

## **Abu Bakr al-Razi** ***The Philosophical Life***

*Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Zakariya al-Razi (c. 864-c. 925 or 932) was born in Rayy near Tehran (the capital of modern-day Iran). He contributed to a range of different subjects, including medicine and philosophy, and was well known as a nonconformist and free-thinker who was not afraid to challenge conventional wisdom. He was so proficient in medicine that he was made the head of the hospital in Rayy before he was 32, then later became head of the hospital in Baghdad. Eventually, he was known as the "unsurpassed physician of Islam." He pinpointed the distinction between smallpox and measles, among other achievements. Towards the end of his life, he claimed to have written about two hundred books, on such subjects as philosophy, alchemy, astronomy, grammar, theology, logic, and especially medicine. His major work on medicine al-Hawi was translated into Latin under the title Continens in 1279 and was widely used as a textbook in Europe for centuries, being published five times between 1488 and 1542 alone. In this work, The Philosophical Life, he attempts to justify his actions and his way of life.*

When some people who are scholarly, discerning, and accomplished observed us mixing with people and pursuing our livelihood they found fault with us and disparaged us. They claimed that we had diverged from the path of the philosophers, notably the path of our leader [*imam*] Socrates. For he was well known not to have occupied himself with kings, and to have held them in contempt if they pursued him. He was also known not to eat the finest food, nor to wear the fanciest clothes, nor to build, acquire wealth, have offspring, eat meat, drink wine, and attend entertainments. Rather, he restricted himself to eating grass, wrapping himself in a worn-out garment, and taking shelter in a barrel in the wilderness. He was also irreverent towards commoners and royalty alike, and responded to them with what he considered to be the truth, using the clearest and frankest expressions. We are not like that [according to them]. They then went on to criticize the vices of the path that was taken by our leader Socrates, on the grounds that it goes against nature and is to the detriment of civilization and future generations, and that it leads to the destruction of the world and the ruin and devastation of humanity. We will respond to these charges as best we can, God willing.

We say: What they have related concerning Socrates is correct, and everything they mentioned is true of him. However, they also ignored other things about him and neglected to mention them on purpose, in order to strengthen their argument against us. The things they related about Socrates were true of him at the beginning of his life and continued to hold of him for a long period, but he left much of that behind. By the time he died, he had daughters, he had participated in warfare against the enemy, attended entertainments, eaten luxurious food (but not meat), and imbibed alcohol in moderation. All this is well-known and has been passed down to anyone who has made an effort to find out about this man [Socrates]. Moreover, what he did at the beginning of his life was done because of his

extreme fascination with philosophy and his love for it, and because he exerted himself to forsake desires and a preoccupation with pleasure for the sake of philosophy, and to accustom his nature to this. [He also did this] because he disdained and derided anyone who did not hold philosophy in the high regard that it deserved and preferred baser things to it. It is inevitable that at the inception of anything that excites and infatuates us, we are strongly drawn to it, love it excessively, adhere to it closely, and detest anyone who violates it. But once one has delved into it more deeply and has settled into it, excessive conduct ceases and moderation is restored. As the proverb says, "Every new thing has its pleasure." That was how it was with Socrates during that period of his life, and what was told of him concerning that period became more famous because it was more unusual, fascinating, and outside of people's ordinary experience. People are eager to transmit reports that are original and rare, and disregard what is familiar and ordinary. Thus, we are not in opposition to the more praiseworthy aspect of Socrates' life, even though we fall short of it greatly and acknowledge our inadequacy in following the just path, restraining passion, and in loving knowledge and pursuing it. We depart from Socrates' path not in quality but quantity, and in admitting this inadequacy we are not diminished, since that is the truth, and admitting the truth is nobler and more virtuous. That is what we have to say concerning this issue.

As for what they find fault with in Socrates' two ways of life, we say the following. In truth, the defect is, again, a matter of quantity not quality. Clearly, a preoccupation with desires and an inclination towards them is not the most virtuous and noblest pursuit, as we have shown clearly in our book, *On Spiritual Medicine*. Rather, [the right way is] to satisfy one's needs to the extent necessary, or to a degree that does not bring more pain than the pleasure that it produces. Moreover, Socrates eventually refrained from excess in this regard, which is truly a defect and leads to the destruction of the world and the ruin of humanity. For he went on to procreate, fight against the enemy, and attend entertainments. Someone who does that is no longer contributing to the destruction of the world and the ruin of humanity, and in order not to contribute to that, one does not have to be obsessed with desires. As for us, even though we may be unworthy of the name of philosophy in comparison to Socrates, we do deserve it when compared to non-philosophers. Having progressed so far in making our meaning clear, let us now go on to complete the statement about the philosophical way of life, that it might benefit the lovers and pursuers of wisdom.

We say: To attain our stated goal, we must build in this essay on principles that we have explained in other works, relying on them to lighten the load of this essay. These works include the following books: *On Metaphysics*, *On Spiritual Medicine*, *A Critique of the So-Called Philosophers Who Are Obsessed with the Details of Geometry*, and *The Noble Art of Chemistry*. This is especially the case with *On Spiritual Medicine*, which is indispensable to

the achievement of the aim of this essay, and to the principles from which we derive the tenets of the philosophical life. These [principles], which we will help ourselves to here in abridged form, are as follows. There is a state after death, which is either praiseworthy or blameworthy, and which depends on how we lived our life while our souls were with our bodies. The most virtuous thing, for which we have been created and to which we have been guided, is not the pursuit of bodily pleasures but the acquisition of knowledge and the application of justice, which are the means to our salvation from this world to the world where there is neither death nor pain. Nature and passion call on us to prefer current pleasures, but reason often calls on us to forsake current pleasures for other things that it prefers. Our Lord, from whom we hope for reward and fear punishment, watches over us, is merciful towards us, does not want us to be in pain, abhors us to be unjust and ignorant, and loves us to be knowledgeable and just. The Lord punishes those among us who cause pain and those who deserve punishment to the extent that they deserve. We should not suffer pain in lieu of a pleasure that is greater than that pain in quantity and quality. The Almighty Creator has put us in charge of particular endeavors that enable us to satisfy our needs, such as farming, weaving, and similar things that are conducive to sustaining the world and our livelihood. Let us accept these principles so that we can build upon them.

We say: If the pleasures and pains of the world come to an end when life does, while the pleasures of the world without death are eternal, everlasting, and infinite, then someone who purchases an expired, terminating, and finite pleasure, instead of one that is permanent, everlasting, and infinite, has been cheated. If that is so, then it follows necessarily that we ought not to seek a pleasure whose attainment requires us to commit an act that would prevent us from escaping to the spiritual world, or that would condemn us in this world to undergo a pain that is greater in quantity and more severe in quality from the pleasure that we have chosen. All other pleasures are allowable for us. But a philosophical man may forgo many of these allowable [pleasures] in order to train his soul and habituate it, so that he will find it easier and less demanding if need be [to avoid pleasures], as we have mentioned in our book, *On Spiritual Medicine*. For habit is second nature, as the ancient [philosophers] said, which makes the arduous easier and familiarizes what is feared, whether in matters of the soul or of the body. It is obvious that messengers are better walkers, soldiers are bolder fighters, and so on, which shows that habituation eases matters that are difficult and arduous before one has become accustomed to them. Although this statement, concerning the extent to which pleasure is allowable, is condensed and concise, many particular things follow from it, as we have explained in the book, *On Spiritual Medicine*. The principle that we have set out says that a rational person should not pursue a pleasure that is known to bring pain exceeding the pain he would undergo by abstaining from that pleasure and suppressing the accompanying desire. If this is a true principle or is entailed by a true principle, it necessarily follows that were we to find ourselves capable of possessing the whole world for the duration of our lives by subjecting

people to acts of which God disapproves and will prevent us from attaining eternal happiness and permanent comfort, we ought not to do so and we should not prefer it. Furthermore, if we have determined for sure, or found it probable, that if we were to eat, say, a plate of dates we would suffer from an inflammation of the eyes for ten days, then we ought not to choose that. The same applies to anything that lies between the two examples that we have mentioned, despite the fact that one is much more important compared with the other. There are numerous other examples which are minor in relation to the greater one and major in relation to the smaller one, and they are too many to be discussed since too many specific individual cases fall under this general principle. Now that we have explained what needed to be explained, let us proceed to clarify another of our conclusions, which follows from this one.

We say: Since the principle that we established states that our Lord and Master is compassionate towards us, watches over us, and is merciful to us, it follows also that he abhors that any pain should befall us. Anything that transpires to us from Him, which is not a result of our actions and choices, but rather a matter of nature is necessary and unavoidable. It follows necessarily from this that we ought not to cause pain to any sentient being who does not deserve such pain, or whom we are not saving from a more extreme pain. From this generalization also flow many particular statements concerning all injustices, including the pleasures that royalty get from hunting animals and the treatment of animals by people who fatigue them excessively when employing them. All this must be done for a purpose, in a rational manner, and according to just rules, which cannot be exceeded or violated. Pain can only be incurred when it is intended to prevent greater pain, such as the slitting of wounds, amputation of decayed limbs, ingestion of bitter and bad-tasting medicine, and avoidance of tasty food to stave off serious painful illness. Animals are to be put to work for a purpose and without violence, except when violence is necessary in certain instances demanded by reason and justice, such as hastening a horse to enable one to escape from an enemy. In that case, justice necessitates that a horse be spurred onwards and [even] destroyed in order to save a human being, especially if that human is knowledgeable, benevolent, or gifted in some way that would benefit people in general. That is, if the gifts of such a person and his preservation in this world are of greater benefit to his people than the preservation of that horse. [Another example would be] of two people who find themselves in a waterless wilderness. If one of them has water that could ensure the survival of himself but not his companion, he ought in this case to prefer to give the water to the one who is of more benefit to people. This is the standard that should be applied in such cases and similar ones.

When it comes to hunting, stalking, snaring, and killing [animals], they should be reserved for carnivorous animals, like lions, tigers, wolves, and the like, or for animals that cause the greatest harm, are unsuitable for domestication, and are of no use, such as snakes,

scorpions, and the like. That is the standard that should be applied in these cases. These animals can be rightfully destroyed on two grounds. The first is that if they are not destroyed they will in turn harm many other animals, which is the case only for such animals, namely carnivorous ones. The second is that the only animals whose souls can escape from their bodies [before death] are humans. If that is the case, enabling animal souls to escape from their bodies is like a prelude to and a facilitation of salvation. Since both grounds are satisfied in the case of carnivorous animals, they must be exterminated whenever possible, since that lessens the pain of other animals and holds out the hope that their souls will be lodged in better bodies. As for snakes, scorpions, wasps, and the like, they cause pain to animals and are unsuitable for human use in the way that some domesticated animals are used, and so killing and exterminating them is allowable. Domesticated and herbivorous animals must not be exterminated or killed, but rather we must treat them gently and avoid as far as possible using them for nourishment, as well as breeding them to the point that they must be slaughtered in quantities. Rather, [slaughtering such animals] should be done intentionally and on the basis of need. Were it not for the fact that there is no hope for the salvation of any non-human soul, the judgment of reason would not have allowed them to be slaughtered at all. Philosophers have disagreed about this issue, for some have thought it allowable for humans to feed on meat while others have not, and Socrates was one of those who did not allow it.

Since it is against reason and justice for a human being to cause pain to another, it follows that he should not cause pain to himself as well. Many things follow also from this general statement that go against reason, such as what Hindus do by burning their bodies and laying on sharp metal in an attempt to approach God, or such as what Manicheans do by castrating themselves when they are drawn to sexual intercourse, or emaciating themselves with hunger and thirst, or making themselves dirty by avoiding water and using urine instead. Other things can also be classified under this rubric, even though they are much less extreme, such as Christians who lead a monastic lifestyle and isolate themselves in cells, or Muslims who confine themselves to mosques, leaving behind their livelihoods and restricting themselves to small quantities of unappetizing food and rough, uncomfortable clothes. All these acts constitute injustices to oneself and involve inflicting pains that do not deflect greater pains. Socrates followed a similar path at the beginning of his life but he left it behind in the latter part of his life, as we mentioned earlier. Under this heading, there is a great deal of variation that goes unmentioned, so we must make an approximate statement about this and give some examples.

We say: People differ in their circumstances, some being raised in luxury while others are brought up in misery, and some people have a yearning to satisfy some desires that exceeds that of others, such as those who are obsessed with women, wine, power, and other things that exhibit variation among people. Hence, the pain that befalls them as a result of

suppressing their desires varies greatly depending on their circumstances. For instance, the body of a child who is born to royalty and is raised in luxurious circumstances is unable to withstand rough clothes or unpalatable food, by comparison to a child born to commoners, and will be greatly pained as a result. Moreover, those who are habituated to experiencing a certain pleasure are pained when they are prevented from having it, and the hardship they experience will be greater and more severe than it will for those who have not been habituated to that pleasure. For this reason, it is not possible for them to be charged with the same things, but rather they must be charged differently according to their circumstances. Hence, a child of royalty who aspires to pursue a philosophical life cannot be assigned the same food, drink, and other means of subsistence that are assigned to a child of commoners, unless it is done gradually if necessary. But the limit that must not be transgressed is that they should abstain from any pleasure that can only be attained by committing an act of cruelty, killing, or in general, anything that would displease God and goes against the judgment of reason and justice. Everything else is allowed. That is the upper limit, by which I mean the utmost luxury. As for the lower limit, meaning the utmost asceticism and abstinence, it is for a human being to eat what would not harm him or make him ill, as long as he does not aim for pleasure for its own sake and seek to gratify his desires rather than simply satisfy his hunger. He must also wear whatever cloth his skin can withstand without harm, and not be drawn to lavish and patterned clothes. He must seek shelter in a dwelling that protects him from excessive heat and cold, and must not go beyond that by living in an opulent, extravagant, and ornamented mansion, unless he has enough money to afford such things without injustice, transgression, or self-destruction in pursuit of wealth. Therefore, in this regard, those who are born to poor parents and who grow up in destitute circumstances are at an advantage, since abstinence and asceticism are easier for such people, as they were easier for Socrates than for Plato. Whatever lies between these two limits is allowable and would not deprive a practitioner of the title of philosopher but would allow him to retain that title. Nevertheless, it is preferable to tend more towards the lower limit rather than the upper limit, and virtuous souls, even ones accompanying bodies raised in luxury, will tend to steer their bodies gradually towards the lower limit. When one transgresses the lower limit one deviates from [the life of] philosophy, as we have said with regard to Hindus, Manicheans, monks, and hermits. This constitutes a deviation from the just life and causes the displeasure of God Almighty by painning souls in vain, and merits relinquishing the title of philosopher. The same applies to transgressing the upper limit. We call on God, who bestows reason, relieves anxiety, and dispels worry, to grant us success, guide us, and help us to achieve what is most pleasing and endearing to him.

To summarize, I say: the Creator, to whom belong glory and majesty, is all-knowing without a trace of ignorance and just without deviation. He is absolute Knowledge, Justice, and Mercy; He is our Creator and Lord, and we are His slaves. The slaves who are dearest to

their masters are those who follow their paths most closely and adopt their rules most strictly. The slaves who are closest to God, to whom belong majesty and glory, are the wisest, most just, most merciful, and kindest. All this is to say what all philosophers do: Philosophy is an emulation of God Almighty to the greatest extent possible for a human being. That is the philosophical life in the most general terms. As for specifics, we have supplied them in the book *On Spiritual Medicine*, where we described how to expunge immoral characteristics from the soul, and to what extent someone who aspires to philosophy ought to engage in the acquisition of wealth, earning a living, spending money, and seeking positions of power.

Now that we have explained what we aimed to explain in this regard, we will revert to explaining our own [life], by replying to our critics and saying that we have never, to this day, adopted a path, with God's assistance and support, that would warrant denying us the title of philosopher. A person who deserves to be stripped of the title of philosopher is one who is deficient in both aspects of philosophy, theory and practice, by lacking the knowledge that a philosopher must have or by adopting ways that are at variance with what a philosopher must do. Thanks to God's help, support, and guidance, we are innocent of that. When it comes to knowledge, if we had only received from God the power to compose a book like this one, that alone would have been sufficient to prevent us from being denied the title of philosopher, not to mention other books, such as *On Demonstration*, *On Theology*, *Introduction to Natural Science* (commonly known as *Natural Acoustics*), our treatise *On Time, Space, Extension, Eternity, and the Void*, *On the Shape of the Universe*, *The Cause of the Location of the Earth at the Center of the Celestial Sphere*, *The Cause of the Circular Motion of the Celestial Sphere*, *On Composition*, *That Objects Have Essential Motion and that Motion is Determinable*, our books on the soul, prime matter, and medicine such as *al-Mansuri*, our book *For Those Who Lack a Medical Doctor*, our book *On Extant Medicines*, the book commonly known as *Royal Medicine*, the book known as *The Compendium* (which has neither a precedent nor a successor in the kingdom), as well as our books on the discipline of wisdom, popularly known as alchemy. In sum, I have produced close to two hundred books, treatises, and essays, up to the writing of this essay, in the disciplines of philosophy, including natural science and metaphysics. As for mathematics, I admit that I have only given it cursory attention, and only to the extent that it was absolutely necessary. I have not devoted my time to mastering it, and that was intentional rather than due to a lack of ability. If anyone so desires, I can supply my reason for that, which is that what I have done is correct rather than what those so-called philosophers do, who spend their entire lives preoccupied with the superfluous details of geometry. Hence, if the extent of my knowledge is not such as to earn me the title of philosopher, I would like to know who does deserve that title among those of our times.

When it comes to the practical side of things, I have not, with the aid of God and His support, exceeded the two limits that I have defined above. None of my actions has been such as to justify saying that my life has not been a philosophical one. I have not been a companion to the king in that I have borne arms on his behalf, or overseen his affairs, but rather have accompanied the king as a physician and confidant. In this, I have taken on two roles: in his time of illness, I have treated him by repairing his body, and in his time of health, I have kept him company and given him advice. And God knows, in all my entreaties to him, I have aimed to benefit him and his subjects. Moreover, I have not been known to be greedy in accumulating wealth or to be extravagant in spending it, nor am I known for being disputatious with others, harboring enmity towards them, or acting unjustly in dealing with them. Rather, the opposite is the case, and I have even been known to relinquish many of my rights. When it comes to my eating, drinking, and entertainment habits, anyone who has observed me at length will know that I have not exceeded the upper limit, and the same goes for my clothes, horses, domestic servants, and slaves. My love of knowledge, my efforts to acquire it, and my dedication to it are well-known to all who have been associated with me and observed me first-hand. I have been preoccupied with knowledge from my early years to the present, to the point that whenever I come across a book I have not read or a man I have not met before, I put off all other work, even at great cost, until I have acquired the book or ascertained what that man has to offer. My patience and efforts have reached such a pitch that I wrote more than twenty thousand pages in one year, using the small script used in amulets. I spent fifteen years working on one book, the large *Compendium*, working day and night to the extent that my eyesight was weakened and I tore a muscle in my hand, both of which prevent me currently from reading and writing by myself, but I remain dedicated and rely on someone to help me read and write.

If the standard I have attained in practical matters lies below the rank of philosophy, according to these people, and if the aim of the philosophical life is different from the description I have given, let them prove this either in person or in writing. We will accept their arguments if they are based on knowledge, and will refute them if we can prove that they contain errors or omissions. But even if I were to grant them my shortcomings on the practical side of things, what can they say when it comes to the theoretical? If they find me lacking, let them have their say on this topic so that we can look into it, and then either admit that they are right or show them where they are wrong. If they do not find me lacking on the theoretical side, they should at least benefit from my knowledge and not pay attention to my life. As the poet once said:

*Act according to my knowledge, so that if I am deficient in practice,  
You will benefit from my knowledge and be unaffected by my deficit*

This is what we aimed to convey in this essay. To the bestower of reason is due infinite praise, for he is worthy of it and deserves it, and may God bless the chosen ones among his worshippers, both male and female.

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