house of an ignorant and stupid aesthete, made of his host's face a spittoon to spare his exquisite possessions and elegant clothes. This apparently led to the reformation of the effete victim who began to strive for science and speculation.

This chapter shows how al-Razi not only treats the disease of infatuation but also emphasizes the importance of logic, knowledge of which distinguishes the philosophers from the mere literati. (Al-Razi indicates, however, that some people are both literati and truly learned.) This recalls the famous debate between al-Sirafi and Abu Bishr Matta on the merits of literature and logic, which illustrates the fact that some people denied the usefulness of logic which they equated with Greek grammar.⁷⁶

b) passions mixed with intellect (Chapters VIII–XII) Such dispositions of the soul at times lead to excess and, therefore, become passions; however, at other times, they give rise to appropriate actions in accord with intellect. Al-Razi will sort out what in them belongs to passion and what belongs to intellect. In Chapter VIII, he explains that excessive anger is self-defeating, though just punishment is proper. In Chapter IX, on lying, al-Razi distinguishes false boasts from the legitimate telling of untruths, for instance, to save someone's life. In the next chapter, al-Razi shows that thriftiness may be caused by an excessive fear of poverty that leads to miserliness, or by sensible economy. He introduces the theme that to distinguish passion from intellect, we must scrutinize the quality of the justification we give for our behavior since intellect alone argues well. In Chapter XI, al-Razi says that excessive anxiety and worry, though effects of intellect, should be treated as passions because of their harmfulness. In the chapter on grief (XII), he states that grief involves both passion and reason, and he again contrasts the quality of the justifications arising from intellect or from passion.

c) sensual desires: greed, drunkenness and copulation (Chapters XIII–XV) The very coarseness of these desires is matched by the crassness of the arguments al-Razi uses to treat them in highlighting their grossness and harmfulness for both body and soul.

76. On this see Muhsin Mahdi, "Language and Logic in Classical Islam," in *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, ed. G. E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970), pp. 51–83; and Gerhard Endress, "Grammatik und Logik. Arabische Philologie und griechische Philosophie im Widerstreit," in *Sprachphilosophie in Antike und Mittelalter (Bochumer Studien zur Philosophie, 3)*, ed. Burkhard Mojsisch (Amsterdam: Verlag B. R. Gruner, 1986), pp. 163–299.

d) other irrational behaviors (Chapter XVI) This chapter is a bit of a mixed bag since al-Razi deals first with useless repetitive mannerisms such as playing with one's beard, and secondly with unreasonable religious prescriptions such as ritual purifications, which stem from passion rather than reason.⁷⁷ Again, this section ends with al-Razi stating that the sign of their irrationality is that there is no sound intellectual justification for such prescriptions.

D. Treatment of defects involving relations with other people (Chapters XVII–XIX)

In chapter XVII, al-Razi claims that justice requires everyone—even philosophers—to participate in improving the quality of life and, therefore, to earn their bread and save for the future.⁷⁸ Such necessities are also a main theme of *The Philosophic Life*.

The acquisition of worldly ranks and honors is the topic of the next chapter. As al-Razi thinks the previous chapters have already provided all the principles necessary to deal with this and similar issues, he recapitulates them, insisting particularly on the intellect's ability to picture to itself the outcome of various possible courses of action. Yet, some people get so engrossed in the final result that they forget to evaluate the way to it and fail to realize that an attractive object may not be worth the trouble of pursuing it. Besides, passion, which is full of tricks and swindles, presents the object as the ultimate satisfaction; although once attained, it begins to pale in comparison to higher ones.⁷⁹ "For in these circumstances passion imitates intellect, counterfeits itself, and imagines it is intellect rather than passion."⁸⁰ As passion passes off evil as good by means of arguments that may even sound convincing, there is still greater urgency to distinguish such arguments and convictions from those of sound rigorous reasoning which alone stand logical testing. The ability to make such distinctions is an important chapter of logic. Al-Razi then whets the reader's appetite for logic by deliberately limiting himself to few remarks on the topic. For instance, at times passion mimics intellect but its arguments are disconnected and its justifications unclear. The implication, however, is clear: readers who want to complete the reformation of their character and curb all their passions successfully must register for a course in logic if they are serious about deflating passion's allurements.

Chapter XIX on the virtuous life is very brief and recaps what has been said. Bad religious and non-religious laws may push many people to a life

77. This seems to be a criticism of all forms of religious rituals; one may wonder whether grouping them with slightly obsessive mannerisms is purely accidental.

78. See Arabic text, p. 80, l. 14: another rejection of asceticism.

79. See Arabic text, chap. XVIII, p. 87, l. 5–p. 88, l. 12.

80. See Arabic text, p. 88, ll. 13–14.

of wrongdoing. Only extensive discussion with people who hold such views can cure them. At the end of the chapter, al-Razi incites to justice on the ground that it provides for one's safety, and to mercy on the ground that it will earn us the love of our fellow men. Somehow one expects this to bring the book to a close but there is still another chapter.

E. The fear of death (Chapter XX)

Only the soul's conviction that its life after death will be an improvement can expel it. To establish this demonstratively would require arguments beyond the scope of al-Razi's book.⁸¹ Yet one must face this issue, for so long as human beings persist in fearing death they will resent intellect and incline to passion. One reason for ending with this chapter may be that al-Razi believes that even his beloved logic will not ensure intellect's full control over passion if the fear of death is not dispelled; all other passions stem from it, presumably because it encourages focusing on immediate pleasures rather than on an uncertain future. Al-Razi then argues at length that even if death is final, there is no reason to fear it. And if there is an afterlife, those who have fulfilled the duties of the true *sharī'a*, or philosophy, will reach the promised lasting bliss. The book then closes with an appeal to pursue seriously the question of the soul's survival and the investigation of this true *sharī'a*.

My analysis reveals that *The Spiritual Medicine*, far from being a collection of loosely knit units, is a carefully crafted work. The numerous cross-references, echoes, and the logical and pedagogical progression of the book are witness to this. *The Spiritual Medicine* is an appeal to the study of philosophy and logic and of the question of the soul in particular, but it is rather silent about God and relies on self-interest. In order to appreciate the role of God in al-Razi's ethics, as well as a more altruistic outlook, we need to turn to *The Philosophic Life*.

IV. THE PHILOSOPHIC LIFE

Here, Al-Razi presents a defense of the philosopher's way of life against specific accusations; its main task consists of deflecting these accusations by showing that they rest on a mistaken conception of the philosophic life.⁸²

81. See Arabic text, p. 93, ll. 2–4. The wording is similar to Arabic text, chap. II, p. 27, ll. 3–6.

82. My reading of the text differs from the one presented by Charles E. Butterworth, "The Origins of al-Rāzī's Political Philosophy," *Interpretation* 20 (1993): 237–57 because I put more emphasis on ethics.

The truly philosophic life is not an imitation of Socrates' way of life, but rather of God's attributes of knowledge, justice, and mercy.

A. The general structure

The specific accusations that determine the general structure:

1. The charges against both al-Razi's and Socrates' way of life: against al-Razi because he does not live as a philosopher and against Socrates because he does and, therefore, does not discharge his social role.⁸³
2. The charges against Socrates hold for the first part of his life but not for the second since by then he had mended his ways and was taking an active part in public life.⁸⁴
3. The charges against the philosophic life are mistaken because it is not antisocial, as the opponents claim. This will be made clear once its principles are set out and explained, and some of their applications worked out.⁸⁵
4. The charges against al-Razi do not stand because he follows the true philosophic life and not Socrates' mistaken early behavior.⁸⁶
5. Conclusion: if the readers are not satisfied either with al-Razi's account of his own life or with the account of the purpose of the philosophic life, let them argue for their own views in order that they may be evaluated for adoption or rejection.⁸⁷

The respective length of the various sections show that al-Razi allocates most of his effort to the defense of the philosophic life. There al-Razi needs to take care of the specific charges as well as to offer valid ethical guidelines covering all aspects of life. He must also make clear that such guidelines reflect the very purpose of philosophy as understood by all philosophers.

B. The defense of the philosophic life rightly understood.

As the accusers are, or take themselves to be, people of speculation, discernment, and learning,⁸⁸ al-Razi can expect his readers to have some sophisti-

83. Arabic text, p. 99, ll. 2–13; Butterworth, nn. 1–3.

84. Arabic text, p. 99, l. 14–p. 101, l. 14; Butterworth, nn. 4–8.

85. Arabic text, p. 101, l. 5–p. 108 l. 12; Butterworth, nn. 9–29.

86. Arabic text, p. 108, l. 13–p. 110, l. 15; Butterworth, nn. 30–37.

87. Arabic text, p. 110, l. 16–p. 111, l. 6; Butterworth, nn. 38–41.

88. See Arabic text, p. 99, l. 3; Butterworth, n. 1. Paul Kraus considers this expression ironic. See his "Raziana I. La Conduite du Philosophe. Traité d'éthique d'Abū Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā al-Rāzī," *Orientalia* 4 (1935): 322n. 3.

cation. He therefore has to lay down the principles of an ethical system⁸⁹ and not simply a series of ad hoc counterarguments, albeit he does not feel obliged to work out all their implications. The reader who has studied his principles as well as the sample implications he offers will have no trouble figuring out further applications. Furthermore, since he is convinced of their general validity, al-Razi does not simply address his accusers but rather all those who are interested in knowledge. He opens this section with the following statement of purpose: "We shall complete the discourse on the philosophic life in order to benefit those who love knowledge and honor it."⁹⁰

Al-Razi here does not take refuge behind Plato, but simply announces that for building his ethics, he needs principles already explained in previous works, *Divine Science* and *The Spiritual Medicine* in particular, and begins immediately by listing his principles.

a) The six principles⁹¹

1. After death we shall have a state that is either admirable or reprehensible according to the life we lived while our souls were associated with our bodies.
2. The supreme end for which we were created and towards which we were moved is not the gratification of bodily pleasures but the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of justice. Both activities are our sole deliverance from our present world into the world in which there is neither death nor pain.
3. Nature and passion prompt us to prefer immediate pleasures but intellect frequently urges us to eschew immediate pleasures for the sake of that which it prefers.
4. Our master, for whose reward we hope (while fearing his punishment), looks over us with mercy and does not want us to cause pain. It is abhorrent to him that we be unjust and ignorant; he loves us to have knowledge and to be just. This same master will punish those of us who inflict pain on others and those who deserve to suffer pain according to what they deserve.
5. We must not suffer pain alongside any pleasure, when the pain exceeds the pleasure both in quantity and quality.
6. The almighty creator has entrusted to us all the particular things of which we have need, such as agriculture, spinning, and the like, upon which depend the world itself as well as our own subsistence.⁹²

The first three principles were already at work in *The Spiritual Medicine* and al-Razi does not bother relating them to his conception of the soul even

89. See Druart, "Al-Razi . . . and Normative Ethics."

90. See Arabic text, p. 101, ll. 5–6; Butterworth, n. 9.

91. Arabic text, p. 101, l. 5–p. 102, l. 5; Butterworth, nn. 4–8.

92. See Arabic text, p. 101, l. 13–p. 102, l. 4.

though he makes use of it in presenting applications of his six principles. They also rest on self-interest and are intended to curb the pursuit of immediate pleasure without setting any limitation to its extent since they do not include any allusion to the mean. Socrates' early life was in agreement with them and illustrates the possibility of abuse. The thrust of the accusations against his way of life is its refusal to mix with people, to transmit life, and to play an active role in society for the common good. Abstaining from these activities is "against the course of nature,⁹³ the maintenance of agriculture" (a metonymy for all useful arts), "and offspring, and leads to the devastation of the world as well as the ruin and annihilation of human beings."⁹⁴

The next three principles set a limit to excessive curbing of passion by focusing on God's mercy. Principle four introduces it and argues therefrom that we should not cause pain to others, and principle five prohibits inflicting useless pain on oneself. As for principle six, its wording is an echo of the motivation for the accusations, particularly in the use of agriculture as symbol for all useful arts. It does not simply require that we avoid causing useless pain to ourselves and to others; rather it calls us to positive and active steps to remove pain from all as far as possible and, therefore, to improve the quality of life. This explains why usefulness to human beings and other sentient beings becomes the criterion of value for human and animal life.⁹⁵

Of these three principles two—five and six—were already at play in *The Spiritual Medicine*. Principle five there was expressed as, "we should not seek a pleasure the consequences of which would cause an equal or greater amount of pain."⁹⁶ Here al-Razi, who wants to insist on the necessity of avoiding and removing pain, reverses the formulation. Principle four is specific to *The Philosophic Life* and is key to al-Razi's defense of the philosophers' true way of life.

b) The structure of the applications.⁹⁷ The intent to limit excessive curbing of passion and sensual desires and so to discredit asceticism and withdrawal from society commands this structure.

1. Curbing one's passion.⁹⁸

This stems from the first three principles and *The Spiritual Medicine*. As the immortality of the soul is assumed al-Razi may now contrast eternal

93. As al-Razi views nature as purely passive, he will skip dealing with this point and focus on God's will and action.

94. See Arabic text, p. 99, ll. 11–12; Butterworth, n. 2.

95. Butterworth, nn. 128–29.

96. See Arabic text, chap. II, p. 23, l. 11–p. 24, l. 1, taking into account Gutas' correction in "Notes," 92–93. Arberry's trans., pp. 25–26, gives the correct meaning.

97. Arabic text, p. 102, l. 6–p. 108, l. 3.

98. Arabic text, p. 102, l. 6–p. 103, l. 13.

happiness to the triviality of mundane, unjust pleasure which can compromise and even ruin it.

2. Not inflicting pain on others.⁹⁹

Prohibition of causing useless pain to any sentient being rests on God's mercy and on principle four. Before working out the applications of this principle in what concerns the treatment of animals and which life should be saved first,¹⁰⁰ al-Razi takes the opportunity to derive a theoretical corollary. Since God shows us mercy and "does not like pain to afflict us, all pain not stemming from our own actions or choices comes from nature and from inevitable necessity."¹⁰¹ This both affirms human freedom and responsibility and absolves God from any responsibility for evil. This principle also gives a more altruistic outlook to al-Razi's ethics since its social outreach no longer rests on mere self-interest but rather on the imitation of God and the desire to please him.

3. Not inflicting pain on ourselves.¹⁰²

This prohibition also rests on God's mercy as well as on principle five. This section sets an effective limit to asceticism and its social harmfulness. Having done so, al-Razi asks what exactly is the mean between asceticism and overindulgence.

4. Delimiting the mean between the excesses of asceticism and overindulgence.¹⁰³

As people vary in their circumstances, natural inclinations, education, and such, it is rather difficult to make a general determination applicable to all. Various conditions may render abstaining from various pleasures more or less painful. Thus it was easier for Socrates to be abstemious than for Plato, who had been brought up in the lap of luxury. Alluding to his favorite Koranic principle (God does not burden us beyond what we have the strength to bear),¹⁰⁴ al-Razi argues that the imposition of restraining one's passion must be bearable for people and, therefore, proportionate to their condition.¹⁰⁵

Al-Razi, therefore, encloses the mean between two limits which should not be overstepped. The upper limit states that all pleasures that can be

99. Arabic text, p. 103, l. 14–p. 105, l. 15.

100. See Druart, "Al-Razi's Conception of the Soul," 253–57.

101. See Arabic text, p. 103, ll. 15–17; Butterworth, n. 15.

102. Arabic text, p. 105, l. 15–p. 106, l. 6.

103. Arabic text, p. 106, l. 6–p. 108, l. 3.

104. Quoted twice in *The Spiritual Medicine* as we saw in n. 35. See also n. 37 above.

105. See Arabic text, p. 106, ll. 15–16; Butterworth, n. 24.

gratified without committing injustice or undue exertion are licit. The lower limit restrains enjoyment of pleasure to modest sufficiency but forbids asceticism because it causes useless pain. Whoever stays within these limits lives as a philosopher and deserves to be called one; however, such a person would be better off gradually training oneself to tend to the lower limit.

The passage ends with a call to God “the giver of intellect, comforter from grief and reliever from anxiety”¹⁰⁶ to help us obtain what brings us closer to Him. This illustrates God’s mercy and His active involvement in reducing pain and provides an elegant transition to the next section which grounds the six principles themselves in the imitation of God’s attributes.

c) The imitation of God’s attributes.¹⁰⁷ God is pure knowledge, pure justice, and pure mercy. He is also our creator and master whereas we are His servants and slaves. Since the most loved servants are those who follow the ways of life and customs of their masters, the servants who are closest to God will be the most learned, the most just, the most merciful, and the most kind. This is exactly what all philosophers mean when they say that philosophy is the imitation of God as far as possible for human beings.

This wrapping up of al-Razi’s six principles and their applications under three of God’s attributes gives more coherence to the system and helps the reader to understand that his basic principles were not chosen at random or simply to deal with specific issues. Finally, al-Razi ensures respectability for his own views in covering them with the mantle of *philosophia perennis*. It is clear that his six principles can be derived from some understanding of God’s knowledge, justice, and mercy, but we do not know why al-Razi selects only these attributes, how he argues for their existence, and how he would balance God’s justice and mercy. Of course, he may have addressed these issues in his lost *Divine Science*.

Having reached the ultimate principle—imitation of God—al-Razi adds that detail for its applications can be found in *The Spiritual Medicine*, which explains how the soul can divest itself from its evil character traits and in what measure the philosopher must earn, possess, and spend,¹⁰⁸ as well as seek the ranks of leadership.¹⁰⁹ This presentation of the content of *The Spiritual Medicine* is remarkable since it makes short shrift of its major theme, curbing passion, but pays much attention to its two meager chapters on social ethics, which, of course, are particularly relevant to dispelling the charge that philosophic life is antisocial.¹¹⁰ Al-Razi now is ready to justify his own life according to the lines of true philosophic life.

106. See Arabic text, p. 108, ll. 1–3. In *The Spiritual Medicine*, chap. II deals with grief and chap. XI with anxiety.

107. Arabic text, p. 108, ll. 4–12.

108. These three terms come from the title of chap. XVII.

109. Allusion to chap. XVIII, but the term “leadership” is never used in it.

110. This clearly relates to principle six which up to now has not been much used.

What marks the difference between this normative ethics and *The Spiritual Medicine* is, on the one hand, the emphasis on the treatment of other sentient beings, on imitating God's mercy and justice, reflecting God's own way of dealing with the cosmic soul,¹¹¹ which He rescued from its entanglement with matter; and, on the other hand, the setting of clear limits of asceticism, particularly in its aspect of withdrawal from one's social responsibilities. In some ways these two issues were already present in *The Spiritual Medicine*; however, here they are brought to the fore.

Considering the purpose and audience of each text helps us to see that inconsistencies between them are more apparent than real.

The Hellenistic tradition of spiritual medicine was common to all philosophical schools though some favored asceticism and withdrawal from social responsibilities. Such a tradition influenced al-Kindi but was generally disapproved in Islamic circles. It is clear that Al-Razi rejected it rather early because he included several chapters on social ethics at the end of *The Spiritual Medicine*. *The Philosophic Life* gave him the opportunity to confront this issue directly and so to distance himself from the ascetic and antisocial trend of some philosophical schools, such as the Cynics. To ground his dissidence, he reworks the theme of the imitation of God, particularly in focusing on one of God's historical actions, the rescue of the cosmic soul. In al-Kindi the God one should imitate is rather remote from human beings, engrossed in contemplation of higher realities, and does not take an active role in human affairs. Al-Razi conceives of a God actively involved with the cosmic soul, the world, and human beings, if not animals. To the Greek focus on God's knowledge, he adds a consideration of God's justice and mercy. They allow him to present a more altruistic ethics, particularly since he seems unaware of Plato's *Republic* or *Laws*, but uses the *Timaeus* (or at least Galen's summary of it).

The question of whether philosophers should be involved in society was a much debated issue, as consideration of the history of Arabic political philosophy plainly shows. Al-Razi's ethics is more sophisticated and consistent than has been argued but cannot be properly understood or appreciated when it is looked at from an Aristotelian framework rather than from an Hellenistic one.¹¹²

111. See Druart, "Al-Razi's Conception of the Soul," 258–63.

112. I cannot thank enough my colleague Richard M. Frank who had the patience not only to check my translations from Arabic but also to take care of my worst crimes against English. He made many perceptive and challenging comments.

