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Michael-Sebastian Noble

PHILOSOPHISING THE OCCULT

AVICENNAN PSYCHOLOGY AND 'THE HIDDEN
SECRET' OF FAKHR AL-DĪN AL-RĀZĪ

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY AND
CULTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Michael-Sebastian Noble
Philosophising the Occult

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Chapter 1

al-Sirr al-maktūm

1.1 Introduction

The most mysterious work of the great philosopher and theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210)—“the renewer” of the Islamic faith at the end of the twelfth century—was *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (“The Hidden Secret”).¹ Addressing its parting counsel to an unnamed king, it describes, in remarkable detail, the occult beliefs and rituals underpinning talismanic astral magic.² For practical purposes, when I refer to “astral magic” and “occult science,” I shall restrict the meaning of these terms to the descriptive definition of “talisman” formulated by Rāzī: “[. . .] the blending of heavenly active forces with elemental passive forces, for the sake of being empowered (*li-ajl al-tamakkun min*) to make manifest that which runs contrary to the norm (*al-‘āda*) or to prevent from occurring that which is consonant with it.”³

1 It was Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) who identified him as the “renewer” (*mujaddid*) of the faith in the sixth Islamic century: see Tāj al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Ibn ‘Alī al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī *et al.* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1964), vol. 1, p. 202, observed by Ayman Shihadeh in “From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005): pp. 141–179, at p. 141.

2 Rāzī addresses this royal figure in the concluding section of *al-Sirr* in the following terms: “O King, aided with all the good of the world, by the affairs of the heavens (*al-mu‘ayyad bi-khayrāt al-‘ālam bi-umūr al-samāwāt*).” See: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mīrẓā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated) p. 164. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the royal figure was Terken Khātūn (d.630/1232–3), a Qipchaq-Turk princess (see Frank Griffel, “On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Life and the Patronage He Received,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 18/3 (2007): pp. 313–344, p. 332, fn. 71). Griffel thinks this unlikely. The early dating of *al-Sirr* (see section 1.3) places it at a time when Rāzī was not enjoying the luxury of royal patronage. That the work could have been a means of currying favour with a potential royal patron might be a way of explaining this. On the possible identity of this patron, see section 1.7 below.

3 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.7: “*nīranj al-quwā al-fa‘āla al-samāwiyya bi’l-quwā al-munfa‘ila al-‘unṣuriyya li-ajl al-tamakkun min iẓhār mā yukhālīf al-‘āda aw al-man‘ bihā yuwāfiqihā*.” This wording I amend to “*tamzīj al-quwā al-fa‘āla al-samāwiyya bi’l-quwā al-munfa‘ila al-‘unṣuriyya li-ajl al-tamakkun min iẓhār mā yukhālīf al-‘āda aw al-man‘ min mā yuwāfiqihā*.” Compare the close wording from Rāzī’s *al-Maṭālib*: “*tamzīj al-quwā al-fa‘āla al-samāwiyya bi’l-quwā al-munfa‘ila al-arḍiyya li-iḥdāth mā yukhālīf al-‘āda aw li’l-man‘ min mā yuwāfiq al-‘āda*.” See: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 8, p. 149. In *al-Sirr*, sublunary passive forces are referred to as “elemental” (*‘unṣuriyya*) whilst in *al-Maṭālib*, they are referred to as “earthly” (*arḍiyya*).

The “talisman” was an earthly object into which the practitioner, by the power of his own soul, could blend the powers of the celestial spheres to affect, at a distance, and in accordance with his will, a breach of the empirical norm that patterns reality in the earthly realm. The talisman could either be a metal object—specifically, an idol or a ring—or the very person of the practitioner himself.

Identified as “Sabians” (*al-ṣābiʿa*), the masters of this science co-ordinated cosmology with psychology to achieve real effects in the world. For Rāzī, the Sabian was a practitioner of this science, irrespective of his theological commitments, his race, language, and culture. A practitioner could be a Sabian whether or not he believed in: multiple necessarily existent beings; God as the only Necessarily Existent Being, and as an agent possessed of volition (*fāʿil mukhtār*); or God as the only Necessarily Existent whose creation is by way of non-volitional emanation. Since, theoretically, someone of any theological conviction could learn and practice Sabianism, it was less of a religion and more of an approach to understanding the hidden forces which determined “generation and corruption” in the sublunary world. It was a science. To what ends this knowledge was put would determine the extent to which it could foster the soul’s perfection, or hasten its debasement into pure idolatry, the pursuit of sublunary gain and immersion in corporeal pleasure.

Concurring with most of the heresiographers from the time of the early tenth century, Sabianism represented for Rāzī any form of astrology. But in the introduction of *al-Sirr*, it is presented as natural philosophy, grounded in the belief in an ensouled geocentric cosmos. All events in its terrestrial centre are generated by the configurations of the planets. The planets and celestial spheres—the orbits in which they move—are animated by a plenitude of spirits. The powers of these spirits can be directed by means of ritual in order to influence change in this world. Each natural phenomenon and product of human artifice has its own special occult correspondence (sing., *munāsaba*, pl., *munāsabāt*) with the specific planet or planets which presided over its coming-to-be (*ḥudūth*). Planetary correspondence thus describes a special kind of ontological relationship in which sublunary effect somehow participates in the nature of its celestial principle: they share in a *congenerity* (*mujānasa*). For the Sabian, the significance of any terrestrial phenomenon derives from its participation in this infinitely complex web of celestial correspondence. Astral ritual gathers together sublunary objects of planetary correspondence and co-ordinates them with action and words to engender an intended result. Certain planets are effective for certain results: Mars for an aggressive aim; Venus for an aim relating to friendship and love.

For astral ritual to be effective, the practitioner must establish a noetic connection with the celestial spirits appropriate for his aim. To achieve this, he must purify his soul and cease its engrossment in material reality and sensual

pleasure by engaging in rigorous spiritual discipline, fasting, and mental focus on the operative planet. Ritual preparatory diet serves two functions. Firstly, in ceasing engrossment with material reality, he must reduce his consumption of food to the barest minimum required to sustain life. Such privation causes inevitable imbalances in the soul and thus requires a subtle knowledge of medicine (*ṭibb*) to ensure its well-being. Secondly, consumption of ritual foods assists in establishing the desired congenereity with the spirit that is invoked.

Two major categories of Sabian astral ritual can be discerned from Rāzī's account. The first involves the casting of a "talisman" (sing., *ṭīlasm*; pl., *ṭīlasmāt*) A talisman is an idol, cast in a mould at the astrologically appropriate time. Its metal corresponds to the operative planet: silver for the Moon; gold for the Sun; iron for Mars; lead for Saturn. Ritualised actions, mimetic of the intended aim, are then performed on or before this idol: when the practitioner enjoys a strong, stabilised noetic connection with the appropriate planet, then the intended result follows.⁴

The second major category of astral magic in *al-Sirr* involves invocations which address the planets (*da'wat al-kawākib*). It represents the central focus of *al-Sirr*. We shall refer to it as the planetary ascent ritual.⁵ A condition which the aspirant must fulfil before undertaking the ritual is to establish, by means of rigorous spiritual discipline, a stabilised noetic connection with his "perfect nature" (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*). The Sabians of *al-Sirr* understood the Perfect Nature as a celestial spirit (*rūḥ falakī*) that was the ontological origin of a discrete group of human souls. The heavens were inhabited by a multiplicity of such spirits, their number being commensurate to the number of discrete soul groups of which, according to the Sabians, humanity comprised.

With a noetic connection with his perfect nature established and stabilised, this celestial spirit plays a tutelary role of initiating him into the long ritual which lasts several years, providing care, guidance, and mediation with hostile planets throughout. It comprises seven distinct successive stages, observing the Ptolemaic planetary order. During each, an astral ritual is performed, and the rational soul of the planet addressed. For some stages, the aspirant is to expect a certain visionary experience. At each, the aspirant receives a sign that

⁴ For an excellent overview of talismans in the medieval Islamic tradition, see Liana Saif, "From *Ġāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Šams al-ma'ārif*: Ways of Knowing and Paths of Power in Medieval Islam," *Arabica* 64 (2017): pp. 297–345.

⁵ As will be seen, this is not a literal ascent, but a metaphorical one. An astral magical ritual in *al-Sirr* is usually referred to as "*amal*"—a "working" or "operation."

the planet has accepted his devotions and is willing to co-operate with his will. Then, he is to ask the planet for knowledge and power over all in the sublunary world which it governs.

Given that all change in the world of generation and corruption falls under the sway of the planets, the aspirant by the end of this long ritual will have attained knowledge of and power over everything in the sublunary world: by the power of his own soul, he would—like the celestial souls—be able to command meteorological and geological phenomena such as the rain and earthquakes. Having achieved a microcosmic transformation, he would have transcended his own humanity and realised the ontological rank of the spirits which move the heavenly spheres. By means of their occult practices the Sabians were able to gain mastery and control of the imbalances of their own souls and the vicissitudes of sublunary reality.

This volume will be the first study dedicated to *al-Sirr*, a highly popular, problematic and unusual work. The number of manuscript witnesses affirms its popularity. The controversy which it provoked amongst subsequent Islamic scholars, some of whom could not believe that Rāzī wrote it, others who did, declaring him an infidel as a consequence, is evidence of its problematic nature.⁶ And the fact that it was one of the rare attempts, by an Islamic intellectual of Rāzī's calibre, to engage with this occult science, motivated by other than a polemical or destructive aim, is testament to its highly unusual nature.⁷

Specifically, this study will present Rāzī's philosophical account of the talismanic craft by focusing on the more theoretical passages of *al-Sirr*. Written in a

6 On the controversy amongst Islamic scholars concerning Rāzī's *kufr* as a result of writing *al-Sirr* see Sa'īd Fūda's discussion in his "Introduction" to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl fī dirāyat al-uṣūl*, ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Laṭīf Fūda (Beirut: Dār al-Dhakhā'ir, 2015), vol. 1, pp. 24–25 and pp. 47–85. The controversy still rages today. On account of the popularisation of his works in modern times, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who anathematised Rāzī for writing *al-Sirr*, has most recently been the object of criticism from the contemporary Ash'arī theologian 'Uthmān al-Nablusī, whose robust defence of Rāzī against Ibn Taymiyya's charge of *kufr* and astrology is the first study dedicated to the issue. See 'Uthmān al-Nablusī, *Mawāqif al-Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī min al-sihr wa-da'wat al-kawākib wa-radd takharriṣāt al-taymiyya* (Amman: al-Aslein, 2018).

7 Previous examples include al-Kindī's *De Radiis*; the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity *On Magic*; and Maslama al-Qurṭubī's *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*. On *De Radiis*, see Peter Adamson, *Al-Kindī, Great Medieval Thinkers* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 188–191. On the continuity of thought between these three works on astral occult science and the astrologer Abū Ma'shar, see Saif, "From Ġāyat al-ḥakīm to Šams al-ma'ārif," pp. 299–309. For a comparison of the astral images described in *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* and in *al-Sirr*, see Živa Vesel, "Le *Sirr al-Maktūm* de Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī face à la *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*," in *Images et magie: Picatrix entre Orient et Occident*, eds. Jean-Patrice-Boudet, Anna Caiozzo and Nicholas Weill-Parot (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2011): pp. 81–85.

highly condensed form; and exhibiting the clear influence of the philosopher Avicenna (d. 427/1037); these passages resist easy analysis. To bring Rāzī's theory into sharp focus, therefore, this study will analyse the relevant passages in *al-Sirr* in light of those works in which Rāzī engaged most deeply with the philosophy of *sheikh al-ra'īs*—the “great sheikh.” The cumulative effect of such an “intertextual” approach will serve the additional aim of securing the attribution of *al-Sirr* to Rāzī.

The Sabian craft, for Rāzī, was a genuine science, grounded in an epistemology that was rooted in empirical observation, tradition, personal revelation and analogical reasoning. Results in the real world confirmed the truth of its claims. Its illicitness, in the eyes of Islamic law, as a practice was an issue entirely separate and distinct from its validity as a science on which rational inquiry might theorise. In laying out the foundations of this science, and in identifying where it came into conflict with Islamic belief and practice, Rāzī's ultimate objective was to integrate its insights into the philosophical-theological synthesis of his late career, in much the same manner by which he harmonised certain aspects of Avicennan philosophy with the fundamental truths of his theology that could admit of no compromise.

In considering the relevance of *al-Sirr* to his final synthesis, we will focus on the themes of cognition, prophethood and soteriology and ask why much of the material that is treated in *al-Sirr* reappears, albeit in a far more systematised form, in *Fī'l-nubuwwāt wa-mā yata'allaq bihā* (“On Prophethood and related matters”), the eighth volume of the great philosophical-theological *summa*, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī* (“The Sublime Theses of the Divine Science”) with which Rāzī's career culminated. The answer to this question will bring into sharp relief the seriousness with which medieval Islamic thinkers of the intellectual calibre of Rāzī treated the occult science.

Despite the importance of the work, both for the history of occult theory and practice, and for the broader field of Islamic intellectual history, a full critical edition and translation of *al-Sirr al-maktūm* remain *desiderata*. For the purposes of this study, we shall rely on the undated Cairo lithograph commissioned by Mīrzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī, checking its text against, amongst other witnesses, the oldest complete manuscript to which I have access: Tehran, Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmī Library, MS 6853, completed in Iṣfahān, and dated, according to the scribal colophon, to the *hijrī* date of 5th of *Dhū'l-Ḥijja*, 616 (11th February 1220)—around ten years after Rāzī's death.⁸

⁸ Tehran, Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmī Library, MS 6853, f. 275a. Frank Griffel argues that the most likely date for Rāzī's death is ʿĪd al-Fiṭr, 606/29th March 1210 (see Frank Griffel, “On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life and the Patronage He Received,” p. 331).

1.2 Sabians in the historical imagination

It was during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–833) that the pagans of the Syrian city of Ḥarrān, which had by the sixth century become a refuge for pagans resistant to Christianisation, are reported to have secured official toleration for their religion by adopting the name “Sabian,” a Qur'ānic designation for a religious group which the early Muslim community regarded as worthy of the kind of protected status extended to Jews and Christians.⁹ Some Ḥarrānian Sabians went on to become accomplished scholars in the court of the caliph, crucial to the translation movement transmitting key philosophical and scientific texts from Greek into Arabic.¹⁰ Of greatest renown was the Sabian Thābit Ibn Qurra (d.901) who, migrating from Ḥarrān, settled in Baghdad where, being closely associated with the court of the Caliph al-Mu'taḍid (r. 892–902), he became a mathematician and translator of great repute.¹¹ He was also the leader of the Ḥarrānian Sabian community in Baghdad, where he authored works describing Sabian astrolatrous ceremonies and providing instructions on the practical casting of talismans.¹² Many of his descendants, retaining their astrolatrous religion for at least a century after him, went on to become prominent intellectuals serving the caliphal court. Indeed such pagans appear in the Arabic sources as late as the eleventh century.¹³

Van Bladel describes the information contained in the historical sources relating to actual Ḥarrānian Sabian belief and practice as scanty and tendentious. Nevertheless, he observes that the Syriac and Arabic reports are almost unanimous that they involved planet worship and ritual sacrifice.¹⁴ But by the

⁹ See Qur'ān 2:62; 5:69; 22:17. The issue of who the original referents of the Qur'ānic term were remains a matter of dispute within modern scholarship, a good survey of which is to be found in Kevin Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science*, Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.67–68.

¹⁰ See Dimitri Gutas *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)* (London New York: Routledge, 1998); Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy without Any Gaps Volume3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 19–25.

¹¹ Charles Burnett, “Thābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian on Talismans and the Spirits of the Planets,” *La Corónica*, 36 (2007): pp. 13–40. On Thābit Ibn Qurra, see generally: *Thābit Ibn Qurra: Science and Philosophy in Ninth-Century Baghdad*, ed. Roshdi Rashed (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

¹² Burnett, “Thābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian,” p.16.

¹³ Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p.65.

¹⁴ Some modern scholars connect it to Babylonian and Hellenistic religion. For the Babylonian aspect, see Tamara Green's *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (Leiden:

early tenth century: “any supposed pagans or idolaters of any period, such as the ancient Greeks, pre-Christian Romans and Egyptians, and the Buddhists, were also called Sabian. The precise identity of the Sabians whom God sanctioned in the Qur’ān was, and is, a matter of persistent controversy for Muslim exegetes and heresiographers.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, the Ḥarrānian Sabian connection remains relevant to *al-Sirr* in the figure of Thābit Ibn Qurra. An anecdote describing his application of occult astral knowledge to thwart a plot hatched against him by an envious courtier at the court of al-Muwaffaq, is adduced in the introduction of *al-Sirr* as an illustration of its invaluable utility.¹⁶ The Ḥarrānian Sabian represents the ideal of how this arcane knowledge can be put into practice to serve very real, sublunary concerns. Moreover, Thābit reappears as an important unnamed source for Rāzī’s practical instructions for the casting of a talismanic idol in *al-Sirr* 3:1, an account which seemingly combines the talismanic astrolatry of the Ḥarrānian Sabians with that of the “Indian” Sabians.¹⁷ Thābit and his descendants remained on their ancestral religion, enjoying the esteem of the ‘Abbasid court, for six generations.¹⁸

By the ninth century, Ḥarrānian Sabians were claiming Hermes as the founding prophet of their religion.¹⁹ In the middle of that same century, Jāhiḻ reported the claim, subsequently corroborated by Abū Ma’shar, that Hermes was identified with the Qur’ānic Idrīs and the Jewish Enoch, the prophet who ascended the celestial spheres where he received visions and learnt mysteries from angelic teachers. In the century that followed, this heavenly ascent had become the means by which he received angelic instruction in the mysteries of the natural sciences and astrology.²⁰ Intellectuals serving the Ismā‘īlī mission in Qayrawān and in northern

Brill 1992); for the Hellenistic background see David Pingree, “The Sabians of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9 (2002): pp. 8–35.

15 Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p.67.

16 The anecdote appears in *al-Sirr*, p.4. A full translation appears in Burnett’s “Thābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian.”

17 Rāzī’s account is to be found in *al-Sirr*, pp. 95–96.

18 Alexandre M. Roberts, “Being a Sabian at Court in Tenth Century Baghdad,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137/2 (2017): pp. 253–277.

19 Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p.66. Despite this fact, Van Bladel argues that the evidence for Ḥarrānian Sabian transmission of Hermetic texts remains elusive: “the evidence for the Ḥarrānian transmission of Hermetica into Arabic faces a major impediment: no one has hitherto been able to show a single surviving Arabic work attributed to Hermes to be definitely Ḥarrānian in origin [. . .]. The great influence that some historians suppose ‘Ḥarrānian Hermeticism’ to have had on Arabic culture and on Islam lacks sure evidence at this stage.”

20 On the theme of the heavenly ascent of Hermes, see Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, pp.164–184.

Iran deployed a form of this narrative to support their argument that all branches of human knowledge were based on principles which were not generated by reason, but received by revelation. Van Bladel observes that a survey of those who used works attributed to Hermes from late antiquity until the time that Rāzī was writing, includes members of all religions represented in Islamicate civilization at that time. Due to the late antique Greek chronographic tradition, he was universally understood as an antediluvian sage and thus sufficiently remote in time to be accepted as an authority. Van Bladel notes: “Yet Hermes would not have acquired the specific character of a prophet if it had not been for the Ḥarrānian Sabians, descendants of the ancient pagans, living in a milieu in which every sect required a prophetic founder. Even after the Sabians had entirely disappeared, Hermes was remembered as the prophet of paganism and the founder of the sciences.”²¹

By the time we encounter him as the Sabian prophet in *Kitāb al-Milal wa'l-niḥal*, written by Rāzī's immediate predecessor Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), Hermes had become the great primordial preceptor of astrology whose revealed knowledge establishes the names of the planets, the zodiacal signs, and the principles of astrology.²² In contrast with the revelation of the Abrahamic traditions, it is by means of the revealed knowledge of Hermes, that Man learns the principles of natural science which inform the astral ritual that he uses to obtain noetic connection with the celestial souls. Although Hermes does not appear prominently in *al-Sirr* as an obvious hierophantic figure, the Sabian beliefs and practices described therein are deeply informed by the principles and motifs with which he had come to be closely associated: astrolatrous religion; talismanic technology; the mediation of the celestial spheres between Man and the divine principle; and the notion of a noetic ascent through the spheres whereby the soul can reach perfection.

1.3 Rāzī's context and intellectual development

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was the pre-eminent philosopher-theologian of his age. His grand project was the neutralisation of the perceived threat that philosophy (*falsafa*) posed the rationalising Ash'arī *kalām* that he defended. Known in the Latin west as Avicenna, the great “sheikh” of the Neoplatonising Peripatetic philosophy

²¹ Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p. 237.

²² Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p. 220. See also Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa'l-niḥal*, eds. Amīr 'Alī Mahnā and 'Alī Ḥasan Fā'ūr (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1993), pp. 353–354.

that posed such a threat was Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037). Throughout the philosophical passages of *al-Sirr* which articulate Rāzī's theory of the talismanic occult science, Avicenna's presence is ubiquitous.²³

His philosophy changed the course of Islamic intellectual history and incepted a protracted period of intense debate amongst philosophers (*falāsifa*) and Ash'arī theologians (*mutakallimūn*), who defended, critiqued, elaborated, and modified his ideas. Avicenna's philosophical predecessors in the Islamic world confined themselves to discussions of comparatively discrete subjects and composing commentaries on the philosophical canon. But so comprehensive and systematic was Avicenna's account of reality that its scientific worldview demanded either assent or rejection by the intellectuals of Islamic society, and represented a direct challenge to the theologians who deployed reason in the defence of Islamic faith and practice, rooted in the *Qur'ān* and the Prophetic tradition.²⁴

In the century after Avicenna's death, the Ash'arī theological response to his philosophical challenge was dominated by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). His work *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* ("Incoherence of the Philosophers") criticised twenty teachings of the philosophers, of which he identified three as constituting unbelief: that the cosmos is eternal, without beginning; that God's knowledge comprises universal classes, not the particular items that belong to them; and that the human soul does not return to the body after the death of the latter. However, as Frank Griffel observes, most of Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* targets not so much the doctrines of the philosophers, many of which—such as God's incorporeity—the Ash'arī theologian upheld. Rather, his purpose was to identify the defects of their purported demonstrative arguments which they adduced to prove them. His objective was to bring into sharp focus the limitations of philosophical demonstration,

23 Although a convenient heuristic, the translation of the word "*kalām*" as "theology" is potentially misleading. For, philosophers such as Avicenna were just as interested in theological speculation. Alexander Treiger observes:

kalām is a methodology, while theology in the proper sense—the discourse about God—is a field of inquiry. Thus, while *kalām* may deal with theology as one of its subjects, it also deals with other subjects, e.g. physics. Conversely, there are types of Islamic theology distinct from and independent of *kalām*. Philosophical theology, Ṣūfī theology, and Ismā'īlī theology are obvious examples.

(Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī's Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennan Foundation*, Culture and Civilization in the Middle East 27 (London: Routledge, 2017)), p. 5.

24 Dimitri Gutas, "Philosophical Manuscripts: Two Alternative Philosophies," in *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library (1502/3-1503/4)*, eds. Gülru Necipoğlu, Cemal Kafadar, and Cornell H. Fleischer (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), vol. 1, pp. 907–933, at p. 907.

and the necessity of prophetic revelation, to establish the basic verities of faith. Griffel's analysis of *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* accents al-Ghazālī's constructive dialogue with philosophy which, through its critique, isolates those doctrines that could be accommodated by his theological framework.²⁵

Avicennan cosmology and psychology were the two areas of philosophical inquiry most pertinent to the Sabian construct in *al-Sirr*. In the theological engagement with secondary—and specifically celestial—causality, Rāzī's most important and influential precursor was Ghazālī who attempted to sanitise Avicenna's necessitarian cosmology to bring it in line with his theology of God's untrammelled power and freedom in His creative action. Diametrically opposite the Ash'arī pole, that asserted God's direct and unmediated creation of the cosmos and all its phenomena, the necessitarian cosmology of Avicenna asserted the reality of natural secondary causes and of the world as the emanation of the first creation, the intellect governing the highest sphere of the cosmos. Ghazālī was thus: "perched between the Ash'arite and the Avicennan poles."²⁶ A close comparative analysis of the strategies deployed by Ghazālī and Rāzī in sanitising the Avicennan theory will have to remain for now a *desideratum*.

It was Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī who dominated the Ash'arī theological response to Avicenna in the second century after his death. Born in Rayy in 544/1149, Rāzī first received instruction in Ash'arī theology and law from his own father, Ḍiyā' al-Dīn 'Umar al-Makkī, an accomplished Ash'arī theologian and legal scholar.²⁷ On his death, he continued his education with Majd al-Dīn al-Jilī, concerning whom information is scarce.²⁸ During this stage, he familiarised himself with Avicenna's thought, and the counter-Avicennan philosophy of Abū'l-Barakāt

25 See Frank Griffel's *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 97–101 and pp. 147–174. On *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* more generally, see Griffel's "Al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) *Incoherence of the Philosophers*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 191–209.

26 Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, p. 11. Frank Griffel's is the most comprehensive study of Ghazālī's encounter with Avicennan cosmology and theory on secondary causality. As for Ghazālī's naturalisation of Avicennan psychology, philosophical noetics and theory of prophecy, see Alexander Treiger's *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought*. On Ghazālī's influence on Rāzī's reception of Avicenna's theories on intellection and noetics, see Damien Janos, "Intuition, Intellection, and Mystical Knowledge: Delineating Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Cognitive Theories," in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī. Papers Collected on his 900th Anniversary*. Vol 2, ed. Frank Griffel, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2016): pp. 189–228.

27 Ayman Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna's Pointers: The Confluence of Exegesis and Aporetics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 296–325, at p. 297.

28 On whom, see Ayman Shihadeh, "From Al-Ghazālī to Al-Rāzī," p. 157.

al-Baghdādī (d. ca. 560/1165).²⁹ On completion of his education in the religious and rational sciences, he travelled east to Khurāsān and Transoxania in pursuit of royal patronage and immersion in the world of philosophical debate. On both fronts he was successful, securing the favour of both the Khwārazm-Shāhs, under the sultan 'Alā' al-Dīn Tekish (r. 567–596/1172–1200) and his son and successor 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad (r. 596–617/1200–1220), and the Ghūrīds, in the period between 585–595/1189–1199: a remarkable feat, given the mutual hostility of these two Central Asian dynasties.³⁰

The main counter-Avicennan current in Rāzī's milieu was represented by Ibn Ghaylān al-Balkhī (d. 590/1194) and Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī (d. ca 585–590/1189–1194).³¹ Both were highly influenced by Ghazālī and Abū'l-Barakāt. Whilst Ibn Ghaylān, a committed anti-Avicennan, was an avowed partisan of Ghazālī, al-Mas'ūdī's critique of Avicennism was much more nuanced and engaged.³²

Rāzī's first major work to engage with philosophy was his theological summa and defence of the Sunni creed *Nihāyat al-'uqūl* ("The Furthestmost Reach of Intellect") which was completed sometime between 570/1175 and 575/1180. Despite exhibiting the structure of a standard Ash'arī theological work, it criticises as "weak" certain methods of argumentation and inference employed by the Ash'arī theologians. Ayman Shihadeh observes: "al-Rāzī is the first to downgrade them wholly, explicitly and systematically in *kalām*, and to replace them definitively with Aristotelian logic, which he began to consider as the standard for certitude."³³

29 For our analysis of *al-Sirr*, it is important to note that Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī is Rāzī's source for the philosophical presentation of a key Sabian doctrine: the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*), a celestial spirit that is the ontological origin of a discrete group of human souls, there being a multiplicity of such spirits, their number being commensurate to the number of discrete soul groups that the Sabians believed comprised humanity. On the significance of Abū'l-Barakāt for the development of the counter-Avicennan turn in this period, see Ayman Shihadeh, "From Al-Ghazālī to Al-Rāzī," pp. 150–155; and Frank Griffel, "Between al-Ghazālī and Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī: the Dialectical Turn in the Philosophy of Iraq and Iran during the Sixth/Twelfth century," in *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth century*, ed. Peter Adamson, Warburg Institute Colloquia 16 (London: The Warburg Institute, 2011): pp. 45–75.

30 Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna's Pointers," p. 297.

31 Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī," pp. 151–153. On Ibn Ghaylān's life and works, see Ayman Shihadeh, "A Post-Ghazālīan Critic of Avicenna: Ibn Ghaylān al-Balkhī on the *Materia Medica* of the *Canon of Medicine*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 24/2 (2013): pp. 135–174, in particular pp. 139–147. On Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī's life and career in context, see Ayman Shihadeh, *Doubts on Avicenna: A Study and Edition of Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī's Commentary on the Ishārāt*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies 95 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 7–43.

32 Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna's Pointers," p. 298.

33 Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī," p. 168.

But regardless of this change in methodology, Rāzī's objective in *Nihāyat al-'uqūl* remained consistent with those of previous theologians. But in the introduction to his later work, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* ("The Eastern Investigations"), completed around 575/1180, in which he adopts a more philosophical approach, Rāzī reserves for equal censure both those who uncritically follow Avicennan philosophy, and those theologians who devote themselves to its gratuitous refutation. Thus, he "adopts a middle position and selects the positive aspects of each side, declaring his purpose to be the explication of the views of the *falāsifa*, the scrutiny of them, and the attempt to find solutions and alternatives to them when necessary."³⁴ Highly "experimental" and, in both content and structure, more of a philosophical than a theological work, *al-Mabāḥith* breaks new ground. From this point on in his career, Rāzī writes works which alternate between "*kalāmī*" and "*falsafī*" approaches.³⁵ *Al-Sirr* prefigures the open "experimental" attitude of *al-Mabāḥith*.

Completed soon after 580/1185, some years after *al-Sirr*, Rāzī's *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt* ("Commentary on <Avicenna's> 'Pointers and Reminders'") represented a deep and penetrating analysis of the Avicennan philosophical system.³⁶ (We shall reserve special attention to this work, so crucial for our understanding of Rāzī's philosophical theorising on the talismanic craft in *al-Sirr*, for later).

In another philosophical work, *al-Mulakhkhaṣ fi'l-ḥikma* ("The Epitome of Philosophy"), Rāzī occasionally refers the reader interested in more expansive discourse on certain topics to refer to his Ash'arī theological works—evidence that Rāzī sees his philosophical and theological works as complimentary, and perhaps an indication that he is already considering the future integration of the former into the framework of the latter. This he begins in earnest with his highly eclectic theological work *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa'l-muta'akhhirīn* ("Compendium of the Thoughts of the Ancient and Later Scholars, Philosophers and *Mutakallimīn*"). Though its section structure indicates that it is a work belonging to the *kalām* genre, *Muḥaṣṣal* records and assesses many arguments on a whole range of issues that have their source in *falsafa*. As such, it represents "one of the heights of al-Rāzī's experimentalism."³⁷ This innovative

³⁴ Shihadeh, "From Al-Ghazālī to Al-Rāzī," p. 170. For the date of completion of *al-Mabāḥith*, see Shihadeh "Al-Rāzī's (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna's Pointers," p. 298.

³⁵ Shihadeh, "From Al-Ghazālī to Al-Rāzī," pp. 170–171.

³⁶ I rely on Ayman Shihadeh's dating of *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, in his "Al-Rāzī's (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna's Pointers," p. 298. For an alternative dating, see Eşref Altaş, "Fahredden er-Rāzī'nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi," in *İslâm düşüncesinin dönüşüm çağında Fahreddin er-Rāzī*, eds. Ömer Türker and Osman Demir (İstanbul: İSAM Yayınları, 2013): pp. 115–116.

³⁷ Shihadeh, "From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī," p. 172.

experimentalism, which began in the period 570–575/1175–1180, with *al-Sirr al-maktūm*, dated to no later than 575/1179, and *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, culminated towards the end of his career with his monumental, yet uncompleted, synthesis of philosophy and *kalām*: *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī* (“The Sublime Theses of the Divine Science”).

As an index of Rāzī's development, during the span of his intellectual career, towards the synthesis achieved in *al-Maṭālib*, Shihadeh focuses on his assertion of the soul's perfection as the primary *telos* of rational metaphysical speculation. In his early theological work *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, Rāzī follows the majority of his theological predecessors in deeming such speculation an obligation enshrined in the religious law. From *al-Mabāḥith* onwards, however, he subordinates, without denying, this legal imperative, to the primary goal of:

[. . .] attaining knowledge of the nature of being, which is in turn sought to attain happiness (*sa'āda*) and perfection (*kamāl*). He does not negate its Legal dimension, but considers it secondary and aimed at affirming the primary objective. From this stage onwards, he will affirm: (a) the existence of the rational animal soul, separate from the body; (b) an intellectual pleasure that man may experience at the spiritual, rather than the bodily, level; and (c) a spiritual afterlife, in addition to the physical one [. . .] With these later, primarily *falsafī* influences, his notion of the goodness (*khayriyya*) (rather than obligation) of metaphysical speculation and knowledge becomes that the soul is perfected by knowledge, and that it realises, by this acquisition, a happiness that surpasses all sensory pleasures. [. . .] As knowledge becomes the constituent of the soul's perfection, the pursuit of knowledge, i.e., rational reflection, becomes almost intrinsically good.³⁸

Mirroring this shift in Rāzī's understanding of the purpose of rational metaphysical speculation, is his gravitation away from the approach of classical Ash'arī ethical theory of voluntarism which upholds “the doctrine that value terms can be defined only in terms of divine command,” to frame ethics, under Sūfī and *falsafī* influence, in terms of human perfection, or what Shihadeh has called his “teleological ethics”: the perfection of the soul as a simple primary end, sought for its own sake, the pursuit of which engenders its own pleasure.³⁹

The capacity to engage in rational metaphysical speculation and to refine ethical behaviour are cognate, respectively, with the Avicennan “theoretical capacity”

³⁸ Shihadeh, “From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī,” p. 172.

³⁹ Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 64 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 111. See chapter 3 for Shihadeh's analysis of Rāzī's perfectionist theory of virtue. On ethical theories of value in *kalām* in general, see Shihadeh, “Theories of Ethical Value in Kalām: A New Interpretation,” *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): pp. 384–407.

(*al-quwwa al-naẓariyya*) and the “practical capacity” (*al-quwwa al-‘amaliyya*), which both reach perfection in the figure of the prophet. Rāzī’s shift towards a perfectionist outlook reconfigures his formulation of prophethood. In *al-Maṭālib*, whilst affirming the standard Ash‘arī theological method to verify prophethood, whereby the public declaration of prophethood, issued by a claimant calling to monotheism, is corroborated by a miracle, Rāzī, under Avicennan influence, subordinates it—again, without invalidating it—to the superior method of specifying a very particular miracle as the means by which a prophetic claim is verified: the perfection of deficient souls (*takmil al-nāqishin*). Thus does Rāzī harmonise philosophy and *kalām* in the related domains of ethics and prophethology.

1.4 Philosophising the Occult: the Avicennan background

It was against the background of Avicenna’s cosmology and psychology, the latter being inextricably bound to the former, that Rāzī projected his construct of the natural philosophy on which Sabian belief and practice stood. In applying the Neoplatonising principle that “from the One, only one proceeds” (*lā yaṣdur ‘an al-wāḥid illā al-wāḥid*), Avicenna’s emanative cosmology attempted to account for how the multiplicity that characterises the universe can derive from the absolutely unitary simplex that is the First Cause which, in its eternal act of self-contemplation, emanates the first intellect.⁴⁰ The objects of this first incorporeal intellect’s contemplation were three in number: (1) the First Cause; (2) its own self insofar as it is necessarily existent by reason of the First Cause; and (3) its own self insofar as it is only possibly existent in itself. Proceeding from these three distinct aspects of eternal contemplation are three distinct entities. They are respectively: (a) a second incorporeal intellect; (b) the soul that is the proximate mover of the outermost sphere; (c) the body of the outermost sphere that englobes the cosmos.⁴¹

Similarly, the eternal contemplation in which the second incorporeal intellect engages has three objects: the First Cause; its own self insofar as it is necessarily existent by reason of its own cause; and its own self as merely possibly

⁴⁰ On Avicenna’s defence of this metaphysical principle and its reception in the post-classical period of philosophy in the Islamic world, see: Wahid M. Amin, “‘From the One, Only One Proceeds’: The Post-Classical Reception of a Key Principle of Avicenna’s Metaphysics,” *Oriens* 48 (2020): pp. 123–155.

⁴¹ Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 75.

existent. Accordingly, from the three aspects of its contemplation, proceed: a third intelligence; the sphere of the fixed stars; and the soul that is the proximate mover of the sphere of the fixed stars. And so the process continues—describing the genesis of the geocentric, Ptolemaic universe to which Avicenna was the intellectual heir—until the final intellect, that governs the terrestrial world and the human soul. Known as the Active Intellect, it is the metaphysical efficient cause both of matter in the terrestrial world and of the forms that constitute the multiplicity of natural kinds that inhere therein. Furthermore, it was the originating principle of the human species. Moreover—and this is crucial to Avicenna’s account of prophecy and the soul’s theoretical perfection—it is the cause of the human soul’s actualisation.⁴²

As auxiliary causes, the motions of the celestial spheres prepare sublunary matter for the reception of these forms emanated by the Active Intellect. Moreover, the celestial souls that are the proximate movers of the heavenly spheres are cognisant of the particular effects, on the terrestrial world, of their motion. These effects, however, are mere by-products of their activity. For, in fact, their circular motion is deliberate and purposeful, being driven by desire to imitate the perfection of the intellects that are their metaphysical causes.

With this overview, we are now in a better position to appreciate the indissoluble link between Avicenna’s cosmology and his psychology. Since the celestial souls drive the spheres with deliberate purpose, and since they are cognisant of their effects on the terrestrial world, according to Avicenna, they possess knowledge of matters, both celestial and terrestrial, that lie beyond the reach of the usual methods of human inquiry: things hidden from sense perception, including future events in the sublunary realm. It is by means of noetic connection with the celestial souls—a cognitive process that is crucial to the talismanic craft of Rāzī’s Sabians—that the human soul might experience veridical dreams and visions that contain such hidden knowledge. This is Avicenna’s account of imaginational prophethood which is predicated on his theory of human cognition.

As we have discussed, for Avicenna, human souls constituted a single species, the originating principle—or agent of primary perfection—of which was the Active Intellect. It was also the efficient cause of their secondary perfection, bringing the individual’s potential immaterial intellect into full actual realisation by “imprinting” it with universals. Since, in his epistemologically dualistic framework, the cognition of universals is the domain of the immaterial intellect which endures after death, Avicenna posited a complex system of multiple internal senses, rooted in the physical substrate of the brain, to account for the

⁴² Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect*, p. 76.

human soul's perception of the sensible particulars which characterise its embodied sublunary existence. When under the intellect's direction, the internal senses served the process of abstraction (*tajrīd*) whereby the sensible particulars of their cognitive data were stripped of their concomitants, preparing the soul to receive universals from the Active Intellect.

The five internal senses that accounted for the cognition of particulars were: the common sense (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*), which orders external sense data into an integrated experience of extra-mental reality; the imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*), which also functions as the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*); the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*) which perceives non-material "intentions" (*ma'ānī*) such as the hostility of the enemy or the goodwill of a friend; and two separate storage faculties which record material and non-material experiences (*al-khayāl* and *al-dhikr* respectively). Each of these faculties inheres in a material substrate in the brain.

Now, Avicenna's theory of imaginational prophethood explains veridical dreams and visions as the result of the human soul's reception of a particular immaterial "trace" (*athar*) from one of the celestial souls. Crucially, as we shall explore in chapter 7, it is the estimative faculty mercurially mediating between the material and immaterial realms that receives this particular celestial trace and delivers it to the imagination. The imagination then sets about constructing what is experienced as a revelatory vision or a veridical dream. In this way, Avicenna explains that, whilst the immediate object of the vision is the creation of the perceiver's own internal senses, its cause is nevertheless extra-mental, of a celestial origin.

Imaginational prophethood, by means of noetic connection with the celestial souls, is one of three aspects (*ḍurūb*)—or special properties (*khaṣā'is*)—of prophethood. The other two are: philosophical prophethood—the extraordinarily rapid and prolific ability to intuit, by means of connection with the Active Intellect, the middle terms of syllogisms—a cognitive act known as *ḥads*; and thaumaturgical prophethood—the ability to perform acts which breach the empirical norm (*khawāriq li'l-'āda*) by means of the *muḥarrika* or "motive faculty": this is achieved by the possession of a singularly powerful estimative faculty. So, the internal sense that is crucial both to the acquisition of knowledge of the unseen, and to the ability to act directly on the material world, is the estimative faculty.⁴³

43 On *ḥads*, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*, second edition (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 179–203.

The complete realisation of the three categories of prophethood represents the pinnacle of human perfection, which Avicenna describes in the following way:

The perfection that is specific to the rational soul is for it to become an intellectual [micro]cosm imprinted with the form of the cosmos, the cosmic order, the good that emanates upon it from its Principle, down to the higher spiritual substances, to those which have some connection to bodies, down to the higher bodies, their forms and powers, and so forth, until it fulfils, in itself, the form of being in its entirety, and becomes an intellectual [micro]cosm parallel to the existent [macro]cosm in its entirety, witnessing what is the absolute good and absolute beauty, united with it, and having its form engraved in it.⁴⁴

Only such a figure commands true and legitimate political authority in this world. Avicenna ends the *Metaphysics* of *al-Shifā'* with a description of the ideal city state, which is organised and governed by the philosopher-king who has realised such perfection. He concludes that the man who combines justice—defined as the aggregate of temperance, wisdom and courage (*'iffa wa-ḥikma wa-shujā'a*)—with theoretical virtue (*al-faḍīla al-naẓariyya*), realises happiness: “and whoever, in addition to this, wins the prophetic qualities becomes almost a human god. Worship of him, after the worship of God, exalted be He, becomes almost allowed. He is indeed the world’s earthly king and God’s deputy in it.”⁴⁵

Since, by means of their craft, the Sabians establish noetic connection with the spirits that animate the heavenly spheres, in order to draw their powers into talismans, to affect change in this world in ways that defy the empirical norm; given that, with the completion of the planetary ascent ritual, the aspirant’s soul is imbued with the knowledge and power of the celestial spheres, undergoing a microcosmic transformation; and considering that it is to the command of a man thus transformed that the planets humbly submit; it is easy to see why Rāzī should look to the framework of Avicennan cosmology and psychology to construct his theoretical account of their science.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Avicenna, *al-Shifā', al-Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. Ibrahim Madkour, *et al.* (Cairo: 1960) vol. 2, pp. 425–426, as translated by Ayman Shihadeh in, “From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī,” pp. 175–176.

⁴⁵ Avicenna, *al-Shifā', al-Ilāhiyyāt*, as translated by Michael Marmura in *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, ed. & trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), p. 378. Avicenna’s phrase for “human god” is “*rabb insānī*.”

⁴⁶ For Rāzī’s Sabians each celestial sphere was the abode of a plenitude of spirits. In this, they differed from the Avicennan cosmology.

1.5 Philosophising the Occult: *al-Sirr al-maktūm*

The fact that Rāzī did indeed compose an early work, with the simple title *al-Sirr al-maktūm*, is indicated by references to it as one of his own, in such philosophical works as his *al-Mulakkhaṣ fi'l-ḥikma wa'l-manṭiq* (579/1183–4), his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt* (580/1185), and his *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma* (605/1209).⁴⁷ Whether or not he, at any stage, gave it a longer title requires a dedicated study of the manuscript tradition, which is beyond the scope of this study. Tehran MS 6853 attests to just the simple title, whereas Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, Carullah, MS 1482 and the frontispiece of the Cairo lithograph supplies the fuller title: “*al-Sirr al-maktūm fi asrār al-nujūm*” (“The Hidden Secret Concerning the Secrets of the Stars”).⁴⁸ Other witnesses attest to the more fulsome title “*al-Sirr al-maktūm wa-kanz al-makhtūm fi 'ilm al-ṭilasmāt wa'l-siḥr wa'l-nujūm*” (“The Hidden Secret and the Sealed Treasure Concerning the Knowledge of Talismans, Magic and the Stars”).⁴⁹

Written no later than 575/1179, it preceded Rāzī's major philosophical works.⁵⁰ In *al-Sirr*, Rāzī articulates his theory of the talismanic craft in a way that is highly compressed. So laconic are his indications of its constitutive doctrines that they demand exegesis by reference to his more expository philosophical works. Of these, the most significant for the approach of our study is his commentary (*sharḥ*) on Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt* (“Pointers and Reminders”).

As his last philosophical *summa*, written sometime between 421–425/1030–1034, *al-Ishārāt* represents the culmination of Avicenna's intellectual career. Although its arrangement follows the traditional order of philosophical *summae*, starting with Logic, then progressing to Physics and Metaphysics, the threads of the latter two fields of inquiry are tightly “interwoven.” Each main section in the Physics and Metaphysics division is called a *namaṭ* (pl., *anmāt*).⁵¹ Eschewing the fully expository, and demonstrative approach of his encyclopaedic *al-Shifā'* (“the Healing”), Avicenna writes *al-Ishārāt* adopting the “indicative

⁴⁷ See Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, p. 8. Unaware of such evidence, a number of writers such as Ḥājji Khalifa and al-Subkī denied Rāzī wrote *al-Sirr*. See Sa'īd Fūda's discussion in the “Introduction” to Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl fi dirāyat al-uṣūl*, pp. 73–74.

⁴⁸ Compare Tehran Majlis 6853, f. 1a with Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, Carullah MS 1482, f. 1a and f. 2a.

⁴⁹ See for instance Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS 2692, f. 1a.

⁵⁰ For the date of *al-Sirr*, see Altaş, “Fahredden er-Rāzī'nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi”: pp. 106–107.

⁵¹ Quite literally meaning a woollen carpet, spread on the ground to sit or lie on, in this particular context, it comes to mean a discourse on a certain philosophical subject.

method” (*ishāra* literally means “pointing”), its style being dense, pithy and non-demonstrative, a deliberate strategy to obfuscate its teachings from the unworthy, the common people, philosophasters, and the philosophically untrained.⁵² Dimitri Gutas comments: “This method of teaching depends on providing hints and guidelines to the student, rather than ready-made arguments, who is then expected to elaborate the entire theory on his own.”⁵³ Replete with philosophical enigmas expressed in an aphoristic style, *al-Ishārāt* swiftly became a text of high repute and prestige that demanded exegesis and exposition. For, as Gutas observes: “It appears that it was responsible, more than any other work by Avicenna, first, for keeping interest in philosophy alive if only because it challenged the talents of the best commentators, and second, for establishing as normative the tripartite form of presentation of philosophy as Logic, Physics and Metaphysics.”⁵⁴ Rāzī’s was one of the most outstanding, and widely read, contributions to the rich commentary tradition to which *al-Ishārāt* gave rise.

But to appreciate Avicenna’s *al-Ishārāt* within the broader context of Islamic intellectual history, due consideration must be given to what Toby Mayer identifies as the *ishārī* genre in Islamic mystical literature. He observes:

The idea was to safeguard higher knowledge in speaking of it: initiates would be alert to undivulged referents, non-initiates barred. The anagogic interpretation of the Qur’ān, for example, is usually called ‘commentary by allusion’ (*tafsīr bi’l-ishāra*) and may have been so known from an early period. [. . .] The key to understanding *ishārī* commentary is its combination of the reader’s inward experience with the outward symbolism of scripture.⁵⁵

Quite aside from the obvious philosophical challenge that Avicenna’s *al-Ishārāt* represented, Shihadeh suggests that Rāzī’s commentary thereon was motivated by his ambition to secure royal patronage. The work was commissioned by an associate of the Khwārazm-Shāh Tekish (r. 567–596/1172–1200), Saḍr al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Wazzān (d. 598/1202), who was head of the Shāfi’ī legal school in Rayy. In his preface to *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, Rāzī flatters al-Wazzān as a man of philosophical learning, with the ability to recognise scholarly talent, such as Rāzī’s own. This, Shihadeh adduces as evidence of the fact that, even after his completion of *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* soon after 580/1185 (approximately six years after writing *al-Sirr*), Rāzī had still not managed to secure stable and reliable patronage. Establishing a connection with al-Wazzān, another Shāfi’ī from his native town,

52 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, pp. 155–159 and pp. 346–350.

53 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 158.

54 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 159.

55 Toby Mayer, *On Existence and Its Causes: The Fourth Namaṭ of Avicenna’s Ishārāt and its Main Commentaries* (D. Phil. Thesis: University of Oxford, 2001): p. 22.

facilitated Rāzī's access to the patronage of Tekish, and subsequently that of his son.⁵⁶

As laconic as Avicenna's philosophical allusions in his *al-Ishārāt*, the talismanic theory in *al-Sirr* demands expansion and exposition. Commenting on Avicenna's instructive style in *al-Ishārāt*, Gutas observes that its: "method of teaching depends on providing hints and guidelines to the student, rather than ready-made arguments, who is then expected to elaborate the entire theory on his own."⁵⁷ This observation has equal applicability to the theoretical passages of *al-Sirr*. Our approach in this study, therefore, will be to provide a detailed elaboration on this theory in much the same way that Rāzī expounds on Avicenna's pointers and reminders.⁵⁸

An indication that this theory is Rāzī's own intellectual product, and not a mere presentation of doctrine that he has gleaned from Sabian works, is to be found in the heresiological section of *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*. Second only to the philosophers in Rāzī's list of "those who fall beyond the pale of Islam," he describes the Sabians as:

[. . .] those who say: that the spheres are living, rational beings, governing the lower world, which originate temporally originated phenomena; that we must worship them, and they worship God. For, God—exalted is He—is too august. Since I have not perused any book of theirs that can be reliably attributed to them, I know not what they maintain concerning the Exalted Creator—whether He is, in their doctrine, an essentially necessitating cause (*mūjib bi'l-dhāt*), or if He is an agent possessed of choice (*fā'il mukhtār*). So, if they believed that He is a necessitating cause, then their doctrine is the same as the philosophers; but if they believed that He is an agent possessed of choice, who but delegated the governing of this world to the spheres and the planets, then the difference between them and the philosophers is clear.⁵⁹

Suffering from a lack of primary doctrinal sources that are reliably attributable to the Sabians, and being more interested in the theory than in the historical development of the group, Rāzī in *al-Sirr* posits three different Sabian parties, each of whose distinct theologies comport with the natural philosophy underpinning the talismanic craft. Whether they believed: in God as an essentially necessitating cause or as an agent possessed of choice; or indeed in multiple,

56 Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna's Pointers," p. 306.

57 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 158.

58 Shihadeh characterises Rāzī's *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* as a hybrid commentary, providing both expository and aporetic exegesis (see Shihadeh, "Al-Rāzī's (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna's Pointers," pp. 302–304). Our analysis of the talismanic theory of *al-Sirr* will draw from Rāzī's expository—as opposed to his aporetic—commentary on Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt*.

59 Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, vol. 1, pp. 505–506.

necessarily existent celestial gods, governing the sublunary realm, the talismanic theory remains the same.⁶⁰

Of special relevance to the psychological dimension of this scientific account are the penultimate and final sections of *al-Ishārāt*: *namaṭ* 9, entitled *Maqāmāt al-‘arīfīn* (“The Stations of the Knowers”) and *namaṭ* 10, *Asrār al-āyāt* (“The Secrets of the Signs”).⁶¹ Avicenna’s naturalistic account of thaumaturgy provides for no essential difference between prophetic miracles, saintly prodigies, and the magic of sorcerers, all of which are performed, as we have already seen, by means of the sheer psychic force of the estimative faculty. Yahya Michot situates the philosophical reading of mysticism “within the widespread effort to normalize Sufism that followed the execution of al-Ḥallāj in 309/922 and gave birth to the great classical doctrinal treatises on the subject, from the *Kitāb al-luma‘ fī’l-taṣawwuf* of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) to the *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* of Ghazālī (d. 505/1111).” Michot also points to another genre that assists us in contextualising the two closing sections of *al-Ishārāt*—the theological literature concerning prophethood and its miraculous corroborating signs. A good representative example of this genre is *Kitāb al-Bayān ‘an al-farq bayna al-mu‘jizāt wa’l-karamāt wa’l-ḥiyal wa’l-kihāna wa’l-siḥr wa’l-nāranjāt* of (“The Book Showing the Difference between Miracles, Prodigies, Trickery, Divination, Magic, and Illusionism”) by Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013).⁶²

60 See section 3.2 for further discussion of Rāzī’s presentation of these three hypothetical groups.

61 Whether or not Avicenna entitled these sections thusly is a moot point. Nevertheless, their subject matter is the prodigious cognitive and thaumaturgical capabilities of the ‘arīf (pl., ‘arīfīn). Dimitri Gutas notes the tendency of some modern scholars to translate the term as it appears in *namaṭ* 9 of *al-Ishārāt*, as “gnostic” or “mystic.” This he views as part of a long tradition that began at the time of Rāzī which misread these sections as “mystical” treatises. Gutas renders the term neutrally as “knower,” meaning “someone who knows things through thinking (*bi-fikrihi*) by his intellect—a philosopher; he is not a ‘gnostic’ or ‘mystic’ as some would have it” (Dimitri Gutas, “Intellect Without Limits: the Absence of Mysticism in Avicenna,” in *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale: Actes du XIe Congrès International de la Société Internationale pour l’Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale* (S.I.E.P.M.), eds. Maria Cândida Pacheco and José Francisco Meirinhos, vol. 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006): pp. 351-372, at p. 354. In Gutas’s reading, therefore, the “arīf”—or “knower”—simply means a philosopher, who by means of prayer is capable, according to *namaṭ* 10, of bringing down rain in times of drought, averting plagues and floods, and causing earthquakes (see our discussion in section 7.9.1). However, since we are primarily interested in Rāzī’s “mystical” reading of *al-Ishārāt*, and not Avicenna’s original intent, we shall render the term “arīf” as the context demands. On Rāzī’s “mystical” reading, see Dimitri Gutas, “Avicenna’s Eastern (‘Oriental’) Philosophy: Nature, Contents, Transmission,” in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10 (2000): pp. 159-180, at p. 163, fn. 14.

62 Yahya Michot, “Ibn Taymiyya’s Commentary on Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*, *namaṭ* X” in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, Mamluk Studies 20, ed. Abdelkader Al Ghouz (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2018): pp. 119–211, at p. 119.

So, having placed *al-Ishārāt* and *al-Sirr* in their proper context, let us turn to Rāzī's commentary on the former to begin elaborating on his talismanic theory in the latter.⁶³ In the tenth *namaʿ* of *al-Ishārāt*, Avicenna provides the following reminder (*tanbih*) relating to extraordinary events (*umūr gharība*):

Extraordinary events proceed to the realm of nature (*tanba'ith fi 'ālam al-ṭabī'a*) due to three principles. The first is the above-mentioned psychical disposition (*al-hay'a al-nafsāniyya*). The second is the occult properties (*khawāṣṣ*) of elemental bodies (*al-ajsām al-unṣuriyya*), such as the attraction, <by> the magnet, of iron by means of an <occult> force special to the magnet. And the third is the special <occult> correspondence (*munāsaba*) <that exists> between heavenly forces, and mixtures of earthly bodies specified by <celestial> configurations (*anzijat ajsām arḍiyya makhṣūsa bi-hay'āt waḍ'iyya*); or <between heavenly forces> and the forces of earthly souls specified by celestial states, either deliberately or otherwise (*quwā nufūs arḍiyya makhṣūsa bi-aḥwāl falakiyya fi'liyyatan aw infi'āliyyatan*), as a result of which extraordinary effects occur. Magic (*sihr*) is the first category (*qism*)—indeed, so are <prophetic> miracles and <saintly> prodigies (*al-mu'jizāt wa'l-karāmāt*); *nīranjāt* are of the second category. And talismans are of the third.⁶⁴

For Avicenna, magic (*sihr*) is confined to the power of the human soul to exert an effect directly on sublunary reality. Indeed, this power of the soul also provides the explanation for the prophetic or saintly miracle. Spirits, angels, jinn and God play no role: this is a purely naturalistic account. The second—the *nīranj*—is just as naturalistic. The third, the talisman, which concerns Rāzī, is more ambiguous, as it involves in some way the participation of earthly souls.⁶⁵ What does Avicenna mean? Rāzī explains it as follows:

Know that celestial forces do not bring about extraordinary events without the bringing together (*inḍimām*) of passive receptive elemental forces (*al-quwā al-unṣuriyya al-qābila*) with active earthly psychic forces (*al-quwā al-nafsāniyya al-arḍiyya al-fā'iliyya*) and this is the talisman. This is what he [i.e., Avicenna] is relating here, and thus have we explained it. If you desire an in-depth investigation (*tahqīq*) then you should consult *al-Sirr al-maktūm*.⁶⁶

63 For a succinct summary, see Michael Noble, “The Avicennan *aestimatio* (*al-wahm*) in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Theory of Talismanic Action at a Distance,” *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale* 59 (2018): pp. 79–89.

64 Avicenna, *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, quoted in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, ed. Ali Reza Najafzadeh (Tehran: Anjoman-i Āthār-i wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangi, 2005), vol. 2, p. 663. Since I shall only discuss it in light of Rāzī's commentary, for the text of Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt*, I rely on the version as it appears in Najafzadeh's edition of Rāzī's commentary.

65 For an introduction to *nīranj*, see Charles Burnett, “Nīranj: a Category of Magic (Almost) Forgotten in the Latin West,” in *Natura, scienze e società medievali. Studi in onore di Agostino Paravicini Bagliani*, eds. Claudio Leonardi and Francesco Santi, Micrologus Library 28 (Florence: SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2008): pp. 37–66.

66 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 664.

In this study, we will take up Rāzī's suggestion. Here, he adapts his description of the talisman from *al-Sirr* to render explicit the crucial role of human psychological agency in the talismanic process: active earthly psychic forces. So, the talisman is a liminal category of occult action, occupying the space between the raw psychic force of the magician or prophet, and the humbler power of the magnet attracting iron. In making a talisman, the human soul must somehow interact with celestial forces. *Al-Sirr* represents an exposition on that interaction, which can be used either for transitive sublunary ends, or for a subjective, soteriological goal.

Engineering Avicenna's prophetology, which is grounded in his theory of the internal senses (see section 1.4), Rāzī constructs his scientific account of the talismanic craft on what is common to both imaginal prophethood and prophetic thaumaturgy: the estimative faculty. Now, the raw occult power of a prophet or magician, exercised by the *wahm* is, in the Avicennan theory, and in the terminology of *al-Sirr*, *fiṭrī* (innate).⁶⁷ Rāzī's interest in *al-Sirr* 1:4 is in the notion that spiritual techniques can develop and train this power in one not so fortunate to possess this capacity innately. Once trained, the practitioner can connect with the celestial souls and somehow draw down their forces into a talisman: then under the focused attention of the practitioner, these talismanic forces are directed towards a transitive objective.

So, the talismanic idol is the earthly force which passively receives celestial forces under the direction of the practitioner's focused intent. But how does this theoretical model also apply to the long ritual of planetary ascent, during which the talismanic idol is conspicuous for its absence?

Although, when he describes the practicalities of the Sabian craft, Rāzī uses the word "talisman" in the sense of an object (either an idol or a ring), in his definition at the beginning of *al-Sirr*, he uses it in the sense of a process: *tamzīj* ("blending"). During the ritual of planetary ascent, the elemental forces which passively receive the dynamically active celestial forces are internal faculties of the aspirant's soul; the active earthly psychic force which is involved in the process is the aspirant's rational soul which willingly submits to transformation. It is in this sense that he himself becomes a "talisman." With the completion of the ritual, into which he is initiated by his perfect nature, he gains knowledge of and power over all that the celestial spheres hold sway. It is a process of "self-talismanisation."

⁶⁷ On the use of the concept of *fiṭra*—or innate human disposition—in al-Fārābī, Avicenna and Ghazālī, see Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's Use of 'Original Human Disposition' (*Fiṭra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna," *The Muslim World* 102 (2012): pp. 1–32.

In the following chapter, we shall examine how the general introduction to *al-Sirr* discusses the virtue of occult knowledge and its practical application in terms of a teleological ethical theory: its pursuit is a soteriological enterprise, the completion of which results in the perfection of the soul and its elevation to the ontological rank of the celestial spirits. Then, having gained an overview of the Sabians as depicted in *al-Sirr* and in Rāzī's well-known and hugely influential Qur'ānic exegesis *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, we will examine the perceived Indic influence on Rāzī's understanding of Sabianism.

In chapter 3 we shall explore the cosmological beliefs which justify their astrology as the means by which noetic connection is established with the celestial spirits. For these, Rāzī formulates philosophical proofs, mainly gleaned from Avicenna, for their belief in the celestial spheres as: living, rational beings possessed of volition; the causes of sublunary change; cognisant of both universals and particulars; and responsive to human communication by means of adoration and ritual. Integrated into these philosophical proofs are arguments, derived from Abū'l-Barakāt, for the reality of the Perfect Nature as the celestial origin of the human soul, connection with which is a necessary precondition for undertaking the planetary ascent ritual. This model has no role for the Avicennan Active Intellect or the Giver of Forms: the former is replaced by the Perfect Nature, the latter by the starless sphere.⁶⁸

Chapter 4 expounds on the definition of talismans with which *al-Sirr* begins, examining Rāzī's deployment of Avicennan arguments to theorise on how celestial motion determines sublunary change, and how the talisman can harness the powers of this process; chapter 5 explores Rāzī's more technical account of how talismans are practically made. Chapter 6 examines how Rāzī draws on Avicennan internal sense theory to formulate a scientific account of how spiritual discipline and austerities can train the soul to marshal the talismanic process. This will provide the impetus for our exploration, in chapter 7, of the Avicennan account of imaginal prophethood and celestial soul noesis, on which Rāzī modelled his theorising of the psychological dimension of

68 Rāzī rejects the Active Intellect in his late work *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma* (See Rāzī, *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma*, ed. Aḥmad al-Saqqā (Cairo: vol. 2, 281–284, observed by Ayman Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, p. 118, fn. 45). Thus, the Sabians of *al-Sirr* cannot be considered as an Avicennan heresiological construct. For the Active Intellect and human intellection, see Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna*, Great Medieval Thinkers Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 130–140; see also Peter Adamson, “Non-Discursive Thought in Avicenna's Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle” in *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, ed. Jon McGinnis, Islamic Philosophy Theology and Science 56 (Leiden, Boston: Brill 2004): pp. 87–111.

Sabian talismanic ritual. The chapter will yield the insight that the adept, who has completed the planetary ascent, is the cognate of what we shall refer to as the Avicennan “perfected man” who has developed all three capacities of prophethood. Chapter 8 will argue that from *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib*, it is possible to discern a distinct theory of occult epistemology which Rāzī roots in the *wahm*. In chapter 9, we shall explore an alternative account of visions and dreams expressed in *al-Sirr*, which is rooted in an extramission theory of vision. Chapter 10 will demonstrate that Rāzī’s “clarification” (*bayyina*) concerning the error—or more accurately “weakness” (*ḍuʿf*)—of Sabianism does not reject a science of talismans *per se*, but rather targets the belief in any agency outside of God’s power (*qudra*).

Finally, chapter 11 will look forwards from *al-Sirr* to show how doctrines which he attributed to the Sabians, most notably that of the Perfect Nature, were incorporated into the anthropology, soteriology, and epistemology of *al-Maṭālib*. Our detailed analysis of Rāzī’s talismanic theory in *al-Sirr*, and its integration into the prophetology of *al-Maṭālib*, will throw into sharp relief those doctrines which Rāzī presents neutrally in the former work, that are subsequently integrated into the soteriology that he advances the latter: (1) the ensouled nature of the celestial spheres; (2) a teleological ethical theory; and most significantly (3) the perfect nature as the origin of the human soul and its spiritual and philosophical guide.

We will see that, in *al-Maṭālib*, it was his knowledge of the Sabian occult science that finally led Rāzī to subordinate the standard Ashʿarī theological test to verify a prophetic claim based on miracles, to one derived from philosophy: the perfection of deficient souls (*takmil al-nāqīṣin*). Moreover, the doctrine of the Perfect Nature provided the basis for an alternative account for not only prophethood in both its epistemological and thaumaturgical aspects; but also the veridical dreams which lesser humans could receive; and the prodigies which they could perform. It was the Perfect Nature which complemented, with directly revealed insights, the scientist’s application of rational deduction, observation, and analogical reasoning, to facilitate his acquisition of the universal sciences and certainty in metaphysical truths. In incorporating the Perfect Nature into his anthropology, a doctrine which he originally explored in *al-Sirr* as a Sabian theory, Rāzī was motivated by the concern to formulate a prophetology that both preserved the exclusivity of prophethood against the relativising effect of the Avicennan account; and to create the ground for a personal soteriology for the intellectual elite.

1.6 Rāzī the crypto-Sabian?

So, what was Rāzī's attitude to the occult science that stimulated his deep philosophical interest? In his introduction to *al-Sirr*, Rāzī declares that his intent in writing the work is merely to compile those practices of the talismanic craft that he has gleaned from the primary sources to which, through much effort, he has gained access. This task he solemnly undertakes “whilst disavowing all that is opposed to the faith and the peace of certainty (*ma‘a al-tabarrī*’ ‘*an kull mā yukhālīf al-dīn wa-salm al-yaqīn*).”⁶⁹

But unlike the grimoire *Kitāb al-Shamīl wa'l-baḥr al-kāmil* by his younger contemporary Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī (more on whom, later), *al-Sirr* is no mere compendium. For, as we have seen, in *al-Sirr*, Rāzī provides a theoretical blueprint from which (an almost) complete scientific account of the occult craft might be constructed. At the same time, he is careful to disavow—again, unlike Sakkākī—all he reports therein that contravenes Islamic belief and practice. And unlike *Kitāb al-Bayān* of his Ash‘arī predecessor, al-Bāqillānī, *al-Sirr* is not a polemical work, intent on dismissing the occult science of talismans as illusion, or the practitioner’s manipulation by the *jinn*—spirits of the lower world. For Rāzī, the craft of the Sabians deserved far more serious philosophical engagement—compelling evidence that Rāzī believed theirs to be a real science. Given his ambition to produce an “Ash‘arising” philosophical theology that might replace Avicenna’s comprehensive Peripatetic system, Rāzī’s intention was to produce a scientific account of the craft that, in being harmonised with his metaphysics, could therefore be subordinated to it.

In his critique of Sabian natural philosophy, Rāzī confines himself to repudiating its failure to affirm that God’s direct power extends to every event in contingent reality: nothing occurs except through God’s power. To affirm secondary causes that act independently of God’s agency is, in effect, to affirm subsidiary gods. His logic, we can but infer, applies as much to the affirmation of human agency as it does to celestial agency. Any apparent relationship between celestial configurations and sublunary events merely describe the patterning of God’s action in the world. Nowhere does the careful reader of *al-Sirr* find any explicit and unambiguous *shar‘ī* sanction for the talismanic craft—aside, of course, from its academic study—let alone of the invocation of planetary souls.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

⁷⁰ Nor, for that matter, do we find any explicit condemnation of the talismanic science, unless we read it implicitly in his caveat “whilst disavowing all that is opposed to the faith and the peace of certainty.”

But a curious phrase in the concluding section (*al-khātima*) of *al-Sirr* gives us reason to pause for thought. Here, the text speaks of the ancient philosophers (*al-ḥukamā' al-awwalūn*) teaching their students a certain astral magical operation in order to gain wealth and the esteem of a ruler. But, the text reads with a tone of disdain, such an operation is performed merely for worldly need. By way of contrast, the following is of far greater value:

As for him who seeks knowledge and the perfect philosophy, he should invoke his perfect nature (*man ṭalaba al-'ilm wa'l-falsafa al-tamma fa-'alayhi bi-da'wat ṭibā'ihī al-tamm*). The Imām, the investigator (*al-muḥaqqiq*), Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī said: we have <now> made clear, in the treatise 'On invoking the heavenly bodies' (*fī maqālat da'wat al-kawākib*) <in> this book, the reality of the perfect nature (*ḥaqqīqat al-ṭibā' al-tamm*). So let the seeker of knowledge rely on this treatise to master how to know (*fa-li-yasta'in ṭālib al-'ilm bi-tilka al-maqāla li-yaṣīra muḥīṭan bi-kayfiyyat al-'ilm*).⁷¹

The last phrase is a little awkward in the Arabic and demands closer scrutiny. We turn to Tehran MS 6853 to resolve the issue. On f. 274b, the last phrase reads as follows: *li-yaṣīra muḥīṭan bi-kayfiyyat al-'amal*.⁷²

Although this metathesis from 'ilm (knowledge) to 'amal (operation), or 'amal to 'ilm is indeed an easy scribal error to make, it expresses a satisfying symmetry, since performing the 'amal leads to 'ilm and the perfect philosophy. But assuming the more natural reading of 'amal, this counsel takes on an altogether different meaning: "we have <now> made clear, in the treatise 'On invoking the heavenly bodies' (*fī maqālat da'wat al-kawākib*) <in> this book, the reality of the Perfect Nature (*ḥaqqīqat al-ṭibā' al-tamm*). So, let the seeker of knowledge rely on this treatise to master how to perform the operation (*fali-yasta'in ṭālib al-'ilm bi-tilka al-maqāla li-yaṣīra muḥīṭan bi-kayfiyyat al-'amal*)."

Here an ambiguity arises. What is this operation? Is it the invocation of the Perfect Nature, or is it in fact the "invocation of the planets" or the planetary ascent ritual, which is the central focus of *al-Sirr*? After describing the method of invoking the Perfect Nature, at the end of *al-Sirr* 4:1, Rāzī says: "It is necessary for whoever would plunge deeply into invoking the heavenly bodies (*da'wat al-kawākib*), to exert great effort in order to know which heavenly body

⁷¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164. In Tehran MS 6853, f. 274b, instead of "*al-imām al-muḥaqqiq fakhr al-dīn muḥammad al-rāzī*," we read: "*mawlānā al-dā'ī ilā Allāh bi'l-ḥaqq raḍīya Allāh 'anhu wa-'an aslāfihī*." The inclusion of Rāzī's name in the Cairo edition would appear to be a subsequent addition.

⁷² The concluding section is missing in all the witnesses to *al-Sirr* which I have viewed in the Bodleian, apart from Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Marsh 212 which, in f. 91a, gives the same reading as that which is to be found in Tehran MS 6853.

it [i.e., the Perfect Nature] is (*yajib ‘alā man yakhūḍ fi ‘ilm da‘wat al-kawākib an yajtahid ḥattā ya‘rif anna dkālīka al-kawkab ayy al-kawākib huwa*).⁷³

So, *al-Sirr* 4:1 establishes the noetic connection with the Perfect Nature as a necessary precondition for the operation (*‘amal*) of invoking the heavenly bodies, described in the following chapter *al-Sirr* 4:2. Moreover, Rāzī commences his description of the ritual of the planetary ascent with the words: “*fī kayfiyyat al-‘amal*.” The case for this *‘amal* being the ritual of planetary ascent is indeed persuasive.⁷⁴ This passage might lead us precipitously to conclude that Rāzī himself in some way endorsed the long ritual of planetary invocation—together with its Venusian ritualised orgy and Martian cannibalism. However, in perusing the parting counsel (*waṣiyya*) to the king (*malik*) to whom the work is addressed, the reader is swiftly disabused of such an error. For, Rāzī exhorts him “to be <both> firm in his resolve in the religious law (*sharī‘a*) and sound in belief concerning it,” and warns him “not to neglect the duties of the religious law (*waṣā’if al-shar‘*).”⁷⁵

How, then, are we to reconcile these two ostensibly contradictory pieces of advice, and thus construct Rāzī’s attitude to the Sabian occult philosophy that stimulates his deep interest? The conclusion could, of course, be dismissed as a later, spurious addition to the text, appended either during Rāzī’s lifetime, or by the scribe that penned Tehran MS 6853, ten years after the former’s death.⁷⁶ But we need not resort to this convenience if we take seriously Rāzī’s encomium to knowledge in both the introduction and conclusion to *al-Sirr*. For, whilst those Sabian rituals which assumes belief in the planets as secondary causes, and which involve the invocation of heavenly bodies and ritualised acts which violate the *sharī‘a*, are to be abjured, knowledge in itself is a soteriological enterprise that can contribute to the soul’s theoretical perfection. We shall, having gained a more detailed understanding of his theory, return to the issue of Rāzī’s attitude to the Sabian science in our conclusion, and the importance of the *sharī‘a* in safeguarding the believer from astrology.

73 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 113–114. The Cairo lithograph reads “*bi-khuṣūṣ*” which must be an error. I prefer the reading of Tehran MS 6853, f. 141a, which reads “*yakhū*”; the word “*‘ilm*” is missing.

74 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 114. I should point out that in the Cairo lithograph we read: *fī kayfiyyat hādhihi al-‘amal*—the disagreement in grammatical gender being an obvious error. But in Tehran MS 6853, f. 141b, we read: *fī kayfiyyat al-‘amal*.

75 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164. More on this royal figure in the next section in what follows.

76 Griffel notes Ibn Abi Uṣaybi‘a reporting that Rāzī’s envious brother Rukn al-Dīn “went so far as to pass off some poor compositions under the name of his brother” (see Griffel, “On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Life and the Patronage He Received,” p. 334).

1.7 Patronage, Politics and the Occult

Who was the anonymous king to whom he directs the parting counsel of *al-Sirr*? Rāzī addresses him in terms that are comparatively plain and barely adorned: “O King, aided with all the good of the world, by the affairs of the heavens (*al-mu-’ayyad bi-khayrāt al-’ālam bi-umūr al-samāwāt*).”⁷⁷ It is a dedication that is, for two reasons, at odds with the rest of Rāzī’s oeuvre. Firstly, in contrast with the dedications that appear in other works such as *Jāmi’ al-’ulūm* and *al-Ikhtiyārāt al-’Alā’iyya*, it only appears in the conclusion; and secondly, the king’s name is not mentioned.

Written at a time when Rāzī was trying to secure stable patronage, his Persian work *Jāmi’ al-’ulūm*, a classification and digest of no fewer than sixty sciences, was dedicated to “the king of kings of the sons of Adam, emperor of the world, the Khusro of Iran and Turan, ‘Ala’ al-Dunyā wa’l-Dīn Abū al-Muzaffar Tekish Ibn Khwārazm-Shāh.”⁷⁸ As he declares in his introduction, for each discipline that he covers in the encyclopaedia, which includes both the rational and religious sciences (*’aqlī va-naqlī*), he provides a short epitome, discussing three clear issues within any given field, and three ambiguous issues that demand further investigation. Moreover, he announces his intention to compose detailed works dedicated to those sciences in which the Khwārazmian court shows most interest. The worldly—as distinct from the intellectual—objective, of course, is to whet the courtly appetite for yet further intellectual productions.⁷⁹

Matthew Melvin-Koushki argues that *Jāmi’ al-’ulūm* was the first work in Persian encyclopaedic literature to reclassify certain occult sciences, such as judicial astrology (*’ilm al-aḥkām*), geomancy (*’ilm al-raml*), and jinn magic (*’ilm al-’azāyim*) as mathematical sciences.⁸⁰ Conspicuous amongst the works that Rāzī devoted to the occult sciences, including his studies on physiognomy and dream interpretation, his defence and study of electional astrology, *al-Ikhtiyārāt al-’Alā’iyya*, is distinguished by its dedication, like that of *Jāmi’ al-’ulūm*, to the Khwārazm-Shāh ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Tekish. Rāzī’s early work thus prefigures what Melvin-Koushki has identified as the “intense patronage throughout the post-

⁷⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164.

⁷⁸ Rāzī, *Jāmi’ al-’Ulūm (Sittinī)*, p. 69.

⁷⁹ Rāzī, *Jāmi’ al-’Ulūm (Sittinī)*, p. 69.

⁸⁰ Matthew Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One: the Mathematicalization of the Occult Sciences in the High Persianate Tradition,” *Intellectual History of the Islamic World* 5 (2017): pp. 127–199, at p. 145. In his survey of the different approaches to classifying the sciences in Persian encyclopaedic works, Melvin-Koushki describes a process of “mathematicalization” of the occult sciences in the post-Mongol period, an index of “a shift away from Avicennan peripateticism and toward a mathematized philosophy-science” (Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One,” p. 137). He identifies Rāzī’s *Jāmi’ al-’ulūm* as the Persian encyclopaedia that incepted this process.

Mongol Persianate world” that was to be obtained by scholars seeking benefactors who wrote on these fields of scientific inquiry.⁸¹ That the Khwārazm-Shāh Tekish had a keen interest in the occult sciences strengthens his case as the most likely addressee of the parting counsel of *al-Sirr*.

Al-Sirr swiftly gained repute as an occult text of high prestige. No more than twenty-six years after Rāzī’s death, the sultān of Delhi Shams al-Dīn Iltutmish (r. 607–633/1211–1236), commissioned a Persian translation of the work towards the end of his reign.⁸² The reputation of *al-Sirr* spread to the western half of the Islamic world, being the only occultist text from the Islamic east of which Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) was aware.⁸³ The lustre of its prestige remained undimmed until well into the eighteenth century of the common era, when the Mālikī scholar Muḥammad al-Ghallānī al-Kashnāwī (d. 1154/1741–1742), from Katsina in modern day Nigeria, composed his abridgement and commentary on *al-Sirr*, entitled *al-Durr al-manẓūm*.⁸⁴

But could it have been the case that *al-Sirr* gained its reputation as an occult text of high prestige even before Iltutmish’s commissioning of its Persian translation in India? There is evidence that Rāzī’s younger contemporary, the author of the grimoire *Kitāb al-Shamil*, Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī, the magician who served both the last Khwārazm-Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn Mingbarnī, and Chagatai, son of Chinggis Khān, made a copy of it in his own hand. On the last folio of the text of *al-Sirr*, the scribe who penned Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library Carullah MS 1482

81 Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One,” p. 142. For Rāzī’s dedication of *al-Ikhtiyārāt* to Tekish, see Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum Library, MS 701, f. 1b. Altaş dates this work to between 589/1189 and 591/1195 (see Altaş, “Fahreddin er-Rāzī’nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi,” p. 152). For discussion of Rāzī’s defence of astrology in *al-Ikhtiyārāt al-‘Alā’iyya*, see Ahmet Tunç Şen, *Astrology in the Service of Empire: Knowledge, Prognostication and Politics at the Ottoman Court 1140s–1550s* (PhD Dissertation: University of Chicago, 2016), pp. 79–81.

82 Živa Vesel, “The Persian Translation of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s *al-Sirr al-Maktūm* (‘The Occult Secret’) for Iltutmish,” in *Conférence of Cultures: French Contributions to Indo-Persian Studies*, ed. Françoise ‘Nalini’ Delvoe (New Delhi, Tehran: Manohar, Centre for Human Sciences, and Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1995): pp. 14–22, at p. 16. For the historical context and the reign of Iltutmish, see Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 29–43.

83 Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One,” p. 146, fn. 68. See Ibn Khaldūn *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, Bollingen Series 43 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), vol. 3, p. 164.

84 For an edition of the work, see Muḥammad al-Kashnāwī, *al-Durr al-manẓūm wa-khulāṣat al-Sirr al-Maktūm fi’l-siḥr wa’l-talāsīm wa’l-nujūm* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1961) in 3 vols. For an overview of the work, see Dahlia El-Tayeb M. Gubara, *Al-Azhar and the Orders of Knowledge* (PhD Dissertation: University of Columbia, 2014), pp. 312–334; for al-Kashnāwī’s life and career, see pp. 312–334.

notes, in a marginal gloss to the colophon, that whilst the majority of the text was copied from a holograph witness—i.e., from a copy in the author’s own hand (*bi-khaṭṭ al-muṣannif*)—a lesser portion was written consulting a copy “in the hand of Sirāj [?] al-Khwārazmī, known as al-Ṣakkākī (*min khaṭṭ sirāj* [?] *al-khwārazmī al-ma’rūf bi’l-ṣakkākī*).”⁸⁵ Providing a vivid portrait of how politics, scholarship and occult science were tightly woven both in the last phase of the Khwārazm-Shāh dynasty, and the Mongol period that followed, his biography illustrates why Rāzī had good reason to believe that *al-Sirr* would have attracted the attention of Tekish, and why the talismanic craft merited the theorising of the pre-eminent philosopher-theologian of the age.

Sirāj al-Dīn Yūsuf Ibn Abī Bakr Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī Abu Ya’qūb al-Sakkākī (555–623/1160–1229) is known primarily for his pandect on grammar and rhetoric, the magisterial *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm* (“The Key to the Sciences”), which became the standard text for instruction in Islamic universities in the east, through its abridgement *Talkhiṣ al-Miftāḥ* (“The Abridgement of the ‘Key’”) by Khaṭīb Dimashq al-Qazwīnī (d. 724/1325).⁸⁶ The *Miftāḥ* itself was based on Rāzī’s *Nihāyat al-ījāz fī’l-dirāyat al-ijāz* (“The Final Concise Word in Understanding the Linguistic Miracle of the *Qur’ān*”).⁸⁷

Born in a village in Khwārazm, the likelihood is that the *nisba* “al-Sakkākī” refers not to his place of birth, but rather to his ancestral profession of metalworking, producing *sakka*—or minted coinage, an etymology that finds support in an anecdote from his early life. His first attempt to attract patronage was to fashion an ink well, which was received with royal indifference; his realisation that it was scholarship that wins royal favour set him on the path to becoming a scholar of Arabic rhetoric.⁸⁸

His skill at metalworking would have served him well as a magician serving the Khwārazm-Shāhs, fashioning talismanic idols. Having failed to secure the generosity of ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Tekish, al-Sakkākī finally secured the patronage of the son and successor of Tekish, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad (r. 596–617/1200–1220), and, in turn, his son the last Khwārazm-Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn Mīngbarnī (r. 617–628/1220–1231).

Evidence of Sakkākī’s service to ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad, and his son Jalāl al-Dīn, as a master of the talismanic craft is supplied by Muḥammad Ibn

⁸⁵ Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, Carullah MS 1482, f. 164a. His name is usually spelt with a *sīn*, not a *ṣād*.

⁸⁶ William Smyth, “The Making of a Textbook,” *Studia Islamica* 78 (1993): pp. 99–115, at p. 100. For these, and alternative dates for al-Sakkākī’s life, see Aḥmad Maṭlūb, *al-Balāgha ‘inda al-Sakkākī* (Bahgdad: Maktabat al-Nahḍa, 1964), pp. 46 and 52.

⁸⁷ Smyth, “The Making of a Textbook,” p. 100.

⁸⁸ Maṭlūb, *al-Balāgha ‘inda al-Sakkākī*, p. 46.

Aḥmad al-Nasawī in his biography of the last Khwārazm-Shāh.⁸⁹ During his struggle against resurgent ‘Abbāsīd power, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad commissioned Sakkākī to fashion a talismanic statue, or *timthāl*, which was buried in Baghdad, the intention being to bring misfortune down on the head of the unsuspecting Caliph. But when Jalāl al-Dīn succeeded his father, Sakkākī had become convinced that the talismanic effect had become reversed. On receiving this news, Jalāl al-Dīn dispatched his trusted servant, the *qāḍī* Mujir al-Dīn, to disinter the malfunctioning talisman. This, however, proved impossible as the palace in which it was buried was no longer accessible.⁹⁰

Just like his older and more illustrious contemporary Rāzī, Sakkākī adroitly navigated the turbulent waters of Central Asian politics and secured the patronage not only of the Khwārazm-Shāhs, but also of the Mongols who overthrew them. But ultimately, his mastery of the occult sciences offered no protection from the intrigue of the Mongol court. According to the biographer ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī, it was on account of his practical expertise in the occult sciences that Sakkākī so impressed Chagatai, son of Chinggis Khān, that he became his confidante and close companion:

Sakkākī was deeply learned (*‘ālim muḥaqqiq*) in the occult arts and wondrous sciences (*al-funūn al-gharība wa’l-‘ulūm al-‘ajība*), including the knowledge of rhetoric in all its forms⁹¹, the science of subjugating the *jinn*, the invocation of the planets (*da‘wat al-kawākib*), the art of talismans, magic, alchemy, the occult properties of terrestrial and heavenly bodies and other fields. The Sultan Chagatai Khān, the son of Chinggis, who ruled over Transoxania, Khwārazm, Kashgar, Badhakhshān and Balkh, made him his companion and confidante when he found out about his merits. It is related that he was sitting with him one day when they spied some birds in flight. Chagatai wanted to hunt them and so he took up his bow and arrow. Sakkākī asked: “which bird do you want to catch?” and so he pointed to three of them. Sakkākī traced a circle in the ground, recited something, and the birds fell to the ground. On seeing that, Chagatai’s belief in him grew and he used to sit respectfully in Sakkākī’s presence.⁹²

⁸⁹ Discussed by Isabel Miller in “Occult Science and the Fall of the Khwārazm-Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn,” *Iran* 39 (2001): pp. 249–256.

⁹⁰ Miller, “Occult Science and the Fall of the Khwārazm-Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn,” p. 249.

⁹¹ It is worthy of note that rhetoric and the power over language should be categorized as one of the occult sciences or *‘ulūm gharība*.

⁹² Abū’l-Ḥasanāt Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī, *al-Fawā’id al-bahiyya fī tarājim al-ḥanafiyya*, ed. Sayyid Badr al-Dīn Abū Firās al-Na’sānī (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 1324 hijrī), p. 232.

Inevitably, Sakkākī's admission to Chagatai's confidence would provoke the envy of political rivals. And there was no rival more dangerous than Chagatai's vizier, Ḥabash 'Amīd:

When he [i.e., Sakkākī] was elevated to such high rank in the esteem of the sultan, envy and enmity were kindled in the hearts of his courtly peers, especially in that of Ḥabash 'Amīd, the sultan's vizier, who wanted to destroy Sakkākī. Sakkākī learnt of this and so he said to Chagatai: "I see that the auspicious planet (*kawkab*) of Ḥabash 'Amīd has fallen, and so I fear that some of his misfortune may affect you." And so, on merely hearing those words, Chagatai removed Ḥabash 'Amīd from his ministerial office and the administration of government suffered disruption.⁹³

Now an inveterate foe, 'Amīd, in retaliation, commenced a slander campaign against Sakkākī. In response:

[. . .] Sakkākī subjugated Mars and caused a fire to ignite in Chagatai's camp and [thereby] discovered Ḥabash as the source of the slander. So he [i.e., Ḥabash] said to Chagatai: "If Sakkākī is capable of such feats, be not surprised if he tries to wrest from you your throne." Thus was [suspicion] seeded in Chagatai's imagination, so he threw Sakkākī into prison where he languished for three years before he died.⁹⁴

Casting light on the nexus between patronage, politics and the occult sciences that characterised their milieu, Sakkākī's career may explain why Rāzī might have thought that *al-Sirr* would attract the attention of the Khwārazm-Shāhs. That a magician of Sakkākī's repute might have penned his own copy of *al-Sirr*, as suggested by the scribal gloss to the colophon of Carullah MS 1482, stands as testimony to the prestige of the work.

It might also explain why the anonymous glossator of the Cairo Lithograph of *al-Sirr*, who refers to himself as *imām al-ḥukamā'* ("the chief of the sages"), was convinced that one of Sakkākī's students—also called Rāzī—was in fact the author of the work. Who the "chief of the sages" thought this other Rāzī might have been is unclear: in his study of Sakkākī, Maṭlūb notes that the biographical sources only mention one student of Sakkākī—Mukhtār Ibn Maḥmūd Ibn Muḥammad al-Zāhidī.⁹⁵ In his gloss on the opening page of the text, the "chief of the sages" comments:

It will not elude anyone possessed of insight into the sciences that this book, which has been labelled (*mawsūm*) as "the hidden pearl," is one of the compositions of al-Rāzī—not the Rāzī who is well-known amongst the theologians and scholars of disputation, author of the

⁹³ Laknawī, *al-Fawā'id al-bahiyya*, p. 232.

⁹⁴ Laknawī, *al-Fawā'id al-bahiyya*, p. 232. This anecdote is quoted in Maṭlūb, *al-Balāgha 'inda al-Sakkākī*, pp. 51–52.

⁹⁵ Maṭlūb, *al-Balāgha 'inda al-Sakkākī*, p. 55.

famous Qur'ānic exegesis—for he is man who is a disputatious sceptical theologian: what has he to do with direct communication with spiritual beings and connection with beings of the higher world? Rather, its author is one of the students of the well-known Sakkākī.⁹⁶

As someone who holds the talismanic occult science in deep reverence, “the chief of sages” deploys a line of reasoning inspired more by Safavid polemics, which saw Rāzī as a purblind partisan Ash‘arī, who resorted mainly to pedantic disputation and scepticism to undermine Avicennan philosophy: such a pedantic sceptic could not have authored a work that philosophises on the occult with such profound insight, he surmises. But “the chief of sages” is evidently unaware of Rāzī’s own references to *al-Sirr al-maktūm* in his other works, the most important for our analysis being *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*. Shihadeh censures what he identifies as “the entrenched grand narrative” that informs the prevailing interpretation of al-Rāzī’s *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* as ideologically hidebound Ash‘arī criticism of Avicenna. This narrative he characterises as “a decidedly reductionist straitjacket, which offers a distorted, at best partial, perspective.”⁹⁷ It is this same prejudice that informs the denial, by the pro-occultist “chief of sages,” of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s authorship of *al-Sirr*.

1.8 *Al-Sirr al-maktūm*: an overview

Prefaced by a general introduction, *al-Sirr* comprises five treatises (*maqālāt*), each of which divides into separate chapters (sing. *faṣl*, pl. *fuṣūl*). The general introduction opens with a eulogy of occult knowledge and concludes with a discussion of twelve conditions relating to the attitude of mind which must be possessed by the one who would aspire to the acquisition of occult knowledge.

The first treatise opens with a definition of talismans as the blending of active heavenly powers with receptive earthly powers. Rāzī begins his theoretical discussion on the level of the talisman master’s soul and its “active earthly psychic forces.” After examining the various epistemological difficulties which underlie astrology, a branch of knowledge necessary for the timing of talismanic operations, Rāzī argues that empirical analysis must be supported by revelation (*wahy*) to the human soul and its inspiration (*ilhām*) by a numinous external source in order to secure the sound basis of astrology as a valid field of inquiry (*al-Sirr* 1:2–3).

⁹⁶ See *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Shihadeh, “Al-Rāzī’s (d. 1210) Commentary on Avicenna’s Pointers,” p. 296. He notes: “the overworn designation ‘the chief doubter’ (*imam al-mushakkikīn*), popularized by Hossein Nasr, originates in Safavid polemics” (*ibidem*, p. 296, fn. 2).

In the *Psychology*, *al-Sirr* 1:4, Rāzī then shifts his focus to the operation of the soul itself and the necessity of focusing its estimative faculty (*wahm*) in order to secure the success of any task. This discussion provides an introduction to the real core of the first treatise: an exploration of: (1) the nature of the soul innately imbued with occult power; and (2) the spiritual austerities by which such power may be acquired by the soul not so naturally predisposed. A crescendo of philosophical arguments, to establish the reality of the former and the efficacy of the latter, reaches its climax with a long passage of a distinct Indian yogic tone, quoted on the authority of a certain Ṭuṭuṣ al-Hindī (“Ṭuṭuṣ the Indian”), which expounds on the occult powers developed by someone who attains “the centre point of meditation” (*markaz al-fikr*). Thus does Rāzī present the reality of the talismanic process on the level of the practitioner’s soul, the focus of which blends the “active celestial forces,” referred to in his definition of the talisman, with “passive elemental forces.” Chapter five describes the various practices involved in astral ritual, including the use of images, suffumigations, and incantations. The sixth and last chapter of the treatise provides a “clarification” on the “weakness” of approach of the philosophers and the Sabians and a defence of Islam.

The second treatise, comprising just under half of the total length of *al-Sirr*, summarises, without acknowledging its source, *al-Madkhal al-kabīr* (“Great Introduction to Astrology”) of Abū Ma’shar whose rational justification for astrology, David Pingree argues, derives from the rationalisations of the philosophising Sabians of Ḥarrān.⁹⁸ Rāzī subsequently presents long lists of different sublunary phenomena and their planetary correspondences. The importance of

⁹⁸ See David Pingree, “The Sabians of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition,” pp. 26–29. Charles Burnett notes that Abū Ma’shar is credited with having written on the astrolatrous rituals of the Sabians of Ḥarrān, and speculates that this might have featured in a now lost work, entitled *Kitāb fī buyūt al-‘ibādāt*, mentioned by al-Bīrūnī: see Charles Burnett’s “Introduction” in *The Great Introduction to Astrology by Abū Ma’shar*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 106, vol. 1, ed. & trans. Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 2, fn. 7. For a critique of David Pingree’s theory of a Sabian Ḥarrānian influence on Abū Ma’shar, see Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, pp. 115–118. Whether or not there was a historic Sabian Ḥarrānian influence on Abū Ma’shar is irrelevant to the present discussion. What is relevant is the fact that, citing him as the authority for the ritual of planetary invocation, Rāzī believed Abū Ma’shar to have had intimate knowledge of Sabian practice. On Abū Ma’shar’s life and works, see David Pingree in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, vol. 1, ed. Charles Coulston Gillispie (New York: Scribner, 1970), pp. 36–37. For Abū Ma’shar’s theory on astral causation, see: George Saliba, “Islamic Astronomy in Context: Attacks on Astrology and the Rise of the *Hay’a* Tradition,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 4 (2002): pp. 25–46; Charles Burnett, “Agency and Effect in the Astrology of Abū Ma’shar of Balkh (Albumasar),” *Oriens* 47 (2019): pp. 1–17; Peter Adamson, “Abū Ma’shar, al-Kindī, and the Philosophical Defence of Astrology,” *Recherches de*

their inclusion resides in the fact that the products of nature and human artifice, which derive their meaning from their participation in the transcendent celestial reality, are brought together in Sabian astral ritual.⁹⁹

The third treatise treats of talismans. Its first chapter provides a practical description of the process and ritual associated with the forging of the talismanic idol; its second and third chapters present instructions for talismans, derived from two different sources. Its fourth and last chapter concludes by reconciling between Islamic scripture and the Sabian belief in an entirely ensouled cosmos.

The first chapter of the fourth treatise describes the eight doctrines of the Sabians, amongst which is included the doctrine of the Perfect Nature. The long ritual of planetary invocation is detailed in *al-Sirr* 4:2. Since, during this ritual, the aspirant may incur the hostility of some planetary souls, *al-Sirr* 4:3 prescribes measures to propitiate their anger, whilst *al-Sirr* 4:4 describes various aspects of the long ritual such as specific sacrifices, suffumigations, and planetary orisons. *Al-Sirr* 4:5–7 comprise technical instructions for invoking the Head and Tail of the Dragon; specific planetary magical operations and descriptions of poisons and antidotes.¹⁰⁰ Operations for: neutralising magic and amorous obsession; causing strife and enmity; and striking down a victim with illness are treated in *al-Sirr* 4:8–10. The Fifth treatise describes the talismans of the seven planets according to *Kitāb al-Siḥr al-kabīr* by Ibn Waḥshiyya. There now follows a concise summary of the main divisions of *al-Sirr*.¹⁰¹

philosophie et théologie médiévales, 69 (2002); pp. 245–270; and Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 9–26.

99 A brief glance at the detailed contents of *al-Sirr* 2:11, entitled “On the distribution of all colours, tastes, occult properties, actions, character traits amongst the seven planets,” assists us in gaining some impression of how comprehensive and all-encompassing was the Sabian vision of a sublunary reality entirely governed by planetary correspondence (see Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 53–58). Included in the list are individual examples of the following categories of natural phenomena and products of human culture: tastes; colours; textures; physical attributes; terrains; dwelling places; countries and regions; non-precious metals; precious materials; fruit and grains; trees; plants and crops; foods and medicines; forces and powers; animals; birds; simple organs and limbs; complex organs and limbs; organs of perception; ages of man; members of the family household; human physical appearance; character traits; behavioural traits; actions and nature; professions and social classes; religions and clothes; planetary images.

100 An ancient astrological notion accounting for the eclipses, the head (*al-raʿs*) and tail (*al-dhanab*) of a celestial serpent or dragon (*jawzahr*, also *al-tinnīn*) were conceived as covering the lunar nodes—two points, from the geocentric perspective, where the Moon’s path crosses the orbit of the Sun. See: Willy Hartner, “The Pseudoplanetary nodes of the Moon’s Orbit in Hindu and Islamic Iconographies,” *Ars Islamica* 5/2 (1938): pp. 112–154.

101 Numbers in square brackets refer to page numbers in the Cairo lithograph.

General Introduction [1–7]

1. On the general merit of knowledge [2–3]
2. On the merit of occult knowledge and the perfection of the theoretical and practical capacities [3–5]
3. Twelve conditions for engaging with this kind of knowledge [5–7]
 - (a) Conviction [5]
 - (b) Persistence [5]
 - (c) Industry [5–6]
 - (d) Concealment [6]
 - (e) Nocturnal Practice [6]
 - (f) Preponderance of good acts over bad [6]
 - (g) Veganism [6]
 - (h) Employment of Spirits for Important Matters [6]
 - (i) Refrainment from the excessive petitioning of spirits [6]
 - (j) Astrological Knowledge [6]
 - (k) Steadfastness and perseverance [6]
 - (l) Spiritual sensitivity [7]

Treatise 1: On General Principles [7–20]

- 1.1. Definition of talismans [7–9]
- 1.2. On whether knowledge of the natures of the heavenly bodies is possible [9–10]
- 1.3. On the method by which knowledge of the states of the celestial spheres can be attained [10]
- 1.4. On the fact that magic is based on the purification of the soul and the focusing of the *wahm* (*ta'liq al-wahm*) [11–17]
 - 1.4.1. Ten illustrations of the occult power of the *wahm* over physical reality [11–12]
 - 1.4.2. Innate (*fiṭri*) occult power [12–13]
 - 1.4.3. Acquired occult power [13–17]
 - (a) Astrological indications of predisposition for the acquisition of occult power [13–14]
 - (b) Rejection of worldliness [14]
 - (c) Physical and Psychological balance through regulation of the humors [14]
 - (d) Vegan diet and reduction in food consumption [14]
 - (e) Use of colours, fragrance and music to fortify the soul [14]
 - (f) Single-minded purpose [15–16]
 - (g) Establishment of connection with the celestial spirit by means of ritual, prayer and concentrated focus on an idol [16]

- (h) Ṭumṭum al-Hindī on meditative focus, occult power, and directing the celestial powers with the power of the soul [16–17]
- 1.5. An adumbration of the ritual acts that the master of the craft performs [17–19]
 - 1.5.1. Four proofs that images exert an occult effect on the soul [17]
 - 1.5.2. On the metaphysical origin of occult images and their extra-mental reality [17]
 - 1.5.3. On images (*ṣuwar*) and their occult effects, knowledge of which was only acquired by means of revelation and inspiration (*waḥy wa'l-ilhām*) [17]
 - 1.5.4. Proof that each image has its archetype (*mithāl*) in the heavens and that lower forms are subject (*muṭī'a*) to their archetypes in the higher world: serpents are subject to Draco; scorpions to Scorpio; predators to Leo [18]
 - 1.5.5. On planetary correspondence with sublunary phenomena and their use in magnifying the power of astral magical ritual [18]
 - 1.5.6. Images are to be inscribed on materials sympathetic to the planet [18]
 - 1.5.7. Repetition of incantations
 - 1.5.8. Burning of aromatics before planetary idol and representation of the person in relation to whom the ritual is being performed [18]
 - 1.5.9. Tying and blowing on knots and the utterance of incantations over them [18]
 - 1.6. A “clarification” (*bayyina*) on the weakness of the approach (*madhhab*) of the philosophers and the Sabians and an explanation of the correctness of the Islamic religion. [19–20]

Treatise 2: Astrology [20–95]

- 2.1. On the proofs that the heavenly bodies influence this world [20–26]
- 2.2. Response to the denial of planetary influence [26–29]
- 2.3. A Summary of Astrology [29–95]

Treatise 3: On Talismans [95–110]

- 3.1. General principles on making talismans [95–96]
 - 3.1.1. A complete talisman draws on the influence of one fixed star and three assisting planets in order to capture the four elements: Mercury; the Moon; and the operative planet;
 - 3.1.2. On the precise measurement of the four elements in the raw material;
 - 3.1.3. Correct seasonal timing for making the talisman;
 - 3.1.4. How distance and speed of the planets determines their influence
 - 3.1.5. Instructions for astrological timing;
 - 3.1.6. On how and when to cast the metal into the mould to make the talisman, and the ritual performed.

- 3.2. Talismans of Abū Dhāṭīs al-Bābili [96–104]
- 3.3. Selections from *Kitāb Yawāqīt al-mawāqīt* [105–109]
- 3.4. A Qur’ānic defence of the doctrine of the ensouled universe [109–10]

Treatise 4: On the invocation of the heavenly bodies [110–58]

- 4.1. Sabian beliefs [110–114]
 - 4.1.1. Three Sabian sub-sects [110]
 - 4.1.2. Eight Sabian doctrines [110–4]
- 4.2. Ritual of planetary ascent [114–120]
- 4.3. How to avoid hostility of the planets during the ritual [120–22]
- 4.4. On the suffumigations, sacrifices and invocations used in the ritual [122–7]
- 4.5. On the invocation of the Lunar Nodes [127–132]
- 4.6. On the operations of the Spirits of the Planets [132–7]
- 4.7. On poisons and teriacs [137–139]
- 4.8. On the neutralization of magic and obsessive love [139–141]
- 4.9. On operations to sow hatred and cause separation [141–151]
- 4.10. On causing illness [151–158]

Treatise 5: The Talismans of the Seven Heavenly Bodies [158–164]

Concluding statement (*al-khātima*) [164]

1.9 A Summary of the Ritual of Planetary Ascent

The ritual of planetary ascent, described in *al-Sirr* 4:2, involves the subjugation of the planets (*taskhīr al-kawākib*), beginning with the Moon, then seeking its aid in the subjugation of the next, one by one, until the subjugation of Saturn, the final stage, at the end of which the adept’s self-talismanisation reaches completion.¹⁰² A necessary condition for attempting it is a stabilised connection with one’s perfect nature.¹⁰³ For the aspirant to be qualified to perform this ritual he must be born under the correct astrological conditions; he must have mastered knowledge of the stars; and he must begin each stage of the ritual

102 A full translation of the ritual is provided in the Appendix. A Persian version of the long planetary ritual, together with the Arabic planetary orisons that Rāzī describes in *al-Sirr* is to be found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Walker 91, ff. 38b–49b (original foliation), in a section entitled *dar taskhīr-i kavākīb* (“on the subjugation of the planets”). Interestingly, the work, entitled *Majmū‘a-yi nushkha-yi Sakkākī dar ‘ilm-i da‘vat*, purports to be a compendium of astral occult procedures penned by Sakkākī. The relevant section also attributes the long planetary ritual to Abū Ma’shar.

103 See Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 113–114.

with the prescribed astrological timing. He must observe the correct requirements relating to place, clothing, food, fasts, sacrifices, and aromatics. Details of the appropriate aromatics to be burnt, the sacrifices to be made, and the orisons to the planets are given in *al-Sirr* 4:4.¹⁰⁴

The central component in the aspirant's performance of each stage is the repetition of liturgical planetary orisons. These set the tone of the aspirant's mental and emotional attitude towards the planet which he addresses. Correct astrological timing for each stage usually means when the relevant planet is in a strong position astrologically, either in its house or in its exaltation, and is free of malefic aspects. Given that they are rational conscious beings, possessed of free will, the planets will be more favourably disposed to answering the needs of its devotee when it is in a felicitous state; when it is malefically afflicted and weak in its position, then the planets are like men burdened by their own suffering and grief, and unlikely to pay heed to the petitions of their devotees.¹⁰⁵ Whilst each stage of the ritual, except for that of the Sun, is performed at night, other conditions which must be observed during the day demand that the aspirant maintain perpetual ritual consciousness. In the co-ordination of timing, space, bodily orientation, diet, emotional attitude and the stimulation of the senses through aromatics, visions, music and prayer, the brandishing of cultic objects and ingestion of cultic foods, the aim of each stage is to establish a powerful noetic connection with the planet invoked.

The Moon

The ritual to subjugate (*taskhīr*) the Moon lasts a year and it is described month by month. It is commenced at a time when the Moon is in its weakest position astrologically.

The aspirant is to prepare himself mentally for the ritual by fasting three days before commencement, reducing his food intake each day; he should ingest, and give in charity meat that has a special occult correspondence with the Moon; he should harm no animal; he should avoid gazing on corpses; and he should avoid all impure substances; he should shave his head; and his diet should comprise moist things. Throughout the period, he must take up residence on agricultural land, near running water, and seek out the company of kings—or, failing that—of tribal chiefs and scholars.

¹⁰⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 122–127.

¹⁰⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 123.

An orison is repeated nightly. By the sixth month he reaches the point of infatuation with the Moon, becoming distraught and tearful when he does not see it—he becomes, quite literally, a “lunatic”. During the seventh and eighth months, his shadow increases in length. Rāzī reports Abu Ma‘shar’s account that when he performed this ritual, his shadow extended to 1,000 cubits. In the ninth and tenth months, the Moon’s light exceeds that of the Sun: the aspirant is cautioned not to fix the Moon with a direct gaze, for fear that he be blinded. In the eleventh month he sees in his sleep every night the lunar sphere, the Sun, the Moon and the planets, all of which apprise him of matters in the unseen world.

By the twelfth month, his heart is suffused with peace and joy and becomes indifferent to kings and princes. Between sleep and wakefulness, he sees true portents and visions of the forthcoming day’s events, even those in distant lands. When he sees all these signs and the solar year is complete: at that point he will know that his goal has been achieved and the Moon has been subjugated.

On the thirteenth month the aspirant seeks the utmost that can be attained by the power of the Moon. Under specific lunar configurations, he is to stand, wearing certain attire, sewn with certain jewels, carrying an iron bracelet; he is to gaze upon the Moon with his left eye. He receives knowledge of the *sharī‘a*, religion, higher knowledge, arithmetic, engineering, geography, agriculture, education of children, knowledge of how to repel the harm of liars and slanderers; how to repel the harm of forgetfulness, and cowardice; he is to seek the power to turn enemies into slaves and friends into kings and to bring happiness to any person whom he so chooses. The aspirant can make requests to the Moon depending on which planet it is applying to; he is to change his garment appropriately. Each of these lunar applications to the different planets prepares the aspirant for the succeeding stages in the ascension ritual. The cultic props that he uses depending on the planet to which the Moon is applying prefigure the props which are used in the later rituals. Thus, when the Moon applies to Saturn, he should carry a bone in his hand; during the lunar application to Jupiter he is to carry a rosary; when it applies to Mars he brandishes a naked sword. It is fitting that the Moon ritual introduces him to all the planets since it is the fastest moving planet, the closest to the Earth, and the one which blends the rays of all the other planets before they reach the sublunary sphere.

Rāzī then provides further information on how the Moon can be used once it has been subjugated. For the destruction of enemies, the aspirant is advised to await the Moon’s configuration with a certain planet in the eighth house: the planet determines the kind of death the aspirant’s enemy will suffer. To prolong life, the aid of the Moon and Jupiter and his associated fixed stars is sought.

Mercury

Mercury's aid is sought for all matters pertaining to the intellect, language, philosophy, mathematics, and occult knowledge. Before proceeding to his subjugation, these things must first be sought three times from the Moon, in a diffident manner; when they are not forthcoming, leave must be requested from the Moon to approach Mercury. He is to brandish a golden sceptre. A description of appropriate clothing jewellery, food with which to break his fast is provided.

Venus

When the Moon is approaching conjunction with Mercury, ideally there being just seven degrees between them, the aspirant thrice seeks from the Moon and Mercury what is under the sway of Venus: women, mothers, young people, siblings, riches, entertainment, things which gladden the heart, jewellery, lovers, alcohol, marriage, and expertise in magic. Then the aspirant asks leave from the Moon and Mercury to seek these things from Venus. He is to wear green clothes, certain jewels and perfumes. He is to prepare a drinking session with beardless boys, and male and female singers. The session is to be held in a place opposite the point where Venus rises; he is to recline on green cushions; they are to eat the hearts of animals; he should position himself at a place where he can see the rising of Venus. Thus should the session be, for three days: they should engage in nothing but drinking wine, and intercourse—both heterosexual and homosexual—for three nights; then on the third night, when Venus rises he should recite love poetry, in Arabic and Farsi. He is to make devoted obeisance to Venus, for eventually his approach will be accepted—and the sign of this will be that the beardless boys and women will approach him sexually without being bidden. He is then to ask of Venus those things which fall under its sway.

The Sun

The aspirant is to seek out the gold palaces of kings; he should wear gold silk, precious rubies, a gold crown, gold rings with red rubies. He is to fast, restricting the amount he eats, and to spend generously in charity, feeding predatory beasts associated with the Sun, such as lions, and tigers. When the Sun reaches the first degree of Aries, he stands in praise of the Sun, extolling the power that it gives to kings, the light that it gives to the Moon. He is to continue this

practice at certain times of the day and night for a period of six months. By the end of this period, certain signs that his obsequies have been accepted will become manifest. His animal and bodily powers will be enhanced as will be his intellect. With the completion of a year, he is to ask the Sun for those things which fall under its sway such as the animal soul, the intellect, light, political power, high standing, gold and buried treasure.

Mars

The process of Mars's subjugation should begin when it is in Capricorn, the sign of its exaltation; none of the planets which have already been subjugated should be in quartile conjunction or in opposition. Mars should not be in a position that is malefic in relation to Saturn at the beginning of the operation; the Sun's aid should be sought in the subjugation of Mars which cannot be in conjunction with Venus, a planet hostile to Mars. When these conditions are fulfilled, then Mars can be safely invoked. The aspirant is to wear copper and brass rings, red wool and a blood red *qalansuwa* (a truncated conical hat), to carry a drawn sword in the right hand, and in the left the severed head of a man. The sword must be stained with the blood of the severed head. The severed head must not be that of a Turk. He is to eat of the head (*yaj'al ghidha'ahu min al-ra's*) and give others to eat of it. Standing in silence before Mars, the aspirant will be shown terrifying visions from which, he is cautioned, he must not take fright. Then, for the number of days during which he was disturbed by such visions, he is to prostrate with his face in the dust. He is then to stand and praise Mars with full force and gusto; he is to seek the protection of the Sun from the harm that Mars can inflict; and he is to petition Mars for the destruction of countries and enemies.

Jupiter

The aspirant is to seek the aid of Mars in Jupiter's subjugation. He should wear the colours and rings associated with Jupiter and have in his possession the Qur'an, Islamic prayers and the Divine Names; he is to fast and reduce his consumption of food until, in less than one month, he will attain his goal. He is to ask Jupiter for riches, generosity, a balanced constitution, justice, leadership, truthfulness, love, faithfulness to oaths, love of good things and hatred for the bad.

Saturn

Saturn should be in one of its houses or in dignity, Capricorn being the most appropriate. The more planets that are aligned in a particular relationship the better. The aspirant is to wear a woven green silk conical hat and a fine black silk shirt; he is to hold in his hand a bone; and distribute in charity the meat of the right leg and the intestines. In Saturn's subjugation he is to seek the aid of Mercury. He is to persist in his service for two and a half years, after which he will be given power and other benefits.

1.10 Objective and Scope of this Study

The sources for the talismanic science on which Rāzī reports and theorises insist on the empirical basis of their operations: so long as all conditions—both external and internal to the soul of the practitioner—are met, they are verifiable and reproducible, regardless of his metaphysical assumptions.

As we have already discussed, the talismanic science itself does not privilege any of the three distinct theological positions mentioned in *al-Sirr*.¹⁰⁶ In his introduction to *Kitāb al-Shāmil*, al-Sakkākī presents his work as a compendium of all those occult procedures which he has read in the tomes of the ancient sages and which he himself has assayed (*jarrabtu*) and found effective: empiricism is the guiding principle of the occult scientist's methodology.¹⁰⁷

In comparing it to modern science, Melvin-Koushki highlights the spirit of empiricism that informed its pre-modern occult predecessor:

Not unlike the practice of modern laboratory science, moreover, the premodern production of such occult-scientific technologies required as a rule the construction and maintenance of highly controlled and artificial settings. But in extreme contrast to their modern cognates, those premodern settings had at least as much to do with the ritual control of human—and non-human—modes of *consciousness* and *imagination* as with the manipulation of matter. Even in the alchemist's laboratory, featuring every manner of specialized and costly

106 A specific example of this metaphysical neutrality can be gleaned from Rāzī's report on two competing accounts, by practitioners, for the efficacy of sacrifices and suffumigations during the planetary ascent ritual: those who maintain that the planets are sensitive, characterised by the passions of desire and aversion, insist that the planets take delight in such offerings; those who do not hold to this position simply assert their effectiveness on the basis of *tajriba*—repeated experience. See Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 123.

107 Sirāj al-Dīn Abū Ya'qūb al-Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil wa'l-baḥr al-kāmil fī uṣūl al-ta'zīm wa-qawā'id al-tanjīm*, London, British Library, MS Delhi Arabic 1915b, f. 70b.

contraption, the elevation and purification of mind was normally prerequisite for the elevation and purification of matter.¹⁰⁸

In *al-Sirr*, Rāzī reports that it is in the fulfilment of the twelve conditions for practice of the talismanic science that the practitioner fostered precisely the kind of consciousness required to make connection with the celestial spirits. In these conditions, philosophical and scientific training, ethical behaviour, and receptivity to the spiritual world converge.¹⁰⁹ For the talismanic science—unlike the practice of modern laboratory science—the precise control of the psychological conditions of the practitioner’s soul was just as important as that of the external conditions for a successful operation. And often those conditions to which he subjected his soul were extreme and protracted:

[h]ence premodern Muslim occultists’ stringent requirement that one observe total seclusion, ritual purity, constant vigil, frequent prayer, astrological obedience and a minimal vegetarian diet when carrying out an operation, for weeks, months or even years on end—this is to achieve an altered, extreme state of consciousness in which experimental designs, or even new sciences, may be delivered through dreams and visions. And hence the perennial insistence by practising mages of all traditions as to the particular magical effectiveness of operations that are grisly, including both animal and human sacrifice.¹¹⁰

Involving lunacy, a Venusian orgy, and Martian human sacrifice and cannibalism, nowhere does this become more evident than in the ritual of planetary ascent.

The present study is interested in analysing the philosophical theory of the talismanic science that Rāzī formulates in *al-Sirr* and proceeds to explore how his meditations thereon influenced the counter-Avicennan prophethology and soteriology of his late philosophical-theological summa *al-Maṭālib*. It is for this reason that it will focus on a limited range of Rāzī’s works. These works will be consulted for two reasons: to illuminate proofs in *al-Sirr* which are expressed in a condensed or obscure way; and to accumulate evidence in support of the claim that the work before us is indeed the work to which Rāzī referred as his own in *Sharḥ al-Ishārat*. Works consulted will be those most fully engaging with Avicennan thought such as the *Sharḥ al-Ishārat*, and *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, both written just after he wrote *al-Sirr*. With this same aim, we will also turn to other Avicennan works such as *al-Shifā’*, and works accepted as Avicennan at the time of Rāzī, such as *Aḥwāl al-Nafs*. To explore the Perfect

108 Matthew Melvin-Koushki, “Is (Islamic) Occult Science Science?” *Theology and Science* 18/2 (2020): pp. 1–22, at p. 14.

109 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 5–6.

110 Melvin-Koushki, “Is (Islamic) Occult Science Science?” p. 14.

Nature doctrine, we shall examine the relevant passage from Abū'l-Barakāt's *Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*. And since key Sabian doctrines which feature in *al-Sirr* were to be subsequently integrated into the systematising thought of Rāzī's later soteriology, we shall focus our attention on *al-Maṭālib* 8.

Since he was one of the most prolific authors in Islamic intellectual history, modern scholarship on whom is only at an early explorative stage, a broader investigation into the development of Rāzī's thought throughout his oeuvre relating to such issues as secondary causality, anthropology, the quiddity of soul and perception, epistemology and mental existence—all of which are important themes in Rāzī's talismanic theory—will clearly fall beyond the limits of this study's scope. Its focus also precludes it from pursuing a number of other very valuable approaches, all of which will have to remain for now *desiderata*. It will add nothing to the inquiry into the historical origins of the Sabians and their broader development as a trope in Jewish, Christian and Muslim theology in the Islamic world. It will not investigate in detail the occult sources which Rāzī used to write his technical account, in particular, the Arabic Hermetica including the Pseudo-Aristotelian subgenre.¹¹¹ Nor will it analyse the ways in which his understanding of the technical aspects of the talismanic craft matured and developed by the time he came to write *al-Maṭālib*. Nor will it examine the obvious relationship between the Sabian religion that Rāzī depicts, and the mystery religions of late Antiquity, especially that which is evidenced in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, particularly the *Asclepius*.¹¹² Nor will it pursue the history of the Perfect Nature doctrine before Rāzī, including: (1) its obvious affinities with the Platonic concept of the personal *daimon*; (2) its appearance in the Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica and subsequent inclusion in *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* in close association with the Sabians, and ritual invocation of the planets.¹¹³ Lastly, a much-needed critical edition, full translation and study of *al-Sirr*'s reception will all have to await future scholarly attention.

As an examination of how one of the greatest minds of the Islamic world “philosophised the occult,” this study will demonstrate that—whether it elicited

111 On which, see Kevin van Bladel, *Hermes Arabicus* (PhD Dissertation: University of Yale, 2004) pp. 303–334.

112 See Charles Burnett, “The Establishment of Medieval Hermeticism,” in *The Medieval World*, eds. Peter Linehan, Janet L. Nelson and Marios Costambeys (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 111–30.

113 On the nexus between astrology and the personal *daimon*, see Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology: Origins and Influence*, Ancient Magic and Divination 11 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016). For the Perfect Nature in *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*, see Maslama Ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *Picatrix: Das Ziel des Weisen*, ed. Helmut Riiter (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1933), pp. 187–194.

approval or condemnation—occult science was indeed an important aspect of Islamic intellectual history, and the object of profound and open rational engagement. Commenting on the creative dialogue between religion and science, F. Jamil Ragep observes:

That religion played a role in Islamic science—perhaps even a crucial role—should not surprise us. What is surprising, especially to a Western audience in the twenty-first century, is that the role was not simply one of opposition and obstruction but rather, at least sometimes, of constructive engagement. I hope I will not be misunderstood as being an apologist for religion if I make the historical observation that religious attacks on aspects of science and philosophy in both Islam and Christendom led to a more critical attitude toward scientific and philosophical doctrines and that this often resulted in some interesting and even productive outcomes. This has been a point increasingly accepted by historians of European science, and one that would greatly help Islamists, and those who write on Islam, to understand the complexity of the interaction of secular and religious knowledge in Islamic civilization.¹¹⁴

Ragep's general observation on religion's engagement with science holds equally true, *mutatis mutandis*, for Rāzī's philosophising the occult.

114 F. Jamil Ragep, "Freeing Astronomy from Philosophy: An Aspect of Islamic Influence on Science." *Osiris 16 Science in Theistic Contexts: Cognitive Dimensions* (2001): pp. 49–71, at p. 64.

Chapter 2

Sabians

The alternative Sabian soteriology depicted in *al-Sirr* enshrined the perfection of knowledge and power, the central theme of the general introduction to the work. In Rāzī's thought, "Sabians" (*al-ṣābi'a*), whose historicity was not a central concern for Rāzī, represented a generic term denoting the adherents of any form of learned astrolatrous paganism, such as those who constituted the ancient civilizations of the Greeks, the Chinese, the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians and the Indians.¹

After examining the central theme of the general introduction to *al-Sirr*, this chapter will present an overview of Sabian belief and practice as presented in the work, supplemented by a brief exploration of their depiction in Rāzī's commentary on the Qur'ān, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*. From these two works will emerge the shape of the Sabian religious construct which represented the oldest religion of Man, with antediluvian origins, rooted in the observation of the natural rhythms of the cosmos. Thereafter, I shall briefly examine the use of Indian spiritual practice in the shaping of Rāzī's Sabian construct.

2.1 The Justification for the Study of Occult Knowledge

Praise is due to God whose knowledge encompasses and whose wisdom penetrates all things; and prayers and blessings on the prophet of mercy, the intercessor for the community, Muḥammad, and on his pure family. This book gathers together whatever has reached us of the science of talismans, magical operations (*siḥriyyāt*), evocations (*'azā'im*) and planetary invocation (*da'wat al-kawākib*), whilst disavowing all that is opposed to the faith, the peace of religious certainty (*salm al-yaqīn*) and reliance on the benevolence of the Merciful.²

1 A synonym for this term might be "masters of talismans" (*aṣḥāb al-ṭilasmāt*), whose views on the celestial spirits Rāzī records in *al-Maṭālib* 7, in a chapter entitled: "a report on what the talisman masters said concerning the attributes of the high celestial spirits," which reports the views of the Greeks, the Chinese and especially the Indians: see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-īlāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 7 pp. 387–395.

2 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shirāzī lithograph, undated), p. 2.

The concise exordium of *al-Sirr* represents a general panegyric of knowledge and wisdom. Appropriately the traditional pious opening passage begins with praise of God “whose knowledge encompasses and whose wisdom penetrates all things.” Implicit in this prayer is a proleptic defence of the subject material he is about to treat, material that might appal the pietistic Muslim: “the science of talismans, magical operations (*siḥriyyāt*), evocations (*‘azā‘im*) and planetary invocation (*da‘wat al-kawākib*).”

This implicit proleptic defence argues that since God’s knowledge embraces all things, no knowledge should be deemed accursed; since God’s wisdom infuses all, nothing can be said to be created in vain. And since this science invokes the intervening power of spiritual beings (*rūḥāniyyāt*), by the will of the adept, to achieve intended effects in the world of generation and corruption, Rāzī, emphatically asserting his own Islamic confessional commitment, appropriately invokes blessings on the prophet of mercy in his capacity as the true intercessor between God and the Muslim community.³

Al-Sirr is offered as as a compendium of magical theory and practice that “compiles together whatever has reached us” (*kitāb yajma‘ fīhi mā waṣala ilaynā*) concerning talismans. He adopts the tone of a neutral observer, whose Islamic confessional commitments do not intrude much into the presentation; the passages in which Rāzī defends Islamic—and specifically Ash‘arī—theology against the claims of the masters of talismans are rare, relatively brief and do not detract from the main purpose of the work. Rāzī is explicit and robust in his

³ In his use of the the word *rūḥāniyyāt*, Rāzī is heir to a venerable Arabic tradition, beginning in the period of Graeco-Arabic transmission, during the early ‘Abbasid Caliphate. Gerhard Endress observes that the use of the word in occult texts may have influenced its use in the translation of philosophical texts:

In the pseudo-Aristotelian Neoplatonic texts, translated in the Kindī circle, *rūḥānī* serves as an equivalent of ἀσώματος, but denoting in particular the realm of the intelligible ‘spiritual’ beings that in the monotheistic interpretation of ancient texts take the place of the Greek Gods. The theological dimension of the word, adapting it to convey, instead of the apophatic predicates of a ‘negative’ theology, a positive, emphatic concept, was inherent in Greek πνευματικός, Syriac *rūḥāyā*, *rūḥānāyā* and was highlighted by the Christian Arabic, and then, in the Koranic usage of the Arabic *rūḥ*. On the other hand, the connotations of *rūḥ*, *rūḥānī*, *al-rūḥāniyyūn*, in the early Arabic tradition of gnostic, magical and alchemical speculation—under the influence of the gnostic dualism of πνεῦμα vs. σῶμα as well as of the Neoplatonic model of emanation—may have influenced the usage of the word in the translations of philosophical texts at an early period. [See Gerhard Endress, “Platonizing Aristotle: The Concept of ‘Spiritual’ (*rūḥānī*) as a Keyword of the Neoplatonic Strand in Early Arabic Aristotelianism,” *Studia graeco-arabica*, 2 (2012): pp. 265–280, in particular p. 270].

“disavowal of all that is opposed to the faith” (*ma‘a al-tabarrī*’ ‘*an kull mā yukhālīf al-dīn*). With this disavowal, Rāzī acknowledges the controversial nature of the material which he presents and anticipates the confusion with which subsequent Islamic theologians received it.

Knowledge, according to the general exordium of *al-Sirr*, is the means by which the rational human soul is delivered from the darkness of material reality and corporeal desire, which veil the soul from perceiving reality as it is. In knowledge and wisdom is the soul’s ennoblement; in engrossment in sublunary reality lies its utter ruin:

Knowledge (*al-‘ilm*) is the <very> life of the rational soul drawing out the heart from the darkness of nature (*al-ṭabī‘a*) which has enshrouded living souls and veiled them from the world of life with the ornaments of nature that are ruinous for he who conceives not the realities and is not honoured with knowledge (*lā yataṣawwir al-ḥaqā‘iq wa-yatasharraf bi’l-‘ilm*).⁴

To amplify this, Rāzī relies not on Islamic authorities but the pre-Islamic Greek sages. According to a saying attributed to Socrates, the wise have:

[. . .] asserted the living soul is the vessel of wisdom, and denied that it is to be found in scrolls and books. For it is pure, living, holy, incorruptible, containing neither filth nor mortal pollution. It cannot be entrusted to aught but living souls, untouched by moribund flesh. Souls are fortified with wisdom just as bodies are fortified with eating and drinking. Wisdom washes souls from the filth and impurities of nature as clothes which are washed in a basin. When the soul knows wisdom, it yearns and longs for the world of life; inclines towards the rejection of natural base desires, which are fatal to living souls; and escapes from the captivity of nature and its condition by which the people of <this> world are bound (*al-shahawāt al-ṭabī‘iyya al-mumīta li’l-nufūs al-ḥayya wa-najat min asr al-ṭabī‘a wa-ḥālatihā allatī qad ta‘allaqa ahl al-‘ālam bihā*).⁵

Wisdom is living; it does not dwell in inanimate books but the soul of the one that inclines towards it. Wisdom nourishes the soul; purifies it of filth; and secures its salvation from captivity in the world of gross materiality. By the following words, attributed to Hippocrates, the reader is exhorted, in the strongest possible terms, to embody its reality:

The wise man is not he who knows the path but then swerves away from it, donning the robe of ignorance; nor does he find <eternal> life who does not strive for the salvation of his soul (*wa-laysa yaḥyā man lam yas‘a fī najāt nafsihi*). A <final> death in <bodily> decomposition (*al-mawt fī’l-bilā*) is better for the ignorant man than life <after physical> death: for when the vices of nature (*radhā‘il al-ṭabī‘a*) attach themselves to the soul and bind it in

4 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

5 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

their snare, then it dies death after death, and endures pain upon pain, and perhaps may remain bound, never to find salvation from it (*wa-rubbamā baqīyat marbūṭatan lā tanjū minhā*). If the captive prefers the humiliation of his captivity to the glory of salvation and liberation (*al-najāt wa'l-khalās*), contenting himself with that which is worthless, then for him a <final> death would <indeed> be a peaceful repose *crāḥa*.⁶

Nothing could be of more concern to man's immortal soul than the pursuit of knowledge. For in it lies his salvation and liberation from the pain and suffering of embodiment. Knowledge is a soteriological enterprise.

Of all fields of inquiry, occult knowledge has the highest virtue. According to its masters, as reported by Rāzī, occult astral knowledge is the pinnacle of human intellectual endeavour, combining the most dignified knowledge with the greatest power that can be wielded:

The masters of this knowledge combined the pleasure (*ladhdha*) of possessing the noblest knowledge with the pleasure of the noblest kind of power (*ashraf al-'ulūm wa-ashraf anwā' al-qudra*). As for the pleasure of <this> knowledge, it is because this knowledge guides you (*yuwaffīquka*) to the mysteries of the higher and lower worlds (*asrār al-'ālam al-a'lā wa-asrār al-'ālam al-asfal*); indeed it transforms you such that you become a witness unto the spiritual beings, their interlocutor—indeed one of their company and one of their like (*yaj'aluka bi-ḥayth taṣīr mushāhidan li'l-rūḥāniyyāt wa-mukhāṭiban lahum bal mukhtaliṭan bihim wa-ka-wāḥidin min amthālihim*). As for the pleasure of power, it is because <practitioners> are empowered to perform all objects of desire, including curing difficult illnesses which defy the expertise of doctors, such as leprosy, paralysis and obsessive love, for they enlist the aid of spiritual beings whilst doctors use corporeal means (*jismāniyyāt*): and spiritual means (*rūḥāniyyāt*) are stronger than the corporeal, without a doubt. Moreover, the master of this knowledge is empowered to subdue his enemy without engaging in war and exposing himself to combat.⁷

The object of this most noble knowledge is the arcana of the higher and lower worlds and how the spirits which inhabit the former effect the generation and corruption of temporally originated phenomena (*ḥawādith*) in the latter.⁸ These spirits, referred to alternatively, but inconsistently, as *'arwāḥ*' (sing. *rūḥ*) or *'rūḥāniyyāt*', are the denizens of the celestial spheres. In *al-Sirr*, Rāzī co-ordinates these celestial spirits with the angels of the Islamic revelation.⁹

6 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

7 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 3.

8 Rāzī often speaks of the “nobility” (*sharaf*) bestowed on the one who possess knowledge. Compare for instance the first chapter of his epistemological introduction to *al-Maṭālib* in which he explores the “nobility of knowledge” (*sharaf al-'ilm*) (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 1, pp. 37–41).

9 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 109–110.

A corollary of this occult knowledge is pleasure (*ladhdha*): the perfection of the soul is a simple primary end, sought for its own sake, the pursuit of which engenders its own pleasure. Its result is the ontological transformation of the knowing subject such that he becomes: “a witness unto the spiritual beings, their interlocutor—indeed one of their company and one of their like.” From Rāzī’s perspective, the claim made by the masters of this occult knowledge to such a transformation constitutes a claim to angelomorphosis. By means of this transformational knowledge, the adept is represented as being able to enlist the aid of the celestial spirits to act in ways in the sublunary world which are stronger and superior to those who act by means of the corporeal. In so doing, he is liberated from engrossment in material reality and raised to the rank of the celestial angels.

2.2 Sabians in *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*

Just as he did in *al-Sirr*, so Rāzī treats the Sabians in his highly influential Qur’ānic commentary *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* as a heresiological category comprising a wide range of historical groups and nations and theologically distinct positions.¹⁰ But in the attempt to place them within a hierarchy of religions, Rāzī’s *al-Tafsīr* equivocates between designating them as privileged *ahl al-kitāb* (“people of the book”) and relegating them to an intermediary status between this dignified category and that of degenerate polytheists.

2.2.1 Sabians as People of the Book

The Sabians are mentioned explicitly on just three occasions in the Qur’ān. The first appears in the second *sūra*: “Surely they that believe, and the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians who believe in God and the Last Day, and who works righteousness—their wage awaits them with their Lord and no fear shall be on them; neither shall they sorrow.”¹¹

Commenting on the identity of the Sabians in this verse, Rāzī gathers three opinions. The first defines the *ṣābi*’ as one who “abandons his religion

¹⁰ All references to Rāzī’s *Tafsīr* will be to: *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-mushtahar bi’l-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), in 32 vols.

¹¹ Qur’ān, 2:62.

for another”: thus, did the Arabs call Muḥammad, who manifested a religion contrary to theirs.¹² The second opinion cited provides detail as to their beliefs:

As for the second <opinion>, Qatāda said: “they are a people who worship the angels and pray to the Sun five times a day.” He also said: “Religions are of five <types>, four of which belong to Satan and one of which belongs to the Merciful. <The four are>: the Sabians who worship the angels; the Magians who worship fire; those who commit polytheism, worshipping idols; and the Jews and Christians.”¹³

In this second opinion the Sabians, who like Muslims observe five daily prayers, but who unlike them direct their worship to angels and pray to the Sun, are accorded an intermediary position which lies between the honoured status of the People of the Book and the depravity of idolaters. This intermediary status in the religious hierarchy is maintained in the third opinion concerning the Sabians, an opinion which Rāzī himself adopts:

The third <opinion>, which is the closest <to the truth>, is that they are a people who worship the planets (*al-kawākib*) and they are associated with one of two theological positions (*thumma lahum qawlān*): the first is that the Creator of the world is God—exalted is He!—except that He enjoined the magnification (*ta’zīm*) of these planets, and that they should provide the direction of prayer, supplication and magnification. The second <of their theological positions> is that God—exalted is He!—created the spheres and the planets, but it is the planets which govern this world, both its good and evil, its sound health and disease, and that it is they which indeed created it; thus it behoves Man to venerate them, for they are the gods which govern this world but which worship God—exalted is He! This doctrine (*madhhab*) is the position attributed to the Chaldeans whom Abraham – upon whom be peace – came to refute and whose doctrine he came to repudiate.¹⁴

This third opinion thus collapses the three categories of Sabians we encounter in *al-Sirr* into two groups. The first asserts the existence of the Creator who enjoins on them the magnification of the planets—their veneration of the planets is thus the fulfilment of a divine injunction. The religion of the second group is more degenerate in nature. For them the planets are the creators and governors of this world: since man is hostage to their caprices, they are to be worshipped as gods in their own right. The link between God and man, the former being too transcendent to be the object of the latter’s attentions, is severed. Thus, whilst for the first group of Sabians the planets provide the focus of veneration, for

¹² Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 3, p.112. For the medieval Islamic sources which support variations on this interpretation, see Sinasi Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life: The Origins and Early History of the Mandaean and Their Relation to the Sabians of the Qur’ān and to the Harranians*, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 17–19.

¹³ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol 3, pp. 112–113.

¹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol 3, p. 112–113.

the second group they are the very objects of worship.¹⁵ This second group is explicitly identified as the Chaldeans, the very community in which Abraham was raised and whose religion he was divinely commissioned to repudiate, just as Muḥammad was commissioned to repudiate the religion of Mecca's Arabs. The Chaldeans are thus a specific subcategory of Sabian.

Rāzī mentions the Sabians elsewhere in *al-Tafsīr* in his exegesis of Qur'ān 22:17, where he includes the Sabians amongst the Muslims, Jews and Christians, who believe in the Creator as a “choosing agent” (*fā'il mukhtār*)—as opposed to the Avicennan emanationist God—and who follow the teachings of the divinely inspired prophets.¹⁶ This category of believers is contrasted with those who follow false prophets, such as the Magians (*Maḡūs*), and with those who reject the very notion of prophethood, namely the idolaters, the polytheists and the Brahmins (*al-barāhima*). Presumably, therefore, the prophet whom the Sabians followed was divinely inspired. And yet somehow their belief in prophethood is deeply compromised, and the divine revelation in which the Sabian religion is rooted enjoys a lesser status to that of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims.

Rāzī's Qur'ānic exegesis is thus ambivalent towards the Sabians. On the one hand they are categorised as People of the Book, who believe in a Creator possessed of volition, and affirm prophethood; the religions of the People of the Book are set in opposition to those of the polytheists, of whom the Indian Brahmins are representative, who have no revealed religion and deny prophethood. On the other hand, there are those amongst the Sabians, namely the Chaldeans to whom Abraham preached, whose religion is pure astrolatry.

¹⁵ Elsewhere in *al-Tafsīr*, when discussing astrolaters in general (not Sabians in particular), Rāzī says:

As for those engaged in the worship of things other than God, their creeds are many. They include those who worship the planets. Such people fall into two categories. There are those who maintain that God—exalted is He!—created the planets to which He delegated the government of the lower world; so the planets are the governors of this world and they say that it is necessary to worship these planets; the spheres and planets then worship God and obey Him <in their turn>. Others who are more extreme deny the Creator and maintain that the spheres and the planets are by their very nature necessarily existent, their non-existence and their cessation being impossible; they govern the conditions of the lower world. Such are pure *Dahriyya*. Those who worship other than God include the Christians, who worship the Messiah, and also the worshippers of idols (*'abadat al-aṣnām*) (Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol 13, p. 38).

¹⁶ See Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 23, p. 19 for commentary on Qur'ān 22:17: “As for the believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians and the polytheists—God shall judge between them on the Day of Resurrection.”

2.2.2 Aetiology of Idolatry

Rāzī is not content merely to condemn idolatry as abominable polytheism. He wants to understand why any rational human soul would be seduced by such a practice. So, it is the people of Noah, the first people to have adopted idolatry, to whom he turns for his exploration of the phenomenon. Reflecting on the idolatrous abominations of the community to which the patriarch was sent to reform, Rāzī asserts that “there is no religion older than idolatry” (*lā dīn aqdam min ‘abdat al-aṣnām*).¹⁷ He observes the fact that it is self-evident that a graven image which human hand has wrought cannot be the creator of that same human hand. What, asks Rāzī, can be the rationality that explains idolatry? He says the most likely explanation (*al-ta’wīl al-aqwā*)¹⁸ is that:

People saw the changes in the conditions of the lower world as being contingent on changes in the conditions of the planets (*marbūṭa bi-taghayyurāt aḥwāl al-kawākib*). For the four seasons are occasioned by either the Sun’s proximity or distance from the zenith, and by reason of the changing of the four seasons different conditions are brought about in this world. Then people observed the conditions of the other planets (*aḥwāl sārīr al-kawākib*) and so began to believe that states of felicity and affliction were connected to the way in which the planets were positioned in relation to people’s ascendant signs [i.e., at the time of their birth]. So when they began to believe this, most people were led to suppose (*ghalaba ‘alā ḡunūn akthar al-khalq*) that the principle cause of events which come to be in this world was the celestial applications and the planetary correspondences

17 Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 13, p.38. Exception must be made, presumably, for the religion of Adam.

18 In the same passage Rāzī mentions two other explanations which he finds less compelling. The first he quotes on the authority of Abu Ma’shar whom he reports as saying:

Many of the people of China and India affirmed the existence of the Deity and angels except that they used to believe that He—may He be exalted—is a body of the most beautiful form and that the angels also have beautiful forms except they are veiled from us by the heavens. And so it follows that they took for themselves images and statues of exquisite shape and form (Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 13, p. 39).

As for the second, Rāzī says:

they believe that God—exalted is He—delegated the government of everything within the climes to an angel and that He delegated the government of every division of each of the world’s dominions to a heavenly spirit (*rūḥ samāwī*). Thus they say the governor of the seas is an angel; the governor of mountains is another angel; the governor of the clouds and the rains is an angel; the governor of provision is an angel; the governor of war and fighting is an angel. Since they believed this, they took for each angel a specific idol and temple constructing each idol with that which is appropriate for the celestial spirit (Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol 13, p. 39).

(*al-ittiṣālāt al-falakiyya wa'l-munāsabāt al-kawkabiyya*). When they adopted that belief, they exerted their utmost in the magnification <of the planets>.¹⁹

By means of direct observation, Rāzī's idolaters come to associate the Sun's distance from the zenith with the changing of the seasons in the sublunary world and therefore go on to posit a causal link between the two phenomena. They then extend this reasoning to the movements of the other heavenly bodies, surmising that the fortunes of individuals are determined by the configurations of the planets at the time of their birth. They then draw the conclusion that sublunary events are caused by the configurations of the planets to which veneration is owed. The arc of Rāzī's presentation of the justification of astrology in the second treatise of *al-Sirr* is determined by the same logical trajectory.

The same passage in *al-Tafsīr* continues: "Then, there were those amongst them who believed <the planets> were by their very essence necessarily existent (*wājibat al-wujūd li-dhawātihā*). Others believed <the planets> were contingent, being created by the Greatest God, but who nevertheless governed the conditions of this world; thus did they assert belief in mediators between the Greatest God and changing conditions in the <sublunary> world."²⁰

Whilst the theological position that Rāzī attributes to the first group represents the most degenerate form of polytheism, the position of the second group most closely resembles that of Abraham's Chaldeans who worshipped the heavenly bodies as divine mediators with an utterly transcendent God. Returning to the idolaters of Noah, Rāzī says:

Irrespective of these two suppositions, they preoccupied themselves in the worship and magnification of <the planets>. But when they saw that they would disappear from sight for most of the time, they took for each planet an idol wrought from material, the essence of which corresponded to it (*min al-jawhar al-mansūb ilayhi*).²¹ So for the Sun they

¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol 13, p. 39. This passage is a repetition of what appears in *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 123.

²⁰ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 13, p. 39.

²¹ The practical measure of adopting idols to serve as the focus of worship when the planets had disappeared from sight is explicitly attributed to the Sabians by Rāzī in his *I'tiqādāt firaq al-muslimīn wa'l-mushrikīn* ("Beliefs of Muslim and Polytheist Sects") where he says the Sabians are:

[. . .] a people who say that the governor and creator of the world is the seven planets and the stars. They are worshippers of the heavenly bodies. When God sent Abraham on his prophetic mission, the people were following the religion of the Sabians [. . .] Know that their worship of idols was an innovation in their religion. For, they used to worship the stars when they rose and when they wanted to worship them when they had set, they had no choice but to fashion images and likenesses of the planets. So, they wrought idols and devoted themselves to their worship and from there emerged the worship of the

adopted an idol wrought of gold, adorning it with precious stones corresponding to the Sun, namely rubies and diamonds. Observing the same principle, they adopted for the Moon an idol wrought of silver. Thus they turned themselves in worship of these idols, their objective being the worship of the planets and the pursuit of their favour. In light of this examination, it becomes clear that the original intention behind idolatry is the worship of the planets.²²

Like the philosophers and the Sabian practitioners of the talismanic craft described in *al-Sirr*, Noah's idolaters conclude by way of empirical observation that the heavenly bodies determine change in the sublunary world. Moreover, the planetary idols they fashion are wrought of metals and jewels which correspond to the planet which is the object of veneration. The resemblance of idol to talisman becomes clearer.²³

This explanation for the development of idolatry also appears in Rāzī's commentary on Qur'ān 2:22. To it, however, he adds an observation that explicitly links idolatry to talismanic magic. He says:

Astrologers (*aṣḥāb al-aḥkām*) used to avail themselves of certain astrological times which would occur only after long intervals such as one or two thousand years; and they used to claim that whoever struck a talisman at that time in a specific way would derive benefit from it in certain ways, enjoying felicity or fertility or the repulsion of disasters. So when they wrought that talisman, they would venerate it, believing that they were deriving

planets [Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *I'tiqādāt firaq al-muslimīn wa'l-mushrikīn*, ed. 'Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār (Cairo: Maktaba al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1938), p. 90].

²² Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 13, p. 39.

²³ The passage continues to describe the responses of the prophets to the reasoning underpinning idolatry:

As for the prophets—peace be upon them—they had in this regard a number of responses. One was to establish proof that the planets exert no effect at all on conditions in this world, as God—exalted is He—said: “His is the creation, His is the Command” (Qur'ān 7:54), having made clear that the planets have been made subject (to His Command). The second is that the planets, whilst they do exert effects on this world, display all the evidence of contingency and therefore they must be created and thus engagement in the worship of the Principle is more fitting than engagement in the worship of that which is subordinate (*al-ishtighāl bi-'ibādat al-aṣl awlā min al-ishtighāl bi-'ibādat al-far'*) so the evidence indicates that what results is the religion of idolatry as we have mentioned [. . .] thus it is clear that the doctrine of idolatry cannot be refuted unless the belief in the Sun, the Moon and the other planets as gods which govern this world is refuted (Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 13, p. 39).

As we shall later examine, Rāzī explores these responses when he examines in detail the beliefs of the Sabians in the fourth treatise of *al-Sirr*.

benefit from it. So when they exaggerated their veneration it became like worship and with the passage of time they forgot the original purpose and busied themselves in the worship of <talismans> out of ignorance.²⁴

2.2.3 Sabian Idols as Talismans

Discussing the idolatrous Chaldean Sabian community in which Abraham was raised and whose polytheism he repudiated, Rāzī writes:

They were rational people and therefore knew, of necessity, that they [i.e., their idols] were inanimate objects (*jāmidāt*). However, perhaps it was the case that they used to believe they were statues of the planets (*tamāthil al-kawākib*), and that they were talismans (*ṭilasmāt*) wrought in such a way that they would bring benefit to anyone who worshipped them, and bring grievous harm to anyone who would scorn them.²⁵

Elsewhere, Rāzī reinforces the association he makes between idols and talismans during his exegesis of Qurʾān 6:80, which describes Abraham remonstrating

24 Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 2, pp. 123–124. In the same passage, Rāzī speaks of the astral idolatry of the Greeks before Alexander:

Know that before the conquests of Alexander the practice of the Greeks was to build for themselves temples, which were named after the spiritual powers and the luminary bodies each of which they adopted as objects of worship. There was the temple of the First Cause—which was for them the Divine Command—the temple of the Pure Intellect (*ʿaql ṣarīḥ*); and the temple of Absolute Governance (*al-siyāsa al-muṭlaqa*); the temple of the soul and form; all of them were circular. The Temple of Saturn was hexagonal; Jupiter’s was triangular; Mars’ was rectangular; the Sun’s was square; the <external shape of the> temple of Venus was triangular but its internal shape was square; the <external shape of the> Temple of Mercury was triangular whilst its internal shape was rectangular; the Temple of the Moon was octagonal (Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 125).

This passage draws from *al-Milal waʾl-niḥal* of Shahrastānī whose understanding of the Sabians as a religious category clearly influences Rāzī’s presentation in *al-Tafsīr*. See ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sharastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal waʾl-niḥal*, eds. ‘Abd al-Amīr ‘Alī Mahna & ‘Alī Ḥasan Fā’ūr (Beirut: Dār al-Maʾrifa, 1993), p. 368. For how *kaldānī* and *kasdānī* came to be Arabic appellations for “Chaldeans,” see Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Waḥshiyya and his Nabatean Agriculture* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 48.

25 Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol 22, p. 183. Rāzī’s identification of the community to which Abraham preached as Sabian is confirmed in his *Iʿtiqādāt*: see Rāzī, *Iʿtiqādāt firaq al-muslimin waʾl-mushrikīn*, p. 90.

with his native community whose religion was one of idolatrous astrolatry.²⁶ Commenting on Abraham saying: “I have no fear of your idol worship,” Rāzī says:

They tried to strike in him fear of their idols [. . .] but fear only arises in relation to someone who can either cause benefit or harm; idols, being inanimate objects, are impotent, incapable of bringing about benefit or harm, so how could fear of them ever arise? Were it said there is no doubt that talismans exert special effects, why then should it not be possible that fear of them should arise in this respect? We respond by saying: the power of a talisman depends on the influences of the planets and we have demonstrated that the power of the planets to influence only occurs by the creation of God—exalted is He—so only God in reality can be the object of hope and fear.²⁷

The Sabians as a category occupy an ambiguous position within the religious hierarchy which mediates between pure idolatry and the revealed Abrahamic religions. Their practice was one of astrolatry. Grounded in the belief that the movements of the heavenly bodies determine change in the sublunary world, their worship focused on planetary statues which, acting as talismans, could direct planetary influence in accordance with their will. Their antediluvian religious practice was identical to that of the idolaters to whom Noah preached. Theirs was the oldest religion in world.

The construct of the Sabian religion, as evidenced in both *al-Sirr* and *al-Tafsīr*, thus challenged the following Islamic theological beliefs: that there is only one Necessarily Existent; that all besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible; that all possibles are originated in time; that nothing has agency except God; and that only prophets can receive revelation.

2.3 Sabians and Indians

It was the figure of Ṭumṭum al-Hindī which provided Rāzī with the necessary solder to weld together the cosmology of Abu Ma’shar and the psychology of Avicenna to forge the idol of Sabian religion. As we shall discover in chapter 5, Ṭumṭum al-Hindī is the authority cited by Rāzī for the images of the starless sphere, so crucial for the process of forging a talisman in the account that appears in *al-Sirr* 3:1; he is also the authority for the fullest description of the

²⁶ “His people disputed with him [i.e., Abraham]. He said: ‘Do you dispute with me about God now that He has guided me? I have no fear of your idol worship, unless my Lord intends some matter. My Lord encompasses all in His knowledge. Will you not reconsider?’” Qur’an 6:80.

²⁷ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 13, p. 62.

adept's meditative focus when performing occult ritual. For, Sabian soteriology lies at the point where macrocosm and microcosm meet. I shall now turn briefly to a few works in which Indic thought and practice came to be associated with Sabians. My intention is to bring into focus the utility of Indian religion, with its emphasis on meditative concentration, for understanding the Sabianism depicted in *al-Sirr*.

It was Pingree who first noted the occurrence of Sanskrit names in the Sabian planetary prayers transmitted in the tenth-century grimoire *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*.²⁸ He subsequently noted that these prayers appeared for the first time in the Arabic tradition recorded by ʿUmar Ibn al-Farrūkhān al-Ṭabarī; a less contaminated version is preserved in a mediaeval Latin translation.²⁹ Sometime in the ninth century, additions were made to the prayers recorded by al-Ṭabarī. In the original version, the planets were invoked by their Arabic names; in the version that is incorporated into the *Ghāyat*, Greek, Pahlavī, and importantly, Sanskrit names were added.³⁰ Pingree notes the similarity between the planetary rituals with which these prayers are associated in the *Ghāyat* and astrological ritual recorded in the Sanskrit *Yavanajātaka* of *Spujidhvaja*. He observes:

Among the earliest descriptions of the ceremonies (*grahapūjā*) performed in honour of the planets themselves is that preserved in the first *khaṇḍa* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāna*, a compilation from earlier sources apparently put together in the sixth century. In this are described the incenses, flowers, substances (for making images of the stellar deities), foods and drinks utilized in the rituals not only of the planets, but of the *nakṣatrāni* as well. The prayers are short invocations calling upon the planets by several of their names and epithets to be present. The similarities of such rituals to those used in the West are quite striking, though of course they are also thoroughly Indianized.³¹

28 David Pingree, "Some of the Sources of the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 43 (1980): pp. 1–15.

29 David Pingree, "Al-Ṭabarī on the Prayers to the Planets," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 44 (1993): pp. 105–117.

30 David Pingree, "The Sabians of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9 (2002): pp. 8–35, at p. 22.

31 David Pingree, "Some Sources of the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*," p. 12. Pingree adduces these planetary rituals as evidence of some kind of connection between Ḥarrān and India, without proof to support his restriction of the meaning of the term "Sabian," as it is used in the *Ghāyat*, to the pagans of Ḥarrān. On this point, see Van Bladel, *the Arabic Hermes*, pp. 115–118.

As for Shahrastānī, his chapter on Indian religion entitled *Ārā' al-hind* ('Opinions of the Indians'), in his *al-Milal wa'l-niḥal*, leads the reader to infer a close philosophical and theological affinity between Sabianism and Indian religion.³² The various categories of Sabian whose gradual decadence from worship of supracellular spiritual beings; to worship of the planets; to worship of idols; and finally into the self-deifying delusion of Pharaoh, provide the basic structure for his analysis of Indian religion.³³ Indeed this decadence of the Sabians is a theme which deeply informs the theory of the history of religions in Rāzī's *al-Tafsīr*, as already noted in the previous section. Of particular interest to the exploration of Rāzī's Sabians, is Shahrastānī's description of a certain sect of the Brahmins whom he designates as the masters of meditation and estimation (*aṣḥāb al-fikra wa'l-wahm*).³⁴

For these Brahmins, the practice of meditation (*fikr*) is given the utmost importance as the mediator between the sensible and intelligible worlds (*al-mutawassiṭ bayn al-maḥsūs wa'l-ma'qūl*); the means by which the forms of *sensibilia*, and the essences of *intelligibilia*, are apprehended; and the reservoir of knowledge derived from the two worlds (*mawrid al-'ilmayn min al-'ālamayn*). This being the case:

[. . .] they exert their utmost to divert the faculty of estimation (*al-wahm*) and their meditative focus (*al-fikr*) from sensible objects by means of rigorous spiritual disciplines and strenuous exertions. So when the meditating mind (*al-fikr*) is abstracted from this <sensible> world, that <intelligible> world discloses itself to it. Sometimes it is informed of occult

³² Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa'l-niḥal*, pp. 305–369. Bruce Lawrence observes: “Sabianism provides the organizing principle as well as the theological impetus for *Ārā' al-hind*. All the groups which Shahrastānī cites and all the data which he has gathered are related to the categories transposed from the earlier section on the Ḥarrānīan Sabians,” Bruce Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 74.

³³ Shahrastānī categorises Indian religion into five categories: the Brahmins; the people of the spiritual beings (*aṣḥāb al-rūḥāniyyāt*); the worshippers of the planets (*abadat al-kawākib*); the worshippers of idols (*abadat al-aṣnām*); the sages of India (*ḥukamā' al-hind*).

³⁴ Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa'l-niḥal*, pp. 604–605. For a full translation of and commentary on the relevant passage, see Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, pp. 44–45 and pp. 114–118. Lawrence translates “*aṣḥāb al-fikra wa'l-wahm*” as proponents of “meditation and imagination.” This translation overlooks the significance of *al-wahm*, in Avicennan psychology, as a faculty distinct from the imagination. This sect is not only the most accomplished in the use of meditation and the direction of the estimative faculty, but it is also “the most knowledgeable concerning the starless sphere” (*wa-hā'ulā'i a'lam minhum bi'l-falak*). The significance of this fact will only become apparent when we examine, in chapter 5, Rāzī's account in *al-Sirr* 3:1 of how to forge a talismanic idol, for which process, knowledge of the degrees of the starless sphere and their associated images is crucial. According to *al-Sirr*, this is a field in which the Indian Ṭuṭuṭ al-Hindī has particular expertise and for which he is cited as the main authority.

matters; sometimes it is empowered to withhold the rains; sometimes it can direct the estimative faculty to <strike> a living man dead in an instant. This possibility is not remote for the estimative faculty <can> wield an astonishing effect which acts on bodies.³⁵

Once the mind has been trained to a high level of meditative focus, it acquires both knowledge of occult matters, and the power to act directly on bodies and to influence souls: it can even influence the rain and kill a man remotely. The ability to perform such remarkable acts at a distance is by means of the *wahm*, or the estimative faculty, a mysterious internal sense faculty, crucial to human cognition, theorisation on which represents Avicenna's key innovation to Aristotelian psychology. Noted by Avicenna, and reproduced by Rāzī for the same purpose in *al-Sirr* 1:4, Shahrastānī adduces, as evidence of the operative power of the estimative faculty on the physical world, the reality of the Evil Eye, and the estimative faculty's vertiginous effect on a man walking on a high wall: “[. . .] is not the power of the Evil Eye (*iṣābat al-'ayn*) the action of the estimative faculty on an individual? Does not a man, walking along a high wall, instantly fall, though the steps which he takes are no longer than those which he takes on flat ground.”³⁶

Both examples are adduced by Avicenna, and reproduced by Rāzī for the same purpose in *al-Sirr* 1:4.³⁷

The power of heightened meditative focus, inculcated by spiritual discipline and a strict diet, to facilitate: (1) the cognition of intelligibilia; (2) communication with spiritual beings; and (3) controlling natural phenomena, is enjoyed not just by Rāzī's masters of the occult astral craft, as described in the first treatise of *al-Sirr*, but also by the *rishis* depicted by Gardīzī:

Some others connect a <true> sage with <the knowledge of> astronomy, medicine and the other sciences. They are all philosophers using their senses perpetually to that purpose. According to them, through hardship and great pain, one can reach a state in which one can see angels, converse with them, and derive benefit from them. They have produced books of sciences and arts. They say that through *sensibilia* they can rise to the conception of *intelligibilia* [. . .] They prepare their food of dates, plants and herbs, so that it

35 “*fa-yajtahidūna kull al-juhd ḥattā yuṣarrifū al-wahm wa'l-fikr 'an al-maḥsūsāt bi'l-riyādāt al-baligha wa'l-ijtihādāt al-mujahhada ḥattā idhā tajarrada al-fikr 'an hādihā al-'ālam tajallā lahu dhālika al-'ālam fa-rubbamā yukhbar 'an mughayyabāt al-aḥwāl wa-rubbamā yuqwā 'alā ḥabs al-amṭār wa-rubbamā yūqī' al-wahm 'alā rajul ḥayy fa-yaqtuluhu fi'l-ḥāl. wa-lā yustab'ad dhālika fa'inna li'l-wahm atharan 'ajīban fī taṣrīf al-aṣām wa'l-taṣarruf fi'l-nufūs.*” (Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa'l-niḥal*, p. 604). In order to convey the range of meanings conveyed by the word *fikr* as it is used in this passage, I have rendered it in three different ways: “meditation,” “meditative focus,” and “meditating mind.”

36 Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa'l-niḥal*, p. 605.

37 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 11. For further discussion, see section 6.4.

should be light for their senses. As they eat such plants all their life, their eyes become sharper and their hearts quicker in the uptake. They obtain what they wish, be it rain or wind, or hail; they bring down birds; or capture animals; or fly like birds.³⁸

But far more impressive than these accounts by either Shahrastānī or Gardizī of Indian meditative power is that attributed by Rāzī in *al-Sirr* to ʿUmṭum al-Hindī. It merits full quotation:

The meditator (*mufakkir*) abstains from sex. He does not fill his stomach. His gaze does not fall on aught but that on which he meditates (*yufakkir*). He does not seek anything other than that on which he meditates. He does not meditate on anything other than that genus (*jins*) to which the object of his meditation belongs: if it belongs to that of fire, then <his meditation> is fiery; if to water, then aqueous; if to air then it is aeric; if to earth then earthy. He inhales no air unless it resembles that on which he meditates. He does not move a limb unless it is in the pursuit of attaining the object of his meditation. He does not descend from the height of his meditation that he has reached except to seek respite. He does not gaze on the light of meditation itself (*lā yanẓur ilā nūr al-fikr bi-‘aynihi*); he does not gaze on anything except the centre-point of meditation (*markaz al-fikr*); no concern of his own affairs commands his attention like his meditation. He eats nothing that derives from an animal; he eats nothing that he fears may harm his meditation. This is the etiquette observed by the one who would ascend to the centre point of meditation (*hādihā adab al-murtaqī ilā markaz al-fikr*). As for he whose meditation has connected with the centre-point of meditation (*ammā man ittaṣala fikruhu bi-markaz al-fikr*), his meditation feeds him, waters him, brings slaves under his command, dispatches rain, lightning, thunder, lightning bolts and earthquakes. At this point, he is in command of the Earth’s elements, the spirits breeze over him (*ṣāfaḥathu al-arwāh*), his body becomes a dwelling place which he can alight in and depart from at will. He can visualise all species of noble forms, large and small (*taṣawwara bi-anwā‘ al-ṣuwar al-sharīfa fi’l-ṣiḡhar wa’l-kibar*); he will delight with marvellous spirits; and he will reach the ultimate goal that he sought. He who ascends to the centre point of meditation (*markaz al-fikr*), his passion (*‘ishq*) does not leave him until he descends from it.³⁹

If this passage is merely a Rāzian pastiche of genuine accounts of Indic spiritual practice, it is certainly rendered all the more convincing by such unusual and ostensibly technically-sounding language such as *markaz al-fikr* (“the centre point of meditation”) and *nūr al-fikr* (light of meditation). The following traits of ʿUmṭum’s idealised meditator resonate with the themes, raised in the introduction to *al-Sirr*, of asceticism and spiritual training which lead to

³⁸ Abū Sa‘īd ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ibn al-Ḍaḥḥāk Ibn Maḥmūd Gardizī, *Zayn al-Akhbār*, MS. King’s College, 213, Cambridge, translated by Vladimir Minorsky, in *Gardizī on India*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, quoted by Lawrence in *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, p.122.

³⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.16.

perfection of the soul and its control over physical reality: withdrawal from bodily pleasure; veganism; and complete and unwavering focus on the object of intent. Any use of the physical senses must serve this meditative focus. The objects of physical perception must: (a) share an elemental congenereity with the object of intent; and (b) must be closely associated in the cognition of the meditator with that shared element. Now, assuming that this process of meditation (*fikr*) is non-discursive, the meditator's cognitive association of physical object with that shared element must arise from such a level of mastery of natural philosophy as to be instinctual and immediate. The complete realisation of natural philosophical learning and meditative focus represents human perfection, whereby the soul, unshackled by the body, can roam wherever it wills; command men and nature; commune with numinous beings; and possess an occult knowledge of all forms and power over physical reality.

This blend of asceticism, spiritual training, meditative focus and mastery of natural philosophy is precisely what characterises the training of the Sabian adept who forges a talismanic idol in the account in *al-Sirr* 3:1. And the state of perfection attained by ʿUmṭum's meditator resembles that which is attained by the Sabian adept who completes the planetary ascent ritual, to whose command the celestial spheres yield. But the additional virtue of the Sabian adept is that, since he is working not only with the four elements of the sublunary world, but also with the intricate web of planetary correspondences on which earthly phenomena are contingent, his soul represents the point at which celestial and terrestrial realities meet.

Rāzī's inclusion of the Indian material, with its focus on meditative practice, represents an imaginative elaboration of the "active earthly psychic forces" employed by the talisman master to blend active celestial forces with sublunary, receptive elemental forces, the planetary correspondences (*munāsabāt*) of which are listed in such great detail in *al-Sirr* 2. To achieve this ability, these active psychic forces are trained using spiritual austerities, which will be the subject of section 6.7. Once trained to a sufficient degree, the adept is able to establish noetic connection with the celestial souls, the subject of chapter 7.

Chapter 3

Eight Sabian Doctrines

3.1 Introduction

In discussing the eight doctrines of the Sabians as presented in *al-Sirr* 4:1, which constitute the justification for astrolatry, we shall examine what rational arguments Rāzī chose to engineer in order to philosophise on the religion of the Sabians and explain the efficacy of their occult craft. The eight doctrines immediately precede Rāzī's presentation of the planetary ascent ritual in *al-Sirr* 4:2. The account assumes a spatially finite Ptolemaic-Avicennan cosmos, at the centre of which lies an unmoving earth, around which rotate seven concentric spheres, a planet being mounted on each. In ascending order, they are the spheres of: the Moon, followed by Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.¹ These in turn are nested within the sphere of the fixed stars, which is bounded by the starless outermost sphere, referred to in *al-Sirr* simply as "*al-falak*."² Of these doctrines, three are absolutely essential to the structure of the justification. They are: (1) the celestial spheres possess rational souls; (2) these souls understand the universal and the particular; and (3) they are the causes of all sublunary change. The remaining doctrines provide the rationale behind the practice of idol worship itself: the celestial spheres, being the proximate causes of all sublunary change and perceptive of it, are consequently deserving of human worship; and on account of the regular withdrawal of the planets from the ken of human vision, their idols can serve as the foci for veneration.

¹ For Rāzī's commentary on Avicenna's argument, in *al-Ishārāt*, against actually infinite space see Jon McGinnis, "Mind the Gap: the Reception of Avicenna's New Argument against Actually Infinite Space," in *Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies: Essays in Memory of Hossein Ziai*, eds. Ali Ghesissari, John Walbridge and Ahmed Alwishah (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017): pp. 272–305, in particular, pp. 278–281.

² On the debate concerning the existence of the outermost—or starless—sphere, see George Saliba, "Early Arabic critique of Ptolemaic Cosmology: A Ninth-Century Text on the Motion of the Celestial Spheres," *Journal of the History of Astronomy* 25 (1994): pp. 115–41. On Avicenna's works on Ptolemy's *Almagest*, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*, second edition (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 462–466. For a general presentation of Avicenna's cosmology and discussion of his commentary on Ptolemy's *Almagest*, entitled *Tahrīr al-Majisī*, see Damien Janos, "Moving the Orbs: Astronomy, Physics and Metaphysics, and the Problem of Celestial Motion According to Ibn Sinā," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 21 (2011): pp. 167–184.

In drawing on Avicenna to engineer his Sabian construct, Rāzī engages with a venerable Graeco-Arabic tradition that identified higher ontological principles, namely soul and intellect, as the causes of celestial motion.³ Animating—quite literally—the movement of each sphere was a soul which, like the human soul, was not only capable of mental acts such as imagination and estimation, but also of rational mental activity, being possessed of choice (*ikhtiyār*) and volition (*irāda*). It is with this latter kind of mental activity that, contemplating their higher ontological principles, the separate intellects, the celestial souls are driven by a desire to imitate the sublime objects of their contemplation. Corresponding closely to his theory of human psychology, the celestial souls could cognise the universals of the higher world, and apprehend the particulars of the lower world.⁴ Throughout his discussions of celestial motion, Avicenna consistently applies terms, such as imagination (*takhayyul*) and estimation (*tawahhum*), to the celestial souls' cognitive acts which, in his psychological discussion, are closely associated with faculties that reside in corporeal substrates. This, as Damien Janos observes, “[. . .] underscores their close relation to their material substrate, to the point that they are described as ‘corporeal’ souls, or souls entangled with matter.”⁵ Their possession of both rational and physically localised faculties accounts for how their contemplation of the perfection of the eternal separated intellects is transmitted into perpetual celestial motion, comprising particular movements, all driven by a desire for mimesis of the higher principles:

It is out of intellectual desire (*shawq*), will (*irāda*), and choice (*ikhtiyār*)—three concepts that are intimately connected and meant to stress rationality—that the celestial souls strive to imitate (*iqtidāʾ*, *tashabbuh*) the good and the perfection of the separate intellects. But because these souls are closely associated with matter, and because the good and perfection they seek cannot be reached through motion, their primary intention to imitate the higher principles becomes divided into particular and constantly renewed intentions that in turn correspond to an infinite series of motions. Likewise, the primary intellectual conception (*taṣawwur*) that the souls have of the separate principles is converted into

3 The view that the heavens were ensouled was standard in ancient and medieval cosmology. A key influence on the cosmology of Avicenna was a Greek work, transmitted into Arabic, by Alexander of Aphrodisias: *Fī mabādiʾ al-kull* (‘Principles of the Cosmos’). For Alexander of Aphrodisias’s theory of ensouled celestial kinematics, see István M. Bodnár, “Alexander of Aphrodisias on Celestial Motions,” *Phronesis* 42/2 (1997): pp. 190–205. On the importance of *Fī mabādiʾ al-kull* for Avicenna’s cosmology, see Damien Janos, “Moving the Orbs: Astronomy, Physics and Metaphysics, and the Problem of Celestial Motion According to Ibn Sīnā,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 21 (2011): p. 179, fn.42.

4 Janos, “Moving the Orbs,” p. 180.

5 Janos, “Moving the Orbs,” p. 180.

particular and constantly renewed conceptions (*taṣawwurāt juz'īyya*), and their will is a particular and constantly renewed will (*irāda mutajaddida juz'īyya*). It is these particular intentions and conceptions and this renewed will that cause the various and particular motions that together constitute the full revolutions of the celestial bodies.⁶

Of the three aforementioned doctrines essential to Sabian belief, the propositions that the celestial spheres possess rational souls and that they are cognisant of universals and particulars are justified by arguments adapted from the third *namaṭ* of Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt*. Rāzī complements these three core doctrines with those which derive their respective proofs from an argument formulated by Abu'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, in his *Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*, to justify the Sabian doctrine of the Perfect Nature. In constructing the eight doctrines of the Sabians, Rāzī adapts Abu'l-Barakāt's proof for the Perfect Nature and superimposes it onto the Avicennan core structure of the philosophical justification for astrology. The resultant composite defines the challenge that Rāzī has set himself: to reconcile elements foreign to his Ash'arī commitments, which possess the potential to serve a later systematisation of philosophical and theological thought which was subsequently realised in *al-Maṭālib*.

The three arguments which constitute the Avicennan core structure presuppose the existence of the supracelestial intellects, which are not investigated in *al-Sirr*. But when we consider, in light of Rāzī's commentary, the original arguments in *al-Ishārāt* from which they are adapted, we will discover that the desire to imitate the intellects explains the impulse driving ensouled celestial motion. This will provide the basis for my contention that the planetary ascent ritual represents a human attempt at mimesis of the celestial spheres: by coordinating his soul with the cosmos, he realises the perfection of the souls which move the heavens.

Before examining the eight doctrines of the Sabians in detail, I shall deal with a few preliminary matters. Firstly I shall discuss the context of the eight doctrines in *al-Sirr*; secondly I shall present Rāzī's tripartite heresiological categorisation of the Sabians to whom these doctrines are attributed; and thirdly I shall summarise their content. In the course of their following detailed examination, I shall focus on two of the three core doctrines and their sources in *al-Ishārāt*.⁷ Moreover, I shall explore the ways in which Abu'l-Barakāt's proof for the Perfect Nature is adapted in two different ways: either to supplement the primary Avicennan proof for a particular proposition; or as a proof in its own

⁶ Janos, "Moving the Orbs," p. 180.

⁷ The proof for the spheres being the proximate causes of sublunary change is the same as the proof for the efficacy of talismans which we find in *al-Sirr* 1:1. It is more appropriate to examine this proof in chapter 4.

right justifying the original Barakātian doctrine. The first five doctrines, which establish the celestial souls as objects of veneration, merit individual analysis. The last three, which focus on the implications of this belief for Sabianism, I will conveniently treat as a unit under the title “Sabian Worship.”

3.2 Three Sabian Sects

Before we discuss the three theologically distinct groups into which Rāzī divides them, it would be helpful to consider an overview of what Rāzī has already said about the Sabians’ occult belief and practice. In *al-Sirr* 1, Rāzī introduces the proof deployed by the philosophers and the Sabians that the planetary movements are the proximate causes of change in the sublunary world; and that the ability to predict their configurations makes possible the casting of a talisman as a means of directing their influence for a particular end. It is only in *al-Sirr* 3, having presented the necessary astrological knowledge in *al-Sirr* 2, that Rāzī describes in detail the practical craft of casting a talisman. Rāzī delays the presentation of Sabian cosmological doctrines and their proofs until *al-Sirr* 4:1, which provides the philosophical justification for the belief that the heavenly bodies are governed by celestial rational souls which are: possessed of volition; aware of the changes they cause in the sublunary world; and responsive to human communication. This is the theoretical foundation of the long planetary ritual that is the main focus of the work as a whole.

Now, Rāzī’s characterisation of the three mutually exclusive Sabian theologies at the beginning of *al-Sirr* 4:1 forms an introduction to his treatment of the eight doctrines shared by them all. Whilst all believe the celestial spheres and the heavenly bodies are living, rational beings governing change in the sublunary world, they differ concerning their ontological status. He says:

The Sabians believe that these spheres and planets are living and rational, governing the world of generation and corruption. Then they differed <concerning this belief>, maintaining three different doctrines. [(1)] The first doctrine is that these bodies are necessarily existent by virtue of their essences, their needing no originating principle, and that rather it is they who produce the effect of the existence of this world (*al-mu’aththir fī wujūd hādihā al-‘ālam*). Their doctrine is false since each body is a composite, whether in actuality or in potential (*imā bi’l-fi’l aw bi’l-quwwa*) and for its realisation each composite depends on the realisation of each one of the parts <which constitute> the composite <which> are distinct from it. (*yaftaqir taḥaqququhu ilā taḥaqquq kull wāḥid min ajzā’ al-murakkab ghayrahu*). So each body depends on something other than it; and each thing which is dependent on another is <only> possible in its essence (*mumkin li-dhātihī*). [(2)] The second doctrine is that the spheres and the planets are <only> essentially possible <in their> existence (*mumkinat al-wujūd li-dhawātihā*), but <they are> necessarily existent by

way of the necessitating action of a pre-eternal producer of effects (*bi-ijāb mu'aththir azalī*), just as the Sun produces illumination. These are the Sabians and the philosophers. [3] The third doctrine maintains that: they occur by way of the action of an agent possessed of volition (*fā'il mukhtār*), namely the most supreme God; and that that god created these planets, investing each with a special power, delegating them with the authority to govern this world. They say this does not diminish from the majesty of God—exalted is His splendour—for what imperfection is there for a king to possess obedient slaves? Then He delegated to each of them the government of a specific kingdom, and rule over a specific clime. In general, despite their differing doctrines, they claimed the spheres and the planets have specific attributes.⁸

The first category of Rāzī's Sabians is unreservedly polytheistic, affirming the reality of the heavenly bodies as gods, each being characterised by necessary existence. The second maintains an emanationist model of reality in which the heavenly bodies are possessed of necessary existence only insofar as it is necessitated by the relationship which links them to the Eternal Producer of Effects, in the same way that solar rays are emanations of the Sun to which they are ontologically posterior. Believing God to be necessitating by His essence (*mūjib bi'l-dhāt*) the Sabians of this second category have a distinctly Avicennan hue to their theology. By way of contrast with the Necessarily Existent of this second group, that of the third group of Sabians is a creator God, possessed of choice and volition, who delegates to the heavenly bodies control of generation and corruption in the sub-lunary sphere.

The Sabians, presented here in an ascending hierarchy that begins with an unrepentant polytheism and ends with a theology closest in resemblance to Rāzī's own confessional commitment, are thus far from being a theologically homogenous group. Of these three, it is significant that it is the second group, distinguished from the other two with the designation of “the Sabians and the Philosophers,” which embraces a distinctly Avicennan theory of cosmogenesis by way of emanation from the one Necessarily Existent.⁹ If the first group comprises an unapologetic polytheism, the second comprises a form of popular

⁸ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated), p. 110.

⁹ It is the belief of this second group that most closely corresponds to the definition of talismans in *al-Sirr* 1:1. For a succinct account of the Avicennan emanationist model of cosmogenesis, see Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 74–83. See also Jules Janssens, “Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sīnā,” *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 8 (1997): pp. 455–477; and Catarina Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies vol. 69 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 97–105.

Avicennism. But what is common to all of them is the belief that events in this world are determined by the heavenly bodies.

3.3 Summary of the Eight Sabian Doctrines

The eight doctrines which comprise the philosophical justification for Sabian idolatrous astrology can be summarised as follows.¹⁰ (1) No fewer than three proofs are invoked to establish the first proposition, on which the entire argument relies, namely that the celestial spheres are living rational beings. (2) That the connection of the celestial soul with its sphere is to be located in its planet, thus explaining the focus of Sabian veneration, forms the second proposition. The third and fourth propositions establish the spheres as: (3) cognisant of universals and particulars; and (4) as the proximate causes of generation and corruption in the sublunary world: thus they are the worthy objects of veneration for the aspirant who would gain the kind of knowledge and power extolled in the general introduction of *al-Sirr*. (5) The fifth proposition states that the heavenly bodies (*al-kawākib*) are either, according to the philosophers, simple spheres or, according to the Kasdānian Sabians, theriomorphic bodies which are the archetypes of sublunary animals.¹¹ (6) The sixth proposition, namely that the celestial souls are the proximate causes of human rational souls, perceive their worship, and are responsive to their acts of communication, justifies astrological Sabian ritual.¹² (7) The veneration of planetary idols, fashioned in order to provide the focus of worship when the heavenly bodies are absent from human sight, is rationalised by the seventh proposition. (8) The eighth proposition is that the Perfect Nature, the personal celestial spirit from which the existence of the individual human soul derives, plays a necessary tutelary role, by way of inspiring intuitions, in the education of the aspirant who would invoke and address the planets.¹³ The Barakātian proof for the Perfect Nature stands on its own terms—instead of acting as a supplementary proof for a separate doctrine—when adduced to establish the eighth; however, it also features as

10 Although Rāzī asserts that the eight doctrines are common to all three categories of Sabian, it is only the second category which seems to be explicitly linked to the activity of philosophy.

11 The loose use of the term *kawākib* allows Rāzī to construct a hypothetical controversy on their shape: see discussion in section 3.4.

12 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

13 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 110–114.

an additional proof for the first doctrine, complementing the primary Avicennan proof, and is also deployed to substantiate the sixth doctrine that the celestial souls are particularly sensitive to our communications and acts of veneration. Therefore, to appreciate *al-Sirr* as a philosophical work, and al-Rāzī's serious intellectual engagement with its subject matter, we shall explore these propositions in detail, in the order in which they appear in *al-Sirr*, examining where appropriate their Avicennan and Barakātian contexts.

3.4 Analysis of the Eight Sabian Doctrines

3.4.1 The Celestial Souls

As we have already mentioned, three separate proofs are adduced to establish that the celestial spheres and planets are living, rational beings, possessed of volition. This of course is a necessary condition of their receptivity to human communication, by which they can be persuaded to act or not to act. On this premise the entire Sabian approach, in its three theologically distinct varieties, rests.

Argument from the circular nature of celestial motion

The Sabians of *al-Sirr* privilege an Avicennan argument, based on the observation of the circular motion of the celestial spheres and planets, to establish their most important doctrine.¹⁴ Its reasons as follows: (1) the movement of every moving body is either: natural, coerced or volitional (*ṭabī'iyya aw qas-riyya aw irādiyya*); (2) circular celestial movement can neither be natural nor coerced; (3) therefore, celestial motion must be volitional. The necessary corollary of this conclusion, which is left unsaid as it hardly requires explicit articulation, is that in order to possess volition, the celestial spheres and planets must have souls.¹⁵ Each of the two supporting premises on which the argument rests is substantiated by its own separate argument.

¹⁴ For the Aristotelian background to this argument, see Harry A. Wolfson "The Problem of the Souls of the Spheres from the Byzantine Commentaries on Aristotle Through the Arabs and St. Thomas to Kepler," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962): pp. 65–93.

¹⁵ "The first proof [i.e., that the celestial spheres and planets are living, rational beings] is that the spheres are moving. The movement of every moving thing is either: natural, coerced or volitional. Since the movements of the spheres and the planets are neither natural nor coerced, then they must be volitional." Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

Turning to the first premise, the very corporeity of any mobile under examination, whether it be sublunary or supralunar, determines that only those three logical possibilities mentioned can explain its motion. In justifying that this is indeed an exhaustive list of all logical explanations (*bayān al-ḥaṣar*) for bodily motion, Rāzī's Sabians argue that: “[. . .] this is because the movements of these spheres are caused either by reason of: [(1)] their corporeity (*li-nafs jismiyyatihā*); or [(2)] by reason of something superadded to that corporeity (*li-shay' mawjūd fī tilka al-jismiyya*); or [(3)] by reason of something extrinsic to it (*li-shay'in khārij 'anhā*).”¹⁶

They rule out the first of these major disjuncts on the ground that, were motion to arise purely as a result of corporeity, then all bodies would manifest the kind of circular movement by which the celestial spheres are characterised: since they clearly do not, mere corporeity cannot be the cause of celestial circular motion.¹⁷ Major disjunct (3) admits of two subsidiary minor disjuncts, for were there an extrinsic cause of circular celestial motion, then it must either be: (3)(a) a body or bodily (*jism aw jismānī*); or (3)(b) neither a body nor bodily. In eliminating the first of these, Rāzī's Sabians affirm the second minor disjunct (3)(b), and in so doing, they are compelled to affirm major disjunct (2), namely that celestial motion is caused by reason of something superadded to celestial corporeity. To eliminate the possibility contained in minor disjunct (3)(a), they reason that were it true, namely that the extrinsic cause of circular celestial motion is a body or bodily (*jism aw jismānī*): “[. . .] then the particularisation (*ikhtiṣāṣ*) of that extrinsic <entity>, out of all other bodies, with this power to influence (*mu'aththiriyya*) <the celestial sphere> must arise by reason of some other extrinsic <entity>, thus necessitating a *regressus ad infinitum* (*al-tasalsul*).”¹⁸

Minor disjunct (3)(a) can therefore be safely dismissed as an explanatory cause of celestial motion, leaving (3)(b), namely that it is caused by an external entity which is neither a body nor bodily. Now, were such an external entity to exist, then its influence would extend equally to all bodies; this being the case, the celestial sphere or planet would therefore require some other cause by reason of which it becomes the unique recipient of the influence of that external entity and thus driven to circular motion: the cause of its unique receptivity to the influence of the extrinsic, non-corporeal entity is precisely the subject of major disjunct (2)—‘something superadded’ to the planet or celestial sphere.

¹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

¹⁷ “We only say the <motion> cannot <arise> due to its corporeity because were it so then all bodies would participate in this movement.” Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

Thus, they argue that were the external entity which acts as the cause of celestial motion:

[. . .] neither a body nor bodily then its relationship would extend to all bodies equally (*yakūn nisbatuhu ilā jamī' al-ajsām 'alā al-sawīyya*) and were this <influenced> body not particularised by something by reason of which it became more appropriate for the receiving of the specific influence from it, then a selective determination (*tarjīh*) of a possible would have occurred without anything to have caused that selective determination (*lakāna dhālika tarjīhan li'l-mumkin min ghayr murajjih*) – and that is impossible. If that body were particularised by something by reason of which it became more appropriate for the receiving of that influence from a separated <intellect> (*mufāraq*) then that would constitute an admission that the specific body only became particularised with <its> specific movement by reason of the power superadded to it (*quwwa mawjūda fīhi*) and that is what is meant (by the second abovementioned major disjunct).¹⁹

Thus, it is established that circular celestial motion is caused by a power “superadded” to the corporeity of the planet or celestial sphere. All that remains now to be determined is whether this superadded power is natural, coerced, or volitional. The answer to this question provides the proof for the second premise on which rests the argument for the living, rational nature of the celestial spheres from their circular motion. The proposition that the superadded power is coerced would require the kind of invalid argument of infinite regress which we already encountered when Rāzī’s Sabians reasoned that the direct cause of celestial motion could not be an external body. Only two possibilities remain, and what determines which of them is true is the fact that “[. . .] either this power has awareness (*shu'ūr*) of that which arises from it, thus being volitional (*irādiyya*); or it does not, and so is natural.”²⁰

Two separate arguments relying on the circularity of celestial motion are deployed to invalidate the assertion that the power superadded to the celestial sphere is natural:

The first is that were this the case, then the point from which the sphere moved [i.e., the *terminus a quo*] would have been fled from naturally (*mahrūban 'anhā bi'l-ṭab'*) and that which is fled from naturally cannot <also> be naturally sought (*maṭlūban bi'l-ṭab'*). And so if the celestial motion were natural then it would be impossible for it to move naturally (*bi'l-ṭab'*) towards that which it moves towards naturally; the consequent (*al-tālī*) is false because each point towards which the sphere moves, the sphere moves towards it by means of a movement away from it, gaining in distance from it even as it moves towards it: thus the <sphere's> movement is not natural.²¹

¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

²⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

²¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

Visualising the celestial sphere moving against an absolutely stationary background which contains a fixed point of reference would assist our understanding of this argument. At any given time, the planet, as it moves with the rotational motion of its sphere, like the gemstone in the bezel of a ring, is either moving towards or away from the point of fixed reference. Were such motion natural, then that fixed point of reference, in relation to the planet, would be at the same time both a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*. This would lead to a contradiction, since as a point of reference for natural motion, no point can be both. The second reason why celestial motion cannot be natural is that:

[. . .] nature (*al-ṭabī'a*) moves towards everything which is naturally sought (*maṭlūban bi'l-ṭab'*) by way of the shortest distance and there is no aspect of circular movement (*al-ḥaraka al-mustadīra*) which is like that. So, circular movement is not natural. Therefore, since these two disjuncts [i.e., that either celestial motion is natural or coerced] have been proven false, it becomes established that they are volitional and thus that the spheres are living beings (*ḥayawānāt*).²²

Thus, do Rāzī's Sabians prove the existence of the celestial souls that are super-added to the corporeal spheres which they govern. But in so doing, they must posit the existence of entities beyond space and time, separated (*mufāraq*) from corporeity, which provide the motive influence (*mu'aththiriyya*) that the celestial souls direct in particular to their own spheres. These are none other than Avicenna's separated intellects, whom as we shall presently discover, the celestial souls in their perpetual motion, attempt to imitate in the pursuit of their own perfection.

To appreciate the Avicennan context of this Sabian argument that circular celestial motion is volitional, we now turn to the twenty-sixth chapter of the third *namaṭ* of Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*:

The movements of the body that has in its nature a propensity for circular <motion> are among the movements of the soul and not those of nature; otherwise, with the same movement, such a body would naturally turn away from what it naturally turns toward, and with its movement it would naturally seek a certain position in the place where it naturally leaves this position and runs away from it. But it is impossible that that which is naturally sought (*al-maṭlūb bi'l-ṭab'*) is naturally abandoned, or that that from which one naturally runs away (*mahrūban 'anhu bi'l-ṭab'*) is that which is naturally intended. Rather, this may happen in the volition due to conceiving a certain purpose that requires

22 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

a diversity of disposition. Thus, it has become clear that the movement of such a body is animated and voluntary.²³

Avicenna does not in this passage provide an explicit argument against external coercion as a cause for celestial motion. Naturally, such an assertion would lead to a *regressus ad infinitum*; but in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, Rāzī adds to this the fact that, having disproved that celestial motion can be natural: “[. . .] it is also impossible to be coerced because coercion is the opposite of naturalness and if naturalness has no role here then so is it impossible for coercion. Since these two disjuncts are proven false it thus becomes established that the movement is volitional.”²⁴

But the argument that the fixed point of reference in relation to the celestial sphere cannot be both the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of circular celestial movement could also be deployed against the assertion that such movement is volitional. Distinguishing the volitional explanation from the natural explanation, Avicenna says “[. . .] rather, this may happen in the volition due to conceiving a certain purpose that requires a diversity of disposition. Thus, it has become clear that the movement of such a body is animated and voluntary.”²⁵

23 Avicenna quoted in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, ed. ‘Alī Rezā Najaf-zādeh (Tehran: Anjoman-i Āthār-i wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 1964), vol. 2, p. 321.

Commenting on this chapter, Rāzī says:

When he [i.e., Avicenna] spoke of the psychic powers which move elemental bodies, he wanted to speak of psychic powers (*al-quwā al-nafsāniyya*) which move the celestial bodies (*al-ajrām al-falakiyya*) and before that he spoke of the fact that the movements of the spheres are psychic and volitional. The evidence for this is that their movements are by their nature circular (*mustadīra bi’l-ṭab’*) and anything that is like this is psychic. As for the fact that their movements are circular, this is obvious. By saying ‘by their nature’ (*bi’l-ṭab’*), he wanted to exclude the etheric sphere (*kurrat al-athir*) since its circular movement is not by reason of its nature. As for the fact that the movement of each thing which, by its nature (*bi’l-ṭab’*), moves with a circular motion is psychic, this is because this movement is either: natural, coerced or volitional (*immā an yakūn ṭabī’iyya aw qasriyya aw irādiyya*). That it can be natural (*ṭabī’iyya*) is false because, suppose there were a <fixed> point on such a body, as soon as the mobile (*al-mutaḥarrik*) reaches <the point> it would leave it; and its act of leaving the point is also in essence the act of moving towards it. So were this movement natural, then that <point> which is sought by reason of its nature (*al-maṭlūb bi’l-ṭab’*) is also that which is left by reason of its nature (*matrūk bi’l-ṭab’*), and that which is left by reason of its nature (*matrūk bi’l-ṭab’*) is also sought by reason of its nature (*al-maṭlūb bi’l-ṭab’*). And since that is false, the assertion that <the movement> is natural is proved false (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 321–2).

24 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 322.

25 Avicenna quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 321.

Expanding on Avicenna's rather condensed response to this objection, Rāzī explains:

[. . .] it cannot be said <that> if it were volitional then this same problem would also arise, because we say that is <indeed> licensed (*jā'iz*) for volitional movement because if the aim of the volitionally moving mobile (*gharaḍ al-mutaḥarrik bi'l-irāda*) were something that could not find completion (*amr lā yatimm*) other than with circular motion, then that which is sought at one time becomes that which is abandoned at another (*ṣara al-maṭlūb fī waqt matrūkan fī waqt ākhar*) since its being sought or being abandoned (*maṭlūbiyyatuhu wa matrūkiyyatuhu*) is accidental, not essential (*bi'l-'arḍ lā bi'l-dhāt*) and the thing which is essentially sought (*al-maṭlūb bi'l-dhāt*) is but <that> other aim (*wal-innamā al-maṭlūb bi'l-dhāt dhālika al-gharaḍ al-ākhar*).²⁶

Thus with volitional movement, any fixed point of reference becomes either sought or abandoned according to the volition of the celestial soul, the ultimate aim of which—"the thing which is essentially sought"—cannot be fulfilled other than by means of perpetual circular movement.

Argument from the existence of the human rational soul

Having proved the existence of the celestial souls by adducing the Avicennan argument from the circularity of celestial motion, Rāzī's Sabians supplement it with an argument from the existence of the human rational soul. This proof is adapted, almost verbatim in parts, from a proof developed by Abu'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī in his *Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*, which seeks to demonstrate that the origin of the human rational soul is a celestial spirit (*rūḥ falakī*). We shall therefore discuss this proof and doctrine firstly as it appears in *al-Sirr*, and secondly as it appears in *al-Mu'tabar*.

The Perfect Nature in *al-Sirr*

Rāzī's adaptation of Abū'l Barakāt's proof that the causes of human rational souls must be the celestial souls rests on three premises: (1) the causes of human rational souls must be souls; (2) human rational souls are the noblest and most perfect of all elemental souls; (3) the cause is always superior to its effect. Rāzī's Sabians feel no need to substantiate premises (2) and (3). But they justify the first with the following proof:

[. . .] rational souls are neither bodies (*ajsām*) nor do they need bodies. However, for their actions, they are dependent (*muftaqira*) on bodily tools (*ālāt jismāniyya*) and the effect

²⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 321–322.

necessarily resembles, suits and corresponds with its cause (*wa'l-ma'lūl lā budda wa-an yushbih al-'illa wa-yulā'imahā wa-yunāsibahā*). So the causes ('*ilal*) of these souls must exist in accordance with this <same> characteristic (*ṣifa*). By this I mean they are neither bodies, nor in their essences are they needful of bodies. So it is established that the causes of these human souls are <also> souls.²⁷

The human rational soul is such that it is: (a) non-corporeal; and (b) reliant on a body in order to act. Since the nature of an effect necessarily resembles the nature of its cause, the cause of the human rational soul must also be: (a) non-corporeal: and (b) reliant on a body in order to act. So having established that members of a certain class of soul must be the cause of human souls, they reason that the former:

[. . .] are either elemental souls (*nufūs 'unṣuriyya*) or they are heavenly souls (*nufūs samāwiyya*). They cannot be elemental souls for the noblest and most perfect of the elemental souls are human souls and the nobler cannot be an effect (*ma'lūl*) of the baser. So it follows that they are the effects (*ma'lūla*) of celestial souls (*nufūs falakiyya*). Thus, it becomes established that the planets and the spheres possess knowing, perceiving souls (*nufūs 'ālima mudrika*) which are the causes of human souls.²⁸

Both the celestial and the human soul are rational: the *differentia* between the two is that the latter requires an elemental body to act. A corollary of this, which Rāzī's Sabians do not explicitly state, but which the reader is implicitly invited to infer, is that were the latter to transcend its reliance on the elemental body, and came to act through a celestial body, then it would have ceased in essence being human, having transformed in essence into a celestial soul.

At this point, having projected onto the Sabians this second proof for the existence of the celestial souls, Rāzī no longer needs to follow the trajectory of the original argument formulated by Abu'l-Barakāt which was to prove that the cause of the human soul is a celestial soul, called the Perfect Nature (*al-tibā' al-tāmm*), which plays the role of an inspiring tutelary spirit which can perfect human knowledge and power. It is a doctrine which lies at the heart of Sabian belief, and anticipates the subject of the eighth and last of the doctrines which Rāzī attributes to them. So, following Abu'l-Barakāt, Rāzī's Sabians reason that since the cause must be stronger and nobler (*aqwā wa-ashraf*) than its effect it follows of necessity that the heavenly souls are stronger and nobler than human rational souls. And since human souls are the effects of the celestial,

²⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.111.

²⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.111.

the former, in their own very mortal sublunary existence, resemble the latter in profound ways. Rāzī's Sabians reflect that:

[. . .] just as the celestial bodies are greater and loftier, their substances simpler and more powerful, their colours—which are their lights—nobler and more radiant, similarly their souls must also be more perfect in knowledge, in power and in all the attributes of nobility and loftiness. So the substances of these human souls resemble the substances of the heavenly souls in the same way that the effect resembles the cause, the actions of the effect resemble the actions of the cause. So just as the planets first rise, their power increasing until they reach the apogee, then decline hour by hour until they set, so in the same way you observe the growth of children, then the power of youth, then then the subtle spread of weakness in middle age, which finally ends in old age, then death which no treatment can avert and no medicine cure.²⁹

Thus, during the course of its earthly life, the human soul, consciously or otherwise, is engaged in a kind of mimesis of celestial motion. The Sabians of *al-Sirr* deploy the concept of the Perfect Nature to account for what they regard as the essential variation that exists between human souls:

Human souls are numerous and also differ in substance: there are some souls which are evil by nature whilst others are good. Such is the case with respect to intelligence, acumen, beauty and generosity. Each species must have a separate cause. Since there is a similarity between the cause and the effect and that one thing cannot resemble two different things, then for each group of these human souls is a heavenly soul which is its cause, bringing it into existence.³⁰

Thus humans of a certain moral character and intellectual acumen constitute a species of human, each member of which derives his or her existence from the same celestial soul, and naturally displays an inclination towards other souls who hail from the same origin: “Between the human souls which share the attention of the same celestial soul, there exists a love and an affection which they do not share with others, like that which exists between brothers. The heavenly soul takes care of their strengthening, their development and their defence.”³¹

Of significance for our examination of the Rāzī's attitude to these Sabian doctrines is his attempt at this point to co-ordinate Sabian doctrine with Islamic belief, finding confirmation for it from the Prophetic *ḥadīth* literature. Concerning the celestial origin of the human soul he observes: “The philosophers (*al-ḥukamā'*) of old called it “the Perfect Nature,” in allusion to which the

29 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

30 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

31 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

Prophet—God’s peace and blessings be upon him—said: “In His possession are spirits (*arwāḥ*) are like enlisted soldiers: those who have <already> come to know each other are in harmony with each other; those who are ignorant of each other fall into difference.”³²

The relationship between this celestial soul and its human effects is compared to the relationship between father and child:

The loving care which these celestial souls show human souls is like the loving care that a father shows to his children. He is the one who guides a man in his sleep to his best interests; when he is awake, he guides him in his thoughts towards his goal; he is the one who casts into the human heart notions which benefit. He is called the Perfect Nature since the cause is higher, more powerful and more perfect in its nature.³³

Rāzī reports the Sabians as asserting: “Of the things which prove the soundness of what we have said are <our> repeated experiences (*tajārib*) of the astral laws for they point to what we have said concerning the causes of souls.”³⁴

Thus, for Rāzī’s Sabians, the truth of the doctrine of the Perfect Nature, established as it is by reason, is corroborated empirically by repeated experience.

The Perfect Nature according to Abū’l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī

This will now be an appropriate point for a brief excursus to examine Abū’l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī’s treatment of the Perfect Nature: this will reveal the extent to which Rāzī relies on this account to formulate his proof for the Sabian doctrine. For Abū’l-Barakāt, each human soul belongs to an astral spirit which is the cause of the human soul’s very existence; the astral spirit watches over the human soul’s welfare and inspires it with every good thought. The differences between these higher astral spirits account for the differences in the natures of their human correlatives in the sublunary world.³⁵

³² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111. For two versions, of the *ḥadīth* cited, see: *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1991), vol. 4, *Kitāb al-Birr wa’l-ṣīla wa’l-ādāb*, *ḥadīth* no. 2638, pp. 2031–2032. The text of the longer of these two versions reads as follows: “People are mines of gold and silver; the best of them in the age of ignorance [i.e., the Pre-Islamic era] are the best in Islam, when they have understanding <of the religion>. Spirits are assembled soldiers: those who have had <a previous> acquaintance have mutual affection; those who have been mutually hostile fall into dispute.”

³³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

³⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 111–112.

³⁵ Al-Zarkān, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wa-ārā’uhu al-kalāmiyya wa’l-falsafiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1963), pp. 482–483.

Abū'l-Barakāt discusses the Perfect Nature in the twentieth chapter of the second volume of his *Kitab al-Mu'tabar*.³⁶ He reasons that since effects are more amenable to definition than their causes the latter are therefore defined by the former. Knowledge of a thing is more perfect (*atamm*) when its cause is defined. The cause—or causes—of human souls are either more mysterious (*akhfā*) than human souls vis-à-vis their existence and their nature as causes; or their existence is apparent whilst their nature as causes remains mysterious. He dismisses the possibility that the causes of human souls can be bodies, since bodies in their own essence, and insofar as they are bodies, cannot act as efficient causes. Rather, they act as material causes for things existent in prime matter. He also rejects the possibility that the causes of human souls can be accidents because a cause must be more perfect (*atamm*) in its existence than its effect. Moreover, he rejects the possibility that the proximate efficient causes of human souls can be the holy substances (*al-jawāhir al-qudsiyya*) which have no connection with bodies.³⁷

The human soul resembles its cause, and everything within the human soul derives essentially from the cause. Both the human soul and its cause are non-bodily essences, although the existence of the human soul's cause is prior and more perfect (*atamm*). Everything in the sublunary world, whether it be a soul, an action, a state or an event has its equivalent in the heavens; and all that is in the heavens has its equivalent in that which is above the heavens, beyond time and space. Just as human souls rely on bodies in order to act, so the causes of human souls, when they act, are attached to bodies which are nobler than those of their human equivalents.³⁸

After excluding the possibility that the causes of human souls can be of the elemental world, Abū'l-Barakāt looks for their cause amongst the stars and

36 Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, Hibat Allah Ibn 'Alī, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fī'l-ḥikma*, eds. 'Abdullah al-'Alawī al-Ḥaḍramī, Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad al-Yamānī, and Zayn al-'Ābidīn al-Mus'awī (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1938–1939), vol 2, pp. 388–393. See Herbert Davidson *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 154–161. For a general overview on Abū'l Barakāt's thought, see Shlomo Pines, *Studies in Abū'l-Barakāt Al-Baghdādī: Physics and Metaphysics* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Leiden: Brill, 1979); Moshe Pavlov, *Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Scientific Philosophy: The Kitāb al-Mu'tabar* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); and Frank Griffel, "Between al-Ghazālī and Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī: the Dialectical Turn in the Philosophy of Iraq and Iran during the Sixth/Twelfth century," in *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth century*, ed. Peter Adamson, Warburg Institute Colloquia 16 (London: The Warburg Institute, 2011): pp. 45–75.

37 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fī'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 388.

38 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fī'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 389.

their spirits: “[. . .] whose bodies are greater and loftier, whose substances are simpler and more powerful, and whose colours—which are their lights—are nobler and more resplendent.”³⁹

Despite their movement and their shifting positions, their attributes remain stable, their essences unchanged. By means of their perpetual cyclical motions, causation connects the world of contingent time to the world of time without beginning. Similarly, human souls in their substances endure. The human soul manifests in the body like a rising star; it grows in strength and power inside its body; its strength augments then diminishes like a setting star. In a similar way, says Abū'l-Barakat: “[. . .] we observe the growth of children, the strength of youth, the approach of the middle age, the weakness of dotage, and then the inevitability of death which no treatment can avert and no medicine cure.”⁴⁰

The differences in size, nature, movement and light of the stars are reflected in the differences that obtain in their human counterparts in the sublunary world. Moreover the amities and enmities that exist between humans are mere reflections of those that exist between the stars. Abū'l-Barakāt deploys the fact that profound differences exist between the natures of men to confute the notion that the cause of human souls can be but one, namely the Active Intellect.⁴¹ Thus, each star governs a number of human souls, each of which shares in the nature of its star which: “[. . .] watches over it, guides it, supports it, helps it win victories, brings it strength and aid, chases away from it harm and protects it: and it is called the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*).”⁴²

Some, says Abū'l-Barakat, call the Perfect Nature an angel, “[. . .] which has the same relation to the human soul as the father has with his son, and which is the proximate cause that is known to us.”⁴³ Abū'l-Barakāt calls it “the real father”⁴⁴ and asserts that: “This angelic spirit shows compassion for the individual that relates to it, and cares for it in the same way that a father does with his child [. . .] from it derive the dreams, which a man sees in his sleep, which bring him news, give him reminders, glad tidings, warnings, instructions and knowledge.”⁴⁵

Now, we return to the focus of this discussion, namely the additional proof, which argues for a celestial origin of the human rational soul, which the Sabians adduce to supplement the Avicennan proof for the existence of the celestial souls.

39 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fi'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 390.

40 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fi'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 390.

41 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fi'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 391.

42 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fi'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 391.

43 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fi'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 391.

44 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fi'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 391.

45 Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Kiṭāb al-Mu'tabar fi'l-ḥikma*, vol. 2, p. 392.

For the purpose of complementing this primary Avicennan proof in constructing Sabian doctrine, Rāzī need only adduce the introductory section to the Barakātian proof for the Perfect Nature. Nevertheless, Rāzī proceeds to adduce the entire proof, which is superfluous to this specific aim. His purpose cannot, therefore, be merely restricted to adducing an additional proof to supplement the Avicennan argument for the existence of celestial rational souls: it must extend beyond this. It is my contention that, since he views the Perfect Nature as a key Sabian doctrine, Rāzī's purpose is to integrate as fully as possible the Barakātian proof for the Perfect Nature into the Avicennan structure of the Sabian philosophical justification for astrology.

Argument from the nobility of life and its place in the cosmic hierarchy

The third argument adduced by Rāzī's Sabians to prove the existence of celestial souls invokes the principle that life is inherently noble. Since divine wisdom has determined that the superior rank in the cosmic chain of being is nobler than the inferior, it is more deserving of a nobler form of life. Therefore the supralunar world must possess superior forms of life to that which are to be found in the sub-lunary world, the apex of which is represented by the human rational soul:

The third proof is that the celestial bodies are nobler than the base composite bodies <of this world> (*al-ajrām al-falakiyya ashraf min hādhihi al-ajrām al-murakkaba al-khasīsa*). Life is nobler (*ashraf*) than lifelessness (*al-jamādiyya*). How then could it be appropriate for the Divine Wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-ilāhiyya*) and Perfect Generosity (*al-jūd al-tāmm*) to give the base that which is noble whilst withholding it from the noble?⁴⁶

Applying this principle to the elements, they reason that fire, being the most subtle and the furthest removed from dense, lifeless earth, is the very source of life, producing the heat of the innate disposition (*al-ḥarāra al-ghazīriyya*) on which life depends. It shares the same genus (*jins*) as heavenly fire, by virtue of its inherent balance, in contrast with the humoral fire which has a tendency towards imbalance and entropy.

Also we witness that those things which are opposed (*muqādda*) to life are coldness, dryness and density and these are the properties of pure earth. As for water, since it is more subtle than earth, it is closer to the nature of life. As for air, since it is more subtle than water, it is the soul and the nourishment of life. As for heat it is the source and spring of life: heavenly heat is of the same genus as the heat of the innate disposition (*al-ḥarāra al-samāwiyya min jins al-ḥarāra al-ghazīriyya*) by virtue of its balance (*i'tidāl*).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112.

⁴⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

Now, given that fire and the heat which it produces are the source of life; and since, according to Galen, the aeric sphere, which girdles the earth, contains a plenitude of spirits; it is even more apt that the fiery sphere should teem with life, for its fire is balanced, gentle and inert (*mu'tadila hādi'a sākina*); *a fortiori*, since the heavenly bodies are nobler and more subtle than even the fiery sphere, then the spirits which they contain must be more numerous and nobler (*akthar wa-ashraf*). It is noteworthy that at this point, Rāzī is keen to interject into the Sabian line of reasoning his observation that it is in fact in complete conformity with the Islamic revelation:

[. . .] For this reason, the Prophet—may God's peace and blessings be upon him—said: "Heaven groans and it is right that it should do so: therein is not even the space of a hand's width in which an angel is not standing, bowing or prostrating." So how close are the demonstrations (*barāhin*) of the sages (*al-ḥukamā'*) to the revelation of the prophets!⁴⁸

The three objections to this Sabian argument which Rāzī subsequently lists are therefore objections to a prophetically revealed truth. They are: (1) the path of the heavenly bodies is regular (*'alā nahj wāḥid*)—were they living beings then their paths would be diverse; (2) since the fire of the Sun is so intense, the solar sphere, despite being nobler and more subtle, cannot sustain life; (3) life cannot be sustained without a special structure (*binya makḥṣūṣa*), such as man's humoral balance (*mizāj*); the celestial spheres lack the kind of structure which can sustain life.⁴⁹

The rebuttal of the first objection has two grounds. Firstly, when an agent possessed of choice makes the best choice in any given situation, no discrepancy arises between the agent and nature.⁵⁰ And secondly, those who raise this objection are asked: "do you not believe that the mover <of the spheres> is God—exalted is He—and He is a choosing agent and that as such He moves them in one way without change? So then your belief that the action of the choosing agent must change is proven false."⁵¹

In rebuttal of the second objection, no concession is made that a producer of heat must itself be hot. Moreover, even if this concession were made, certain

48 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112. For the ḥadīth cited, see *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ: wa-huwa sunan al-Tirmidhī*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir et al (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, second edition, 1978), vol. 4, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, p. 556, ḥadīth no. 2312.

49 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

50 "The first aspect is what Ptolemy mentioned namely, that when the choosing agent seeks the best then there is no difference between <the choosing agent> and nature (*al-mukhtār idhā ṭalaba al-aḥḍal lam yabqa baynahu wa-bayna al-ṭabī'a farq*)." (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112).

51 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

life forms, such as the ostrich and salamander nevertheless thrive in such intense heat. The third objection is rebutted with the same response since the substance of its argument is much the same as that of the second.⁵²

This third argument demonstrating the reality of the celestial rational soul is more of a persuasive rhetorical proof (*min al-iqnā'īyyāt*), which appears in Rāzī's *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*. The argument asserts that since causes are superior to their effects, and closer to perfection, the celestial spheres, being the causes of sublunary rational and sensate souls must be possessed of a superior form of rationality and perception:

[. . .] how can base bodies be uniquely characterised by life, perception (*idrāk*) and rationality (*al-nuṭq*) whilst the noble luminous bodies are deprived <of such attributes> despite the fact that they are the causes of such perception and rationality occurring in this <sub-lunary> world? And it is plain that the cause (*al-sabab*) is more deserving of every <form of> perfection than its effect (*al-musabbab*).⁵³

Now since the celestial spheres are alive, it follows that the entire cosmos is alive—indeed it is one living creature, a reality which is not threatened by the fact that the four sublunary elements are inanimate, since their portion of existence within the greater cosmic whole is but a mere jot.⁵⁴

52 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

53 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya fi 'ilm al-ilāhiyyāt wa'l-ṭabī'īyyāt*, ed. Zayn al-'Abidin al-Musāwī et al. (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1925), vol. 2, p. 102.

It is curious that Rāzī should refer to the celestial spheres (*aflāk*) as the causes of rational human souls—this account of anthropogenesis bears remarkable resemblance to the Barakātian thesis of the Perfect Nature which we have just encountered.

54 Rāzī says:

And if it is established that the celestial spheres are alive, then it is correct to make the general statement that the entire cosmos is an animal (*al-'ālam kulluhu ḥayawān*) <a proposition which> is not undermined by the fact that the four elements are not alive – for their portion is but small because in comparison to the celestial spheres, the sum total of all the four elements is almost imperceptible. The <rules> of analogy would require that the sum <of all four elements> in <its relation to> the sphere of Saturn be compared to that of a point in a circle. So then how would the analogy stand in relation to that which is above the sphere of Saturn? And it is plain that were there a small pearl in a man's intestines, this would not represent an impediment to it being said that this indicated that the body is alive, even though the ratio of the pearl to the body of the man is greater than the ratio of the four elements to the sum of the heavens. Indeed in the body of an animal are many bodies which are neither alive nor sensate (*ghayr ḥayya wa lā hassāsa*) such as the humors (*akhlāt*), the bones and more else besides. So if there is no impediment <to saying> that, then so <it can be said here>: indeed it is more apt (Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 2, p. 102).

Following a somewhat similar trajectory to that of the second proof in *al-Sirr* for the existence of the celestial souls, which infers the rationally ensouled nature of the spheres from the fact that they are the most likely causes of human souls, this third proof in *al-Sirr* reasons from the inherent nobility of life, and the fact of human rational life, that those beings superior to man in the cosmic hierarchy must be possessed of life. In contrast with the first proof, inferences about the celestial world in these last two proofs are drawn from observations about the sublunary world.

3.4.2 The Planet—Where Celestial Soul and Body Meet

Being the focal point at which the celestial rational-bodily soul complex interfaces with the body of the sphere, the planet represents the co-ordinating centre of celestial activity, under the direction of which celestial spirits act on specific parts of the sphere. The analogy of the planet's relationship with the sphere is as the relationship of the heart to the human body. Rāzī accounts for this second doctrine of the Sabians concerning the celestial spheres as follows:

The second attribute is that the wise have said the sphere is like the totality of the <human> body whilst the planet is like the heart. And just as the primary connection (*al-ta'alluq al-awwal*) of the soul is with the heart, and then by means of the heart, to the rest of the body, so too the primary connection of the celestial spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-falakiyya*) is with the planet, and then by means of the planet, to all of the sphere. Just as the human soul then divides up into many different powers (*quwā kathira*), each one of which is connected to one of the organs of the body, so the celestial soul divides up into many powers, each one of which has a special connection with a specific part of the sphere.⁵⁵

The nature of these celestial spirits is ambiguous: on the one hand they could act as the purely natural pneuma of Galenic physiology which possesses no volition of its own; on the other hand, they could each indeed be possessed of individual volition, each instance of which works entirely in concert with the

⁵⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113. Compare Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 7, p. 8:

[. . .] as for the spirits which govern the celestial bodies, then the most apparent (*al-aẓhar*) is that the spheres for them are like the bodies, the planets are like the hearts, and the lines of rays which emanate from the bodies (*ajrām*) of the planets (*al-kawākib*) flow in the manner of subtle luminescent bodies (*ajsām*) which emanate from the heart and brain to reach the rest of the organs (*a'ḍā'*).

rest of the celestial host. But in the context of Sabian astrolatry, the planet serves as the most appropriate focus for veneration of the celestial sphere as a whole.

3.4.3 Celestial Soul Perception

al-Sirr

That they perceive both universals and particulars constitutes an argument that the celestial spheres have rational souls and are the necessary mediators between Rāzī's Sabians and the supracelestial world. Once again this is an inference drawn from the empirical observation of celestial circular motion. Given that the planets are living volitional beings, their particular movements must be performed as a result of conscious choice; from this Rāzī's Sabians infer that they must also be capable of apprehending particular knowledge items: “[. . .] they say that the spheres and the planets are perceptive (*mudrika*) of the particulars and the general. As for the assertion that they perceive the particulars, it is because they perform particular acts by way of will (*irāda*) and whatever acts thus is cognisant of particulars (*‘ālim bi'l-juz'īyyāt*).”⁵⁶

Their knowledge of universals (*kullīyyāt*), which derive from the supracelestial world, is inferred from the perpetual nature of their circular motion, since:

[. . .] their movements must have a purpose (*gharaḍ*) for pointless activity (*al-'abath*) cannot continue in perpetuity—nor indeed could it endure for most of the time. Moreover, that purpose cannot be particular because if its realisation were impossible (*in kāna mumtani' al-ḥuṣūl*) then it would no longer be an eternal purpose; and if its realisation were possible then it would be necessary for the <movement of the> sphere to cease once the purpose has been realised (*wajaba wuqūf al-falak 'inda ḥuṣūl gharaḍihi*) and that is impossible. That its purpose is particular has been proven to be false: so, it becomes established that its purpose is general. Everything that has a purpose must be cognisant of it: thus, it is established that <the spheres and the planets> perceive the general and the particular.⁵⁷

The argument that demonstrates that the celestial souls perceive universals thus rests on two premises, each with its own supporting proof: (1) perpetual celestial motion has a purpose; (2) the purpose of that motion is universal. The implied third premise of course is that everything which pursues by its activity a universal purpose must also be able to perceive the universal.

⁵⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

⁵⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

The following argument establishes the first premise: celestial motion is perpetual; no activity that is perpetual can be without purpose; therefore, celestial motion must have a purpose.⁵⁸ The second premise rests on eliminating the possibility that the object of celestial motion can be the particular, thus leaving the universal object as the sole remaining explanation. Thus, if the object of such motion is particular, its realisation would be either: (a) impossible; or (b) possible. If impossible, then we would be forced to conclude that perpetual celestial motion has no realisable object; this being the case, it cannot properly be said to have purpose: so it must constitute pointless activity (*‘abath*). This conclusion leads to a contradiction of previously established premise (1). Therefore, if the object of celestial motion is particular, its realisation must be possible. But, were it indeed possible, then once it were realised, celestial motion would cease: this leads to a contradiction of the proposition, contained in premise (1), that celestial motion is perpetual. Thus, the object of celestial motion cannot be particular. So, it must be universal.

In summary, the ability of the celestial souls to perceive both universals and particulars is inferred from the fact of their perpetual motion. Insofar as the motions of their spheres occur in space and time, they are particular; and since they perform them with volition, it can be inferred that they also perceive them; thus they are able to perceive the particular. And since their motion is perpetual, their purpose cannot be said to be realisable in a particular way for once realised, they would then cease, contradicting the initial premise that their motion is indeed perpetual. Their purpose must therefore be universal. Just as Rāzī’s Sabians inferred from the circularity of celestial motion that the spheres must be living and rational, possessed of choice and volition, so they infer from the perpetual nature of celestial motion that the spheres perceive the universal as well as the particular. This being the case the Sabian adept, once he has achieved noetic connection with the celestial souls, is theoretically able to receive understanding of both kinds of knowledge.

Avicenna’s *al-Ishārāt*

This Sabian argument for the celestial soul’s perception of the universal and particular is an adapted version of a more involved proof, advanced by Avicenna in

⁵⁸ That celestial motion is perpetual (*dā’im*) is assumed by Rāzī’s Sabians: he does not attribute to them any supporting argument establishing this proposition.

the third *namaṭ* of his *al-Ishārāt*,⁵⁹ that the celestial spheres are possessed of rational souls. He reasons that, since movement is never an aim in of itself, the purpose of celestial motion must be other than mere movement for its own sake. This must be the universal realisation of an infinite series of configurations. Each individual configuration is particular; but the realisation of an infinite series of configurations is a universal aim. Therefore, the celestial soul which governs the motion of its sphere, perceiving both the universal and the particular, must indeed be rational, possessed of universal volition. Avicenna says:

By volition, the movement of the first body is not for the sake of movement itself because it [i.e., movement] is not of the sensible perfections (*al-kamālāt al-ḥissiyya*), nor of the intellectual perfections (*al-kamālāt al-ʿaqliyya*). It [i.e., movement] is only pursued for <an aim> other than it (*innamā tuṭlab li-ghayrihā*). Nothing is more befitting to <this movement> than <celestial> configuration (*laysa al-awlā lahā illā al-wadʿ*) <which> is not a determined but rather a hypothetical existent (*laysa bi-muʿayyan mawjūd bal farḍī*). Nor does <this movement> stop at the determined hypothetical <configuration> but rather at the determined universal <one> (*muʿayyan kullī*). So this <movement> is an intellectual volition (*tilka irāda kullīyya*).⁶⁰

In his commentary to this passage, Rāzī refers to what is subsequently identified as the celestial rational soul as the possessor of universal volition (*ṣāḥib al-raʿy al-kullī*). He explains that, according to Avicenna, the aim (*maqṣūd*) of the sphere in its movement cannot be for its own sake:

[. . .] because the quiddity (*māhiyya*) of movement is that it is a first perfection (*kamāl awwal*) so it is a means for the second perfection (*wasīlat al-kamāl al-thānī*). And since its quiddity is that it is a means for something else, it cannot be a purpose in of itself (*istahāla an yakūn hiya naḥs al-maṭlūb*). Thus, it becomes established that the aim of the sphere in its movement is something other than movement.⁶¹

This aim is the realisation of something which exists only in potential (*biʾl-quwwa*), namely the actualisation of the celestial configurations: “So the purpose of <celestial> movement is to actualise the configurations (*istikhrāj al-awḍāʿ ilā al-fiʿl*); the aim is not a specific individual configuration (*waḍʿ muʿayyan*

⁵⁹ See chapters 27–29, Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 322–327.

⁶⁰ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 323.

⁶¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 324.

shakṣ) otherwise once it were arrived at, then it would stop. Rather the aim is a determined universal configuration (*waḍʿ muʿayyan kullī*).⁶²

Of course, being determined seems in apparent contradiction to being universal (*kullī*). Rāzī understands Avicenna's response to such an objection in the following terms:

Being determined (*muʿayyan*) does not contradict its being universal because each one of these individual determined <configurations> is determined and shares in being determined (*fa-hiya mushārika fī muʿayyaniyya*) but they are distinct <from each other> by means of their own specificity (*mumāyiza bi-khuṣūṣiyyatihā*) and that which they share is other than that by <reason of> which they are distinct (*mā bihi al-ishtirāk ghayr mā bihi al-imtiyāz*). So, the specific, insofar as it is absolutely determined (*muṭlaq al-muʿayyan*), is something universal. This is what he [i.e., Avicenna] asserted in the introduction when he said that if an idea is predicable on many, then it is universal, whether it be specific to an individual or not. Thus, is it established that the aim of this movement is something universal and this demands a universal intention (*qaṣd kullī*) and universal intention is known as intellectual volition. Thus is it established that the movements of the spheres have a principle, namely the possessor of universal volition.⁶³

Avicenna is confronted by an obvious dilemma. Observing the eternal nature of celestial motion, he must maintain that its object is universal, since if its object were particular, then its realisation would entail the immediate cessation of such movement. And yet at the same time, the configurations to which it gives rise are particular. He attempts to reconcile these seemingly contrary positions by observing that the celestial configurations all share in being determined and are thus universal, whilst at the same time being distinguished from one another by their own specificities.

The supracelstial intellect is an abstracted substance independent in its essence from the sphere with respect to all of its perfections (*jawhar mujarrad ghanī bi-dhātihi fī jamīʿ kamālātihi ʿan al-falak*). But not so the celestial rational soul: for whilst it is also abstracted from the body of the sphere, the former nevertheless has a relationship with the latter which is analogous to the relationship between our souls and our bodies. The perfections of the celestial rational soul are not independent of the sphere which it governs, the perpetual motion of which pursues a universal aim (*gharaḍ kullī*), driven by a universal intention (*qaṣd kullī*), and subject to universal perception (*idrāk kullī*). The possessor of such universal intention and perception cannot be bodily: it must be an abstracted substance. But this substance cannot be the intellect since, says Rāzī

62 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 324.

63 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 324.

interpreting Avicenna: “[. . .] everything whose aim is an action must be in need of that action in order to attain perfection [. . .] and everything that seeks perfection is not an abstracted intellect but rather is a soul. Thus, in this way, is established the assertion <of the reality> of the rational celestial soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭīqa al-falakiyya*).”⁶⁴

In governing the eternal motion of the sphere the celestial rational soul realises its own perfection. The attempt to seek perfection by means of motion is characteristic of souls rather than intellects. It is for this reason that Avicenna posits the existence of the celestial rational soul.⁶⁵

That the sphere possesses a bodily soul, which is the means by which the “universal opinion” of the celestial rational soul becomes particularised in specific celestial movement, is an inference drawn by Avicenna from the fact that: “A specific particular thing (*shay’ makḥṣūṣ juz’iyy*) cannot arise from a universal opinion for <such a universal opinion cannot> become specified (*lā yatakhṣṣaṣ*) with <one> particular rather than another, unless <that be> by reason of a specifier that is necessarily linked to it (*illā bi-sabab mukḥṣṣiṣ lā maḥālata yaqtarin bihi*)—not by itself alone.”⁶⁶

Explaining this statement, Rāzī comments:

[. . .] the relationship of the universal to all particulars is one such that no one particular is more fitting than another to issue from the universal. So either a universal arises, which is absurd, or nothing arises from it, and that is what is meant. So it is established that no particular arises from a universal opinion but that particular must issue from a particular volition, and the possessor of particular volition is a bodily power (*quwwa jismāniyya*). Thus is it established that the sphere has a bodily soul.⁶⁷

The rational-bodily celestial soul complex thus provides the means by which influence from the supracelestial intellect, which exists beyond space and time, can flow to the sublunary world. Being both abstracted but nevertheless connected with the body of the sphere, the celestial rational soul perceives both universals and particulars, translating the former into particular instantiations in the sublunary world by governing the celestial bodily soul, which affects the movement of the sphere, in the attempt to realise an infinite series of configurations. For Avicenna, the reality of the celestial rational souls is a mystery which is: “[. . .] veiled from all except those who have perfected the divine

⁶⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 326.

⁶⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 325–326.

⁶⁶ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 326.

⁶⁷ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 327.

wisdom (*ḍarban min al-naẓar mastūran illā ‘alā al-rāsikhīn fi’l-ḥikma al-muta-‘āliya*).⁶⁸

Janus-faced, the rational-bodily celestial soul complex at once receives the universal abstractions of the supracelestial realm and translates them into motion.⁶⁹

3.4.4 Celestial Souls as the Causes and Perceivers of Sublunary Change

It has previously been mentioned that the proof that celestial motion is the principle of sublunary change was adduced in the first treatise as a means of justifying the efficacy of talismans. When this proposition is considered in light of: (1) the Avicennan proof which deduces the volitional nature of celestial motion from the circularity of its movements; and (2) the principle that any agent which acts with volition must be cognisant of the effects of its actions, it follows that the planets must be cognisant of all events which occur in the sublunary world:

You already know the aforementioned proof at the beginning of this book that the proximate principles of coming to be of events which come to be (*al-mabādi’ al-qarība li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādīth*) in the world of generation and corruption must be the movements of the spheres and the applications of the planets; and you already know that they perform their acts by volition (*bi’l-irāda*) and that anything which acts with volition is cognisant of its action. Therefore, these planets are cognisant of all contingent events which occur in this world, whether they be natural, coerced or by choice (*sawā’an kānat ṭabī’iyya, qas-riyya aw ikhtiyāriyya*).⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 325.

⁶⁹ Rāzī expresses doubts about Avicenna’s solution to the seeming paradox of the celestial sphere’s motion. He observes:

[. . .] so insofar as it performs particular acts and then abandons them, it must be a body; and insofar as it yearns to imitate the intellect then it is abstracted (*mujarrada*). So there is no escape from this philosophical impasse (*uqda*) unless it be asserted that: [(1)] these particular acts have no need of particular perceptions; or [(2)] that an abstracted substance can be possessed of particular perceptions; or [(3)] that a bodily power can perceive abstracted things; or [(4)] that the purpose of moving the sphere is not yearning for imitation. Regarding whichever of these positions they adopted, they left their own distinct doctrinal school and definitive statement (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p.329).

⁷⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

Of course, this account of celestial causation of *all* sublunary events and perception thereof gives rise to the intractable aporia of how to reconcile determinism with human agency and free will. For, if the planets are cognisant of all sublunary events, as effects produced by their own circular motion, including those which are the result of the individual choice of sublunary agents, then a seeming contradiction would appear to have arisen.⁷¹ Be that as it may, the fact that the planets are cognisant of all sublunary change justifies the Sabian belief that some form of noetic connection with them would provide knowledge of the unseen world.

3.4.5 The Shape of the Planets

Theological differences aside, the fifth doctrine attributed by Rāzī to the Sabians represents the only point of contention between the distinct categories of Sabian: specifically, between the philosophising Sabians and the Chaldean sages (*al-ḥukamā' al-kasdāniyūn*). The former are committed to the doctrine that the planets are spheres on two grounds. The first is an empirical proof: they appear circular. The second reasons that since: (1) the planetary bodies are simplexes, as opposed to the complexes of terrestrial bodies composed of the four elements; and (2) all simple bodies are circular, they conclude the planets must be circular: “The Philosophers adduced two proofs that they are spheres (*kurrāt*); the first is that we observe them as spherical (*mustadira*); the second is that they are simple and the shape of anything that is simple is spherical.”⁷²

However, their co-religionists refused to concede their belief in the theriomorphic shape of the planets to such reasoning. They countered that a triangle or a square, for instance, might appear as a sphere when viewed at a vast distance.⁷³ Furthermore, they resisted the assertion that the planets were simplexes,

71 For a good overview of the issue, see Taneli Kukkonen, “Causality and Cosmology, the Arabic Debate,” in *Infinity, Causality and Determinism: Cosmological Enterprises and their Preconditions*, ed. Eevan Martikainen (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 19–43.

72 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

73 References to shapes might not merely be for the sake of illustration but reflect something more concrete such as the shapes of the Sabian temples on earth. See Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 394 for the shapes of the Greek planetary temples before the time of Alexander: Saturn’s was a hexagon; Jupiter’s a triangle; Mars’ a rectangle; the Sun’s a square; Venus’s a triangle containing a square; Mercury a triangle containing a rectangle; the Moon’s an octagon.

the acceptance of which would demand that they disavow their theriomorphic belief. They are reported as saying:

[. . .] we do not concede that they are simple <bodies> so why could not one of their parts be of one nature and another part of another nature, except that one part, with its nature and essence, would have to cohere with another part <of a different nature> in such a way as to prevent dissolution and disintegration (*al-inhīlāl wa'l-infikāk*).⁷⁴

This belief was the natural conclusion of their understanding of the causal relationship between the planets and their sublunary effects. For, they maintained that the form of the planets: “[. . .] was that of animals which are to be found in this world, adducing as evidence that which we have already demonstrated, <namely> that the effect must resemble its cause, and be congeneric and similar (*al-ma'lūl lā budda wa-an yakūn mulā'īman li-'illatīhi mujānisan lahā wa-mush-ābihan*).”⁷⁵

Thus the nature of the causal relationship is one of similarity (*mushābaha*) and “congenerity” (*mujānasa*) between the superior cause and the inferior effect. Once this is established:

[. . .] it follows that the bodies of the higher world must be the real causes of those in the lower world, sharing with them a resemblance in both shape and form. And when we consider that the cause must be more powerful than the effect, it naturally follows that those animals which are in the higher world are nobler and more perfect in form than the animals of this lower world, their matter being different from the matter of creatures of the lower world. For, those shapes and forms are necessary concomitants of their essences (*lawāzim dhawātihā*). And when we consider that the cause must be more powerful than the effect, it naturally follows that the animals in the higher world perpetually endure, preserved from change (*mumtani'at al-taghayyur*).⁷⁶

Thus the sages of the Chaldean Sabians infer the theriomorphic shape of the heavenly bodies (*al-kawākib*) on the *a priori* assumptions that: (1) they are the causes of corresponding theriomorphic forms in the sublunary world; and (2) a resemblance necessarily exists between the cause and its effect. Vast distance explains why our limited sense perception erroneously apprehends their shape as spherical. They maintained a belief in the simple and naïve correspondence between the animals of the sublunary world and the divine entities that populated the supralunar, understanding almost literally the Hermetic dictum “as above so below.” Indeed their simple identification of

⁷⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

⁷⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

⁷⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

causality with congenerity between sublunary phenomena and their celestial principles provided the simplest account necessary to account for the efficacy of their occult practices which sought to influence the outcome of celestial action in this world by bringing together, in ritual, objects of planetary correspondence appropriate to the desired result.

3.4.6 Sabian Worship

Building on the propositions that the celestial souls are perceptive of sublunary events and that they are the causal origin of human souls, Rāzī's Sabians aver that they pay particular heed to human acts of devotion:

[. . .] the celestial souls are the causes, the real fathers and the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*) of earthly souls and their senses are far more powerful than ours; and since the cause must be more perfect than the effect then it is not unlikely that they regard with favour things in this world. For, they hear the supplication of humans (*du'ā al-bashar*), see their adoration (*tubṣir taḍurru'ahum*), smell the fragrance of their ritual suffumigations and incense; nor is it unlikely that they, their spirits and their helpers have special names (*asmā' makḥṣūṣa*); nor is it unlikely that they appear before the one who serves and adores them (*tatajallā li-man yakhdumuhā wa-yatadarrā' ilayhā*) to reveal their names and those of their adjutants (*a'wān*) to the one who calls in supplication.⁷⁷

With the intimate relationship between human and celestial souls established, the Sabians can now speak of how the former might communicate with the latter through acts of devotion, for which they might be rewarded with revelatory experiences and occult knowledge of the names of planetary spirits which facilitate the fulfilment of their sublunary needs. Seeing that the heavenly bodies were held to be both the proximate causes of sublunary change, and the very causes of human souls, the Sabians took them as “proximate gods of this world,” to whom they directed their worship:

[. . .] Know that the Sabians, professing this set of beliefs which we have just explained, based their religion on these principles, claiming that the planets were the proximate gods of this world (*hādhihi al-kawākib hiya al-āliha al-qarība li-hādihā al-ālam*); thus, it naturally follows that it is necessary that the people of this lower world devote themselves to their worship and entreaty them with incense and sacrifices (*fa-lā jarāma wajāba 'alā ahl al-ālam al-asfal an yashtaghilū bi-'ibādatihā wa'l-tadarrū' ilayhā bi'l-dukhn wa'l-qurb-ānāt*).⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

⁷⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

Since the heavenly bodies would regularly disappear from sight, they could not serve as constant foci for worship. Therefore, planetary idols came to serve this purpose: “[. . .] and since they knew that the planets disappear from sight, it was natural for them to fashion statues and idols (*tamāthīl wa-aṣnām*) <of them>, devoting themselves to the veneration of the planets (*wa-ishtaghalū ta’zīman li-tilka al-kawākīb*). This is the religion of idolatry (*dīn ‘abdat al-awthān*).”⁷⁹

Knowledge of how to invoke and address the stars is imparted by a man’s perfect nature, often when he is in a hypnagogic state. Thus, since an individual’s close and conscious relationship with his perfect nature is crucial for his occult education and training, it becomes necessary for him to identify the planet to which it belongs:

[. . .] the Chaldeans have said that each man has a celestial soul (*naḥs falakiyya*)—the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭibā’ al-tāmm*) which is in respect of him like a father who is kind and caring towards his child; it inspires in him that which is of benefit to him; it summons to his memory that which he has forgotten; it brings him to that which he seeks in his mind; and it shows him in his sleep that which is useful to him. It thus behoves the man who concerns himself with the knowledge of how to invoke the planets (*‘ilm da’wat al-kawākīb*) to exert himself such that he finds out which planet it is.⁸⁰

The phrase “such that he finds out which planet it is” might mislead the reader into thinking that an individual’s perfect nature is the celestial soul of the planet itself. This would lead to the somewhat absurd conclusion that the almost limitless range of human character types might be reducible to just seven. To avoid this misunderstanding, the phrase would require construction in light of the earlier discussion of the Perfect Nature, which proposed that: “[. . .] the planets and the spheres possess knowing, perceiving souls (*li’l-kawākīb wa’l-afl-āk nufūs ‘ālima mudrika*) which are the causes of human souls.”⁸¹

And as we have already learnt from Rāzī’s Sabians, the celestial spheres possess a plenitude of rational souls. Thus for example the sphere of Mercury possesses a countless number of souls, each of which can act as the causal origin for innumerable individual human souls. Thus to establish a stabilised connection with his perfect nature, the practitioner of the Sabian religion would firstly be required to identify which sphere it is from which his soul derives. A twofold empirical method is applied: (1) identifying which planet possesses

⁷⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113. It is at this point that Rāzī makes a brief interjection in order to argue for the correct Islamic theological grounds on which this kind of astrolatrous idolatry is to be refuted. We shall discuss this in chapter 10.

⁸⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 113–114.

⁸¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

the strongest domination over his rising sign; and (2) inferring the planetary sphere by observation of his actions and moral character:

Sometimes they deduce it by means of the cause indicating the effect (*yastadill 'alā dhālika bi'l-'illa 'alā al-ma'lūl*) which <method involves> looking at the ascendant sign at the time of birth <of the man in question> so that the planet with the strongest domination over his rising sign (*aqwā al-kawākib isti'lā'an 'alā ṭālī'ihī*) becomes known. Sometimes it is deduced by means of the effect indicating the cause such that by knowing the actions and moral character of the man, the most appropriate star can be deduced. Both methods are relied on, so that by means of an inductive analysis of its conditions <which indicate that> that is such-and-such a planet (*al-kawkab al-fulānī*), his perfect nature becomes known.⁸²

Failing this twofold method, the practitioner can seek the revelation of the Perfect Nature through asceticism and fixed meditation, whereby all cognitive activities are directed to this one aim:

If he is unable to find out his perfect nature by this method, then let him discipline himself; pursue great lengths in severing all bodily ties; and immerse his meditation (*fīkr*), his heart, his thought (*khāṭir*) and his imagination (*al-khayāl*) in the magnification (*ta'zīm*) of the perfect nature, for it will inevitably appear to him. After that let him avail himself of its mediation with respect to whatever he wills and desires.⁸³

Once the perfect nature has been revealed to the practitioner, he is to devote himself to it, for it will be the swiftest in response to his invocation and will mediate between him and benevolently disposed planets, such as Saturn, which would be benevolently disposed towards a Martian celestial soul or Jupiter towards a Venusian:

So let him occupy himself in its invocation and service, for communication with it [i.e., the perfect nature] will be the easiest, and it will answer his supplication more swiftly [. . .]; then let him avail himself of its mediation with planets that are benevolently disposed to him (*al-kawākib al-sādiqa lahu*), whilst avoiding those planets which are hostile (*al-kawākib al-mu'ādiya lahu*), until the point that his position in that has become consolidated (*ḥattā yaqwi lahu amruhu fī dhālika*).⁸⁴

Whilst the empirical twofold method might be instructive in identifying to which planetary sphere any individual's perfect nature might belong, it would appear that the latter method of asceticism and meditation would be necessary in order to induce the epiphanic experience of the particular celestial soul which

⁸² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 114.

⁸³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 114.

⁸⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 114.

acts as his perfect nature. Be that as it may, since connection with the Perfect Nature is absolutely essential to the practitioner's ability to address the other celestial spheres, it becomes apparent that it would also be crucial for any successful attempt at the planetary ascent ritual.⁸⁵

3.5 The Purpose of Celestial Motion

Previously we observed that the first Sabian proof for the existence of the rational celestial souls, which argues from the circularity of celestial motion, relies on the positing of the supracelestial intellects, which are separated and abstracted from matter. This is now the appropriate juncture at which to explore the relationship between the celestial and supracelestial worlds insofar as it is evident in Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt*, from which text the Sabian proof derives. In doing so it will be shown that the purpose of the eternal motion of the latter is the attempt to imitate the former, in the pursuit of perfection. It is in the light of this purpose that the mimetic ritual of planetary ascent must be understood.

With this aim in mind, we return to the sixth *namaṭ* of *al-Ishārāt*. In the eleventh chapter, Avicenna asserts that celestial motion must be driven by the kind of motive (*dā'in*) which is possessed by a soul rather than an intellect. Moreover, this motive can neither be desiderative nor irascible (*shahwānī aw ghaḍabī*).⁸⁶ The reason for this, explains Rāzī, is that such motives only drive the actions of bodies which undergo increase and decrease, or change and transformation either for the better or for the worse: it would be absurd to attribute such change to the eternal and unchanging celestial spheres. Moreover, if the object of celestial desire or anger were attainable, then eternal celestial motion would cease on its realisation, which is impossible; whilst if it were unattainable, then eternal celestial motion would be nothing but an absurd act of folly.⁸⁷

Dismissing both desiderative and irascible motives as valid accounts for celestial motion, Avicenna asserts that it must resemble our own motions which

⁸⁵ This construction of the two methods as complementary rather than as alternatives, however, is undermined by the phrase “[i]f he is unable to find out his perfect nature by this method,” which would support reading them as alternatives. If this latter reading is indeed the correct one, then of course it leaves the question unanswered as to how the twofold empirical method can identify an individual celestial spirit as the perfect nature, as opposed to merely the planetary sphere to which it belongs.

⁸⁶ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 445.

⁸⁷ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 446.

are driven by the practical intellect. Moreover: “It is unavoidable that this soul’s movement is directed toward a beloved (*ma‘shūq*) and chosen object (*mukhtār*) in order to attain either: [(1)] the essence of this object; [(2)] (one) of its states; or [(3)] something that imitates these two things.”⁸⁸

On the same grounds that he dismissed the desiderative and irascible motives as accounts for celestial motion, he eliminates the first two disjuncts, leaving only the need for imitation (*mushābaha*) of the beloved as the sole remaining explanation. Interpreting the intentions of Avicenna, Rāzī comments: “[. . .] the aim (*al-maṭlūb*) is the attainment of imitation (*taḥṣil al-mushābaha*) of an attribute (*ṣifa*) which does not emerge into actuality in its entirety (*lā yakhnuj ilā al-fīl bi-tam-āmihā*), but rather in the successive <realisation> of its parts throughout eternity (*‘alā al-dawām*).”⁸⁹

The celestial soul cannot perfectly imitate the attribute of the supracelestial intellect, thereby bringing it into actuality, other than in a way that is gradual, stretched out over eternity. Avicenna explains the nature of this imitation thusly: “[. . .] that which yearns (*al-mutashawwiq*) is an imitation of things in actuality—in that they are free from potentiality—exuding from it the emanating good, insofar as it is the imitation of the higher—not insofar as it is an emanation onto the lower.”⁹⁰

Rāzī writes in elucidation:

The celestial sphere, which we have supposed yearns for the realisation of perfection, comes to imitate at that point those things which are in actuality, namely the abstracted intellects, in two respects. One is in their abstraction from the nature of possibility and potentiality; the second is in their emanation of good things (*fayḍān al-khayrāt*) on that which is below them, which does not mean that the goal (*maqṣūd*) of the former is the emanation of good things on lower beings (*al-sāfilāt*). For we have explained that the higher does nothing for the sake of the lower. Rather the aim is imitation of the intellect insofar as it is a principle for the emanation of good things, on that which is below it, without seeking or desiring <to do so>.⁹¹

Perpetual circular motion is thus the way in which the celestial spheres attempt to realise in their own selves the perfection of the intellects. By such motion they raise in themselves the supracelestial attribute (*ṣifa*) from the inferior ontological orders of mere possibility (*imkān*) and potentiality (*quwwa*) to the superior ontological order of actual realisation. The extent to which they achieve this is the

⁸⁸ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 446.

⁸⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 447.

⁹⁰ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 447.

⁹¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 447–448.

extent to which they realise the perfection of abstraction (*tajarrud*). And the measure of their realisation of the attribute is the measure to which they gratuitously effuse goodness on that which is beneath them in the hierarchy of being. But since, it should be noted, beings of a higher ontological order do not act for the sake of beings of lower orders, this effusion of goodness, is not the aim of celestial motion but merely its concomitant. Avicenna identifies the principle of this effusion with: “[. . .] the celestial configurations (*aḥwāl al-waḍʿ*) which are the emanational dispositions; that which is in potential in them flows into actuality by means of that which is possible by way of successive procession.”⁹²

The seeming obscurity of this gnomic allusion is illumined by Rāzī’s commentary: “[. . .] the means by which the celestial sphere realises its imitation of the intellect is naught but the bringing from potential into actual realisation the <rotation> of the aions and the celestial configurations (*istikhrāj al-ayūn waʿl-awḍāʿ*).”⁹³

The celestial soul is thus motivated by a yearning for the supracelestial intellect which is its beloved (*maʿshūq*); this gives rise to the need of the former to imitate the attributes of the latter. Since the celestial soul is a rational-bodily complex, governing the body of a celestial sphere, in a way that is analogous to the human soul’s command of its own body, it attempts to imitate the supracelestial attributes by translating its apprehension of them into the eternal motion of the sphere. In this way the transcendent, supracelestial realm becomes manifest within space and time through celestial motion. The aim of this celestial motion is mimesis.

According to Avicenna, so subtle is the nature of supracelestial mimesis that the faculties of man, who is mired in the corporeal “world of exile” (*ʿālam al-ghurba*), are simply incapable of perceiving its reality. He goes on to reason that if a mover (*muḥarrik*) perpetually engages in mimesis, then it follows that such activity would exert an effect on its body in much the same way that our bodies are affected by the passions (*infiʿālāt*) of our souls.⁹⁴

Rāzī sees in Avicenna’s account of the relationship between the supracelestial intellect and the celestial soul an implicit pedagogy. This he foregrounds in his commentary, comparing it to the situation in which:

[. . .] a student, when he desires to imitate his teacher <with respect> to some of his perfections, so that he might realise some of those perfections anew (*ʿalā al-tajaddud*),

⁹² Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʿl-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 445.

⁹³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʿl-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 448.

⁹⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʿl-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 453–454.

displays within his body specific passions (*infi'ālāt makḥṣūṣa*); in general, bodily passions for the most part are subject to the passions of the soul. Thus, it is not remote that bodily motion should follow the yearning of the celestial sphere to imitate the intellect.⁹⁵

3.6 Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, we have seen how the Eight Sabian Doctrines are justified using Avicennan and Barakātian arguments. To prove that the celestial spheres possess rational souls which perceive the universal and particular and which drive motion that is the cause of sublunary change, Rāzī, in theorising on the Sabian creed, need only have relied on Avicennan arguments. As such, philosophically the Sabians would have been purely Avicennan. Were the Sabians intended as an anti-Avicennan construct, then he need not have introduced the Barakātian doctrine of the Perfect Nature, the celestial causal origin of the human soul. The Avicennan theory of celestial noetics is designed precisely to provide a rational account of communication between human and celestial souls. Rāzī must have been motivated by another need which was, I contend, a desire to integrate the Sabian doctrine of the Perfect Nature into a theoretical model which can account for the individual's communication with the celestial spirits by means of the Perfect Nature's intercession. It is an attempt at a philosophical justification for the belief that each human soul has the potential to establish a special connection with his celestial causal origin which can therefore act, by means of revelatory visions and inspired intuitions, as a personal hierophant providing instruction in the mysteries of the planets and how to address them.

Having examined the Eight Sabian Doctrines in light of the Avicennan and Barakātian sources from which they were adapted; and after exploring those concepts, such as the supracelestial intellects, in which they are embedded; we are now in a better position to theorise on the purpose of the planetary ascent ritual and its role in the soul's perfection, drawing the following conclusions:

1. The relationship between the intellect and the celestial soul is analogous to that which exists between the teacher and student whereby the former stands in relation to the latter as a model to be imitated;
2. The yearning of the celestial soul to actualise the perfection of the intellect is translated within space and time into the motion of its sphere—as such, celestial motion represents the mimesis of the supracelestial intellects;

⁹⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 454.

3. An unintended corollary of this mimesis through motion is that the celestial sphere transmits to the sublunary realm, by way of emanation, all manner of good (*khayrāt*), which are traces from the supracelestial realm;
4. Both the celestial and the human soul are rational: the *differentia* between the two is that the latter requires an elemental body to act. Thus, it would be reasonable to infer that if the latter were to transcend its reliance on the elemental body, and came to act through a celestial body, then it would have ceased in essence being human, having transformed in essence into a celestial soul: the lesser rational soul would thereby have transcended its own limitations to become the greater rational soul. It is my contention that this is what is intended by Rāzī in his introduction to *al-Sirr*, where he reports that the masters of occult knowledge all concur that it: “[. . .] guides you to the mysteries of the higher and lower worlds; indeed it transforms you such that you become a witness unto the spiritual beings (*mushāhid li'l-rūḥāniyyāt*), their interlocutor—indeed one of their company and one of their like.”⁹⁶
5. Reasoning analogically from celestial motion, understood as mimesis of the intellects, the aim of the planetary ascent ritual, whereby the aspirant, with his entire body and soul, attempts a mimesis of the heavenly spheres, is to transcend the ontological rank of humanity and become like the celestial souls;
6. For the Sabians, the celestial souls are proximate gods (*āliha qarība*)—to become like them is thus to become a god;
7. Such an apotheosis represents the return of the individual human soul to its causal origin, the Perfect Nature, itself a celestial soul;
8. It is the Perfect Nature which initiates the human soul into the mysteries of the planetary ascent, and acts as the psychopomp guiding it to its apotheosis.

⁹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 3.

Chapter 4

The General Physics of Talismans

4.1 Introduction

Having gained an overview of the cosmological and astrological beliefs that inform it, we are now better equipped to understand the Sabian talismanic craft. Maintaining the distance of the neutral observer, Rāzī introduces its descriptive definition with the word “*qālū*” (they said). Precisely who “they” are is not stated, but they can be presumed to be the “masters of this knowledge” (*āṣḥāb hādhā al-‘ilm*) who extolled the virtue of occult knowledge and power in the introduction.¹ As we have already seen, the purpose of the talisman, as stated in the definition, is:

[...] the blending of heavenly active forces with elemental passive forces, for the sake of being empowered (*li-ajl al-tamakkun min*) to make manifest that which runs contrary to the norm (*al-‘āda*) or to prevent from occurring that which is consonant with it.²

The ensuing detailed investigation (*taḥqīq*) of the metaphysical principles which underlie the working of the talisman is structured around two premises. The first asserts the reality of heavenly forces which actively determine the generation and corruption of phenomena in the sublunary world—these heavenly forces of course are the planets and their spheres; the second proposition is that for such celestial agency to act with any efficacy in this regard, their influence must be received by appropriately disposed sublunary conditions. It is the first premise which receives the most detailed proof, the final conclusion of which is that whilst sublunary phenomena are ultimately

1 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated), p. 3.

2 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7. This definition of talismans is recycled in *al-Maṭālib*:

Said the philosophers and Sabians: *talisman* is an expression for the blending of heavenly active forces with earthly passive forces to bring about that which runs contrary to the norm or to prevent that which is consonant with the norm (*tamzīj al-quwā al-fa‘ ‘āla al-samāwiyya bi’l-quwā al-munfa‘ila al-arḍiyya li-iḥdāth mā yukhālīf al-‘āda aw li’l-man‘ min mā yuwāfiq al-‘āda*) [Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol.7, p.149].

caused by the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent, its influence is mediated through the celestial motion by which the “active heavenly forces” are characterised. The ontological gap in the causal chain which leads from the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent by virtue of its essence to temporally originated sublunary phenomena is thus filled by the celestial spheres which are the pre-eternal and necessarily existent effects of the former, and the proximate causes of the generation and corruption of the latter.

The proof is a highly reworked and condensed adaptation of the first part of an argument for the eternity of the world, found in the first chapter of book nine of the *Metaphysics* of Avicenna's *al-Shifā*. Here, Avicenna argues for the existence of motion, deriving from the Creator (*al-khāliq*), which neither has beginning in time, nor end: namely that of the celestial spheres. The problem to which this is the solution is highlighted by Avicenna when he considers how temporally generated sublunary phenomena can ultimately be caused by the Necessarily Existent despite the fact that: “[. . .] the Existent Necessary in itself is a necessary existent in all its aspects and that it is impossible for a state which did not exist previously to commence for it. With <this>, it became evident to you that the cause in <terms of> itself necessitates the effect, so that, if it is permanent, it necessitates the effect permanently.”³

The most curious and significant aspect of the proof as it is reworked in *al-Sirr* is that, in the course of demonstrating its final conclusion, it proceeds by exploring and eliminating all other seemingly possible logical disjuncts, except one: the possibility that all that occurs as a result of the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent, in fact occurs within time. This of course would be entirely compatible with belief in God as an agent possessed of volition who creates in time—the God of Rāzī. In theorising on the occult in light of Avicennan natural philosophy, Rāzī thus identifies a construction of the talismanic craft that harmonises with the Ash‘arī assertion of God as creator in time. But now let us turn briefly to Avicenna's argument in 9:1 of the *Metaphysics* in order to understand the philosophical concerns which inform the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*.

4.2 Avicenna's *Metaphysics* 9:1

The aim of *Metaphysics* 9 is to prove the existence of motion which has no beginning in time. This motion is that which drives the celestial spheres and is

³ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), p. 300.

the principle for the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena in time. And since the heavens are the product of the divine emanative process, it is a proof which accounts for the Necessarily Existent as the ultimate metaphysical principle of sublunary reality, whilst preserving the following two crucial principles: firstly, being necessarily existent in all its aspects, the Existent Necessary in itself cannot undergo change: thus, it cannot change from a state in which it is not creating to one in which it is. Secondly, a cause—since it is a cause—necessitates its effect in a way that is synectic: by its own essence without any temporal delay.⁴

Now, since it is characterised by matter, and temporally originated, Avicenna argues that the terrestrial phenomenon comes into being as an effect in time either: (a) because its cause comes into existence, in which case, no time can intervene between the generation of the effect and the coming into being of its immediate efficient cause; or (b) because its immediate efficient cause has become close to the receptive cause in which the phenomenon is generated. As for (a), the reason that there can be no delay between the coming into being of the cause and the generation of the effect is that the necessity of another temporally originated being other than the cause would necessarily follow. And so, argues Avicenna:

That originated thing would then become the proximate cause. If the matter is repetitively prolonged in this manner, then there would necessarily ensue causes and temporal events coming all at once that are infinite and would necessarily occur simultaneously. But this is something for which we have known the principle dictating its refutation. It thus remains that the temporal causes do not <come about> all at once—[that is, the effect not being] due to the proximity to or remoteness from a first cause.⁵

With (a) eliminated in this way, Avicenna affirms that the principles which govern the generation of sublunary phenomena are determined by the alternating proximity and distance of immediate efficient causes (*'ilal fā'iliyya*) to and from receptive causes (*'ilal qābiliyya*). This can only come about through motion. This motion must be continuous, for if at any point it reached a moment of stasis, then another cause would be required for its resumption, leading to an infinite chain of regress. This being the case, it must be circular. This continuous, circular, pre-eternal motion of the celestial spheres, consists of an endless series of contiguous movements, originated in time, which act as the proximate efficient causes of terrestrial change. Being both pre-eternal,

4 Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, p. 300.

5 Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, pp. 300–301.

and consisting of individual movements, celestial motion provides the necessary ontological link between the eternal, beginning-less Necessarily Existent and the generation and corruption of innumerable sublunary phenomena.⁶

4.3 The Theory of Talismans in *al-Sirr*

4.3.1 Proof of the Heavenly Forces

Now, if celestial motion is the proximate efficient cause of sublunary phenomena, the talismanic craft represents the means by which such influence might be directed in order to act on terrestrial forces to bring about change in accordance with the practitioner's own objective. So now let us turn to the proof for the first premise of the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*: the positive affirmation of active heavenly forces as principles of sublunary change. It relies on the demonstration of three propositions:

- (1) The ultimate cause of temporal sublunary phenomena must be the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent;
- (2) That to which the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in pre-eternity;
- (3) Pre-eternal celestial motion mediates between the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent and the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena.

We shall now explore the demonstration of each of these three propositions, the last of which is dependent on the previous two.

The ultimate cause of temporal sublunary phenomena must be the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent

This proof begins by exploring whether the causes of “temporally originated phenomena (*ḥawādith*) in this elemental world” are themselves temporally originated or pre-eternal (*qadīma*). The first disjunct can of course be eliminated on the grounds that if they are themselves:

[. . .] temporally originated then they would need yet other causes, thus giving rise to an *infinite regress* (*tasalsul*) and that is absurd, because an influencing cause (*al-sabab al-mu'aththir*) must exist together with that which is caused (*al-musabbab*), so if that which influences the existence of each temporally originated phenomenon is yet another temporally

⁶ Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, pp. 301–302.

originated phenomenon, and so on without end, then it would be necessary for those causes and effects which have no end to occur in one instant (*daf'atan wāhidatan*).⁷

The Avicennan account of causation demands that the effect necessarily arises simultaneously with the existence of its complete and sufficient cause.⁸

This being the case, the entire chain of originated causes and effects must spring into existence in one instant. But the sum total of the members of this hypothetically endless chain must ultimately end in that which, being not merely possible as they are, but rather necessarily existent, stands outside of the aggregate which they form. And since this chain finds its end in the Necessarily Existent, it cannot without contradiction be held to be endless. So, referring to the set of temporally originated causes and effects, it is reasoned that:

[. . .] <their> aggregate (*al-majmū'*) is possible and temporally originated both as a whole and in terms of every one of its parts; and every possible is originated (*muḥdath*) and every possible has a cause which is different from it. And so that aggregate, in its entirety, and in each one of its parts, needs a cause. And that thing which is different from the aggregate of possible things and from each part of that aggregate is, inevitably, not a possible. And so it <must be affirmed> that all possibles end with the necessarily existent, and the assertion of an endless chain is proved false (*baṭula al-qawl bi'l-tasalsul*).⁹

That to which the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in pre-eternity

Having established that all possible and originated things end with a necessarily existent eternal cause, the question is posed whether everything which arises as a result of the influence of this eternal <cause> occurs: (1) pre-eternally (*fi'l-azal*) or (2) within time. Included within the latter of these two logical disjuncts are positions opposed to the doctrine of the eternity of the world, and thus closer to an Ash'arī perspective:

[. . .] included in this disjunction (*yadkhul fi hādihā al-taqsim*) is the position of the one who asserts that a <given> originated phenomenon was only created (*khuliqa*) at this time because its creation (*khaliq*) then was more fitting than its creation at another time; or

⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.7. Rāzī discusses the generation of temporally originated phenomena in the elemental world in terms of “causes” (*asbāb*). When we encounter the heavily adapted version of this discussion in *al-Maṭālib*, Rāzī speaks of their “cause” (*sabab*).

⁸ On this aspect of Avicenna’s theory of causation, see Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna*, Great Medieval Thinkers Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 199. For Avicenna’s full discussion on his contention that every cause coexists with its effect, see Avicenna, *Meta-physics*, pp. 201–205.

⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7.

because its creation was dependent on the arrival of a specific time, either actual or supposed. And so for all these positions it is true that everything which arises as a result of the influence <of this eternal cause> does not occur pre-eternally (*fi'l-azal*).¹⁰

As was mentioned previously, this latter logical disjunct is not subjected to analysis and then either elimination or affirmation, at the very least, as a possibility: it is simply ignored. So, assuming the truth of the former disjunct as it does, the argument then proceeds to prove that all that arises as a result of the influence of the Necessarily Existent—which, as will subsequently become clear include the celestial spheres—must necessarily be ordered after it ontologically in pre-eternity (*wajib al-tartib fi'l-azl*). This simply must be the case, because the only logical alternatives to this would be either: (1) an impossible ontological ordering (*mumtani' al-tartib*); or (2) merely a possible ontological ordering (*mumkin al-tartib*).¹¹

Of course, the first of these two alternatives can be summarily dismissed. For were such ontological ordering of all that arises from the Necessarily Existent impossible, then it must follow that the Necessarily Existent gives rise to nothing and produces no influence at all (*laysa bi-mu'aththir ašlan*). This would lead to an absurd contradiction of the original postulation that it does indeed produce an influence.

Less straightforward is the task of disproving that the ontological ordering of all that arises from the Necessarily Existent is merely possible, involving as it does the elimination of three hypothetical alternatives to the way in which such possible ontological ordering could be realised: (2)(a) the Necessarily Existent is sometimes the source of an effect and sometimes not; (2)(b) everything which should arise from the influence (*mu'aththiriyya*) of the Necessarily Existent does not in fact occur; and (2)(c) the Necessarily Existent changes from being an influencer from which no occurrent arises to one from which occurrents do arise. All three of these hypothetical realisations of possible ontological ordering are reduced to absurd conclusions.

Thus, if (2)(a) were correct: “[. . .] the distinction between the time during which the influencer becomes in actuality a source for the effect (*mašdar li'l-athar*) from the time during which it does not proceed thusly either depends: [(2)(a)(i)] on the superimposition of an additional attribute on it (*inḍimām qayd ilayhi*) or [(2)(a)(ii)] it does not so depend.”¹²

¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7.

¹¹ “So if we say that everything which arises as a result of the influence <of this eternal cause> occurs pre-eternally (*fi'l-azal*) it would follow that the effect would necessarily be ordered after it <ontologically> because the effect (*athar*), were it not so <necessarily> ordered, then either such ordering (*tartib*) would be impossible (*mumtani'*) or possible” (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7).

¹² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

Both disjuncts are invalid. (2)(a)(i) is eliminated by the following *reductio ad absurdum*: before the superimposition of the additional attribute the influencer would not be complete in its influencing capacity, thus contradicting the original postulation that the influencer is indeed an influencer. Its companion disjunct 2(a)(ii) is eliminated on the ground that it offends “the principle of inferring the the preponderator from possibility,” since if it were accepted as true then it must be assumed that the actual existence of the possible has “been made preponderant without anything at all to cause such preponderance” (*fa-qad tarajjaha al-mumkin min ghayr al-murajjih*).¹³

(2)(b) is immediately discounted on account of the contradiction to which it immediately gives rise:

If we were to say that everything which should arise due to influence (*mu'aththiriyya*) does not in fact occur, then if that cause were to endure forever (*in istamarra dhālika al-sabab abadan*) then it must be that it would never become that which produces influence (*mu'aththir*)—but we have just postulated that it is in fact a producer of influence pre-eternally (*fi'l-azal*). This is a contradiction.¹⁴

The hypothetical situation of (2)(c) posits that, from a situation in which nothing arises from the influence of the Necessarily Existent, as in (2)(b), it undergoes change such that occurrents do indeed arise.

Such change could only occur in the Necessarily Existent due to a superimposed attribute (*qayd*). The question therefore arises: was the superimposition of this attribute due to a cause or not? If not: “[. . .] then a possible would have happened without an influencer (*fa-qad waqa'a al-mumkin lā 'an mu'aththir*.)”¹⁵

This would lead to yet another contradiction. So, assuming that this change in the Necessarily Existent were indeed due to a cause, then the inquiry would be trapped in a chain of infinite regress which: “[. . .] would arise either from the aggregate of causes and effects which would exist in one instant—and that is what we have <already> refuted—or it would arise in such a way that each member <of the set of causes and effects> would be preceded by another, without <ever reaching> a beginning.”¹⁶

And so, having assumed that, with no explicit justification, the occurrent to which the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent gives rise occurs also pre-eternally, the inquiry, eliminating impossible and possible ontological ordering by means

¹³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 7–8.

¹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

¹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

of the arguments we have encountered, reaches the conclusion that this process must be one of necessary ontological ordering.

Pre-eternal celestial motion mediates between the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent and the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena

Thus far, the argument has sought to demonstrate two propositions: (a) the ultimate cause of temporal sublunary phenomena must be the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent; and (b) that to which the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in pre-eternity. Now taken as proven, the argument seeks to deploy these two propositions to account for how the influence of the Pre-Eternal Necessarily Existent, as the ultimate source of sublunary phenomena, can be mediated. For this purpose, it assumes that the: “[. . .] eternal, essentially necessary, producer of influence (*al-mu’aththir al-qadīm al-wājib li-dhātīhi*) is also essentially emanative (*fayyāḍ ayḍan li-dhātīhi*).”¹⁷

This being the case, a mechanism is required to account for how the unchanging simplex that is the Necessarily Existent acts as the ultimate emanative principle which produces the successive generation and corruption of innumerable sublunary phenomena. The solution, of course, is to be found in celestial motion, the process of which constitutes an endless series of individual, contiguous, temporally originated, planetary movements, such that: “[. . .] each originated phenomenon [i.e., planetary movement] is preceded by another such that the cessation of the prior (*inqiḍā’ al-mutaqaddim*) is a condition for the emanation of the posterior (*sharḥ li-fayaḍān al-muta’akhkhir*).”¹⁸

Motion, it is averred, provides the best paradigm for how the cessation of one temporally originated phenomenon would be a condition for the generation of the next. Two different examples are adduced to illustrate how this might be the case, the one representative of natural motion, the other of motion driven by continuous volition. The former is illustrated by:

[. . .] the clod of earth (*madarat*) which is thrown upwards <and> returns to the earth by its own weight. So that which necessitates this movement from the *terminus a quo* to the *terminus ad quem* (*min awwal al-masāfa ilā ākhirihā*) is that weight. It only necessitates the movement of the body from the second point (*al-ḥayz al-thānī*) to the third point be-

¹⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

cause the previous movement has caused it to reach the second point. So the occurrence of the first part of the movement and its cessation is a condition for the possibility that the weight becomes the cause of the movement of the body from the second point to the third. Such is the case with respect to all parts which constitute movement.¹⁹

If the state of the earthen clod as it leaves the hand of the thrower and proceeds in its skyward ascent, and its state as it travels in its descent, are understood analogously as two distinct but contiguous, temporally originated, planetary movements, then the weight of the earthen clod is the natural, non-volitional cause of the latter, and the cessation of the first state is a pre-condition for the efficacy of the earthen clod in its consequent generation of the second state. The analogy is extended to human volitional movement. Thus:

[. . .] he who wants to go and visit a friend of his, this volition is that which exerts an influence in moving the body from that place to that friend except that the influence of that volition in bringing about the second step is preceded by the occurrence of the first step and its cessation: in this way each preceding step is a condition for making possible (*imkān*) the influence of that volition on the occurrence of the succeeding step, <following> this way of ordering, until the final end of the distance.²⁰

Just as the cessation of the earthen clod's ascent is a pre-condition for the efficacy of its weight to produce the effect of its descent, so the cessation of a man's first step on his journey is a pre-condition for the efficacy of his volition to bring about the second step. For the continuous process of sublunary generation and corruption: "there must be an eternal, perpetual motion (*ḥaraka sar-madiyya dā'ima*) mediating between the first principle and these originated phenomena."²¹

Motion, of course, not only characterises bodies but also requires space. Thus, if this perpetual motion were rectilinear it would require infinite space, a logical consequence which Avicennan physics would find absurd.²² And so the

19 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

20 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

21 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

22 "[. . .] it is impossible for this perpetual motion to be rectilinear (*mustaqīma*) for otherwise, the existence of infinite space would necessarily follow and that would be absurd" (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8). On Avicenna's treatment of infinity in general and infinite space in particular, see Jon McGinnis, "Avicennan Infinity: A Select History of the Infinite through Avicenna," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 21 (2010): pp. 199–222. On Avicenna's marked departure from Aristotle in arguing for the impossibility of circular motion within an infinite void, see Jon McGinnis, "Avoiding the Void: Avicenna on the Impossibility of Circular Motion in a Void," in *Classical Arabic Philosophy: Sources and Reception*, ed. Peter Adamson, The Warburg Institute Colloquia 11 (London, Turin: The Warburg Institute, 2007): pp. 74–89.

argument is driven by the necessity to postulate the existence of: “[. . .] a body, the motion of which is circular, namely the sphere of the starless sphere (*al-falak*).”²³ Now, since it is a corporeal simplex, and: “[. . .] the relations (*nisab*) which arise between similar parts are similar; and similar matters, in the completeness of their quiddity (*fī tamām al-māhiyya*) cannot be causes of different matters,”²⁴ then its perpetual circular motion cannot by itself act as the cause of multiple and diverse sublunary effects. Rather, they are caused by the complex web of geometrical relations, which forms as a result of the eternal rotation of the celestial spheres relative to each other, each of which contains a planet possessed of its own unique nature, moving at its own unique speed:

The bodies of the spheres <contain> different natures, and these bodies, by reason of <the fact that> their <geometrical> relations and configurations (*tashakkulāt*) differ such that it is possible that these configurations are the principles for the occurrence of diverse originated phenomena in this world. So those bodies, <which are possessed of> different natures, <and> which are fixed in the bodies of the celestial spheres, are the planets (*al-kawākib*). So it is established that the proximate principles of the coming to be of originated phenomena in the world of generation and corruption, are the planetary applications (*ittiṣālāt al-kawākib*).²⁵

At this point, Rāzī makes explicit the connection between the talismanic craft and astrology, commenting that it is on account of their belief in the planetary applications as principles of sublunary change, that: “the philosophers and the Sabians, have asserted the divinity (*ilāhiyya*) of these planets, devoting themselves to their worship (*‘ibāda*), adopting for each one of them a specific temple and a particular idol (*ṣanam mu’ayyan*), devoting themselves to their service.”²⁶

4.3.2 Passive Receptive Forces

As was made clear in the initial definition for which this account is an elaboration, the talismanic craft works with both active heavenly forces and passive sublunary forces. The latter must be suitably disposed (*mutahayyi’a*) to receive, as the result of a particular unusual planetary configuration (*tashakkul gharīb*), the kind of celestial form (*hay’a*) which corresponds to the talisman master’s intended effect:

Moreover, they held that the active principle is not enough for the occurrence of the effect. Rather, it is necessary for <passive> recipients (*qawābil*) to be present together with

²³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

it; rather <all> conditions must be met, and obstacles removed. For perhaps an unusual <celestial> configuration (*tashakkul gharīb*) might occur <acting> on the matter of the lower world which is most apt for the bringing about of unusual originated phenomena within the matter of the lower world. So if sublunary matter is not suitably disposed (*mutahayyi'a*) for the reception of that form (*hay'a*) from the agents of influence of the higher world, then that form (*hay'a*) would not come about.²⁷

Certain impediments or unfulfilled conditions may thwart the suitable disposition of sublunary matter. But the expertise of the talisman master allows him not only to predict the celestial configuration most propitious for his intended goal, but also to prepare sublunary matter appropriate for the reception of that influence; to remove any impediments thereof; and to set in place preparatory procedures (*mu'iddāt*) that will ensure the full realisation of the desired astral emanation:

Moreover, the elapsing of that suitable disposition (*fawāt dhālika al-tahayyu'*) is sometimes on account of the <sublunary> matter being inhibited by encumbrances whilst at other times on account of the fact that certain conditions have not been met. But if we have been primed with foreknowledge of the nature of that configuration, the time of its occurrence, and the nature of those things which are to be considered in the generation of the sublunary matter which is receptive to that influence, then we would be able to prepare the matter to receive that influence; to hold in abeyance those encumbrances by which it would be inhibited; and to procure the equipment (*taḥṣil al-mu'iddāt*) for it such that the emanation reaches completion.²⁸

Thus the master of talismans has a consummate understanding of the fundamental nature of causality in the cosmos. This allows him to identify both the perfect agent (*al-fā'il al-tāmm*), in the form of a celestial configuration, to facilitate his terrestrial objective, and the perfect sublunary circumstances for the reception of its influence:

Since it is firmly established that when a perfect agent (*al-fā'il al-tāmm*) meets a perfect passive recipient (*al-munfa'il al-tāmm*) a perfect <resultant> action occurs, it is the master of talismans who knows—to the furthest extent of human capability—the active heavenly forces, their simple and composite aspects; it is he who knows that which corresponds to each sublunary recipient and knows the correct preparatory procedures to prepare (*waya'rif al-mu'iddāt li-yu'iddahā*), and the encumbrances to avoid.²⁹

²⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 8–9.

²⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 9. As we will discover when we examine what *al-Sirr* says concerning the practical method of casting a talisman, these preparatory procedures take the form of astral ritual involving objects of planetary correspondence.

²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 9.

Recalling the initial definition of talisman, the account concludes that the man who has mastered this knowledge and craft:

[. . .] is able to generate that which breaches the norm (*al-‘āda*) to repel that which is consonant with it, by bringing the passive receiver into close proximity with the agent (*yakūn al-insān mumkinan min istiḥdāth mā yakhrūq al-‘āda wa-min daf mā yuwāfiqūhā bi-taqrīb al-munfa‘il min al-fā‘il*). This is the meaning of the saying of Ptolemy that knowledge of the stars is from you and from them. This is the doctrine of the Sabians and the philosophers on the reality of talismans.³⁰

4.4 Active Heavenly Forces in *al-Maṭālib*

The account of talismans in *al-Sirr* is modified and adapted in Rāzī’s report, in *al-Maṭālib* 8, on how the philosophers and Sabians treated of the issue. But whilst, like the former, the latter concentrates on proving how heavenly active forces determine the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena, it is nevertheless unconcerned with the discussion of the Necessarily Existent as the emanative source of those forces and as the ultimate cause of sublunary reality. Rather its point of departure is to ask what the proximate efficient cause of change in the terrestrial world is. Thus, it dismisses the possibility that this cause can be a pre-eternal, beginning-less existent (*mawjūd qadīm azālī*), for were this the case, then its efficient causal influence would either be: (1) dependent on a temporally originated condition, thus giving rise to an argument of infinite regress which merely begs the question; or (2) not so dependent, in which case, its effect would also be pre-eternal, which is obviously absurd. So, the proximate efficient cause of change in the terrestrial world must also be temporally originated.³¹

This of course would lead to a beginning-less, infinite sequence of temporally originated causes.³² There are two ways in which this could occur. Firstly,

³⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 9. For the quote from Pseudo-Ptolemy, the Mirza Muḥammad Shīrāzī Cairo lithograph edition, p.9, l.9, reads “*wa-hadhā qawl baṭūlimūs “ilm al-nujūm mumkin wa-minhā.”*” Tehran, Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmī Library, MS 6853, f. 9b. reads “*wa-hādhā ma‘nā qawl baṭūlimyūs “ilm al-nujūm minka wa-minhā.”*” The latter is clearly the correct reading. Rāzī derives this saying from the Pseudo-Ptolemaic *Kitāb al-Thamara*: see José Bellver, ‘MS Tehran, Ketāb-kāna-ye markazi-e Dānešgāh-e Tehrān, 1971’ (update: 10.11.2018), *Ptolemaeus Arabus et Latinus. Manuscripts*, URL = <http://ptolemaeus.badw.de/ms/694> (accessed 11. 09. 2019). I thank Charles Burnett for recognising the source.

³¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 151.

³² This argument of infinite regress would occur on one of two grounds. One is that all causes and effects (*jamī‘ al-asbāb wa’l-musabbabāt*) would occur in one instant (*daf‘atan wāhida*) and we have already made clear in the demonstration of the Necessarily Existent by virtue of its essence that this is impossible. The other (ground) is that each one would be preceded

it could occur by way of an eternal spiritual existent, other than God, which perpetually moves from object of intellection to object of intellection. The generation of terrestrial phenomena is the result of the cognitive activity of a number of such spiritual entities whose existence is of a sublime ontological order. So to bring about contra-natural effects in this world, it is their aid which must be enlisted.³³ Secondly, it could occur by way of everlasting, uninterrupted, circular corporeal motion, namely, that of the celestial spheres.³⁴

Since these two ways in which this infinite chain of originated causes can be conceived are not mutually exclusive, Rāzī reports that the philosophers found it more credible to combine them, maintaining that it is through the

by another, without beginning (*lā ilā awwal*) – and this is the unavoidable truth (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 149–150).

- 33 Two possibilities might explain these temporally originated phenomena. One is that there should occur in reality a spiritual existent (*mawjūd rūḥānī*) which perpetually moves from one object of intellection to another (*yakūn dā‘iman muntaqilan min ma‘qūl ilā ma‘qūl*) and from perception to perception (*min idrāk ilā idrāk*), and so in accordance with those successive acts of perception and cohering acts of conceptualisation (*bi-ḥasab tilka al-idrākāt al-muta‘āqiba wa’l-taṣawwurāt al-mutalāṣiqa*) temporally originated phenomena come to be in this world. The spiritual existent must be eternal, without beginning or end, everlasting (*azalī abadī sarmadī*); and it must be other than God. Since it is established that the Necessarily Existent by virtue of its essence is necessarily existent in every respect (*min jamī‘ jihātihi*) then it would be impossible for it to undergo change. So that which is possessed of these ever-changing perceptions must be something other than God—exalted is He. So it is established that it is necessary to maintain that the existence of lofty spirits (*arwāḥ ‘āliya*) which govern the conditions of this world; and in this way no attempt to bring into being an unusual (*gharīb*) phenomenon can be successful except by seeking the aid of these spirits (*al-isti‘āna bi-tilka al-arwāḥ*) (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 150).

- 34 As for the second disjunct [i.e., explaining the generation of temporally originated phenomena], it is that there should occur an everlasting perpetual corporeal motion (*ḥaraka jismāniyya sarmadiyya dā‘ima*), free of beginning or interruption (*mubarra‘a ‘an al-mabda’ wa’l-maḥṣa*). So we say: this motion is either rectilinear or circular (*mustaqīm aw mustadīr*). The first disjunct is false because either this motion would extend without end (*tamtadd ilā ghayr al-nihāya*) thus necessitating the existence of limitless dimensions without end—and that is absurd—or it would return <on itself> at which time there would occur between the end of the outgoing <motion> and the beginning of the returning <motion> a <moment> of stasis (*sukūn*). Since it is established that between the two motions there must be a <moment> of stasis, at which point, this motion is <no longer> perpetual, free of interruption, then so it is <also> established that every rectilinear motion is interrupted. So the motion must be circular. This demonstrates that the first proximate principle for the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena (*al-mabda’ al-awwal al-qarīb li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādith*) in this world is the circular motion which obtains in the celestial bodies (*al-ajrām al-falakīyya*) (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 150–151).

celestial sphere, being driven by a governing soul, the conscious subject of endless acts of intellection, that infinite circular motion is realised:

Then the philosophers said: it is more apt (*al-awlā*) to combine the first and second disjuncts, such that the substance of the celestial sphere is like the body, and the substance of that spirit is like the soul (*jawhar al-falak ka'l-badan wa-jawhar dhālika al-rūh ka'l-nafs*), and the perpetual, moving acts of intellection which belong to that spiritual substance (*al-ta'āqqulāt al-muntaqila al-dā'ima li-dhālika al-jawhar al-rūhāni*) necessitate the motions of these corporeal spheres (*kurrāt jismāniyya*), their totality (*majmū'*) being the causes (*asbāb*) of the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena in this world. So is it established by way of this explanation that the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena in this world is contingent and dependent (*manūṭ wa-marbūṭa*) on circular celestial motion, free of interruption and change.³⁵

Like the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*, that in *al-Maṭālib* explains the incalculable variety which is to be found in sublunary reality in terms of the endlessly shifting geometric relations and applications between the planets, each of which, being centred in its own respective sphere, has a different nature and quiddity from its fellow heavenly wanderers:

[. . .] The celestial bodies are simplexes (*basā'it*) and the postulated parts of a simple sphere are homogeneous in both nature and quiddity (*mutashābiha bi'l-ṭab' wa'l-māhiyya*); and causes which share similarity in nature and quiddity do not yield aught but knowledge items which resemble each other (*ma'lūmāt mutamāthila*). And so the temporally originated phenomena of this world would necessarily be the same (*mutasāwiya*)—and that is false. Since this is false, there must occur, in the celestial bodies, bodies which are different in nature and quiddity—and those entities must be mobile such that, on account of their different motions, different <geometrical> relations arise; and those different <geometrical> relations are principles for the coming to be of the different temporally originated phenomena in the world of generation and corruption. And it is known that these different bodies which are bound by the substances of the celestial spheres (*markūza fī jawāhir al-aflāk*) are naught but the planets (*al-kawākib*). Thus, is it established with what we have mentioned: that the principles of the temporally originated phenomena which come to be in this world are naught but the different planetary applications (*al-itīṣālāt al-kawabiyya al-mukhtalifa*).³⁶

³⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 151.

³⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 151. Rāzī reports that this rational demonstration for active heavenly forces is supplemented by a rhetorical proof which infers the efficacy of the planets in causing sublunary phenomena from the observable fact that the Sun determines the seasons and the alternation of the night and the day. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that knowledge of the stars has been maintained by human culture since time immemorial:

As for the second proof—which is the rhetorical proof—it is that they said: we have mentioned many instances which show that the conditions <which obtain> in this world are dependent on the conditions of the Sun in the quality of its motion within the Zodiacal

To briefly sum up the account in *al-Maṭālib*, its explanation of talismans is largely dependent on that which is to be found in *al-Sirr*. However, its most important difference is its emphasis on the ensouled nature of the celestial spheres and planets on whose ever-shifting geometric relations sublunary reality depends. Whilst this is a doctrine which the philosophers and Sabians, as they are represented in *al-Sirr*, espouse, it is not integrated into the account of talismans but is introduced only later when describing their general beliefs. Furthermore, the explanation of talismans in *al-Maṭālib* omits the account in *al-Sirr*, illustrated by the examples of the earthen clod's ascent and descent and of the man walking to visit his friend, of how celestial motion can act as a cause of originated phenomena. To understand the significance of these two illustrations in configuring how celestial causation operates, we must turn to Rāzī's *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*.

4.5 Active Heavenly Forces in *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*

The account of heavenly active forces in the general explanation of talismans in *al-Sirr* also appears in modified form in Rāzī's *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, in a chapter entitled: "On circular motion as the cause of the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena."³⁷ But whilst their respective proofs establishing celestial motion as the proximate efficient cause of sublunary phenomena,

belt for it is for this reason that the Sun sometimes becomes northerly and sometimes southerly and it is on account of this variation that the seasons occur; and it is by reason of them that conditions in this world vary. Moreover, it is by reason of the rising and the setting of the Sun in the space of a day that the conditions of this world vary. This inductive reasoning is strong and a full explanation of the dependence (*istinād*) of the conditions of this world on the motions of the planets. This explanation finds corroboration in another, which is that since the beginning of time (*min qadīm al-dahr*) people assiduously applied themselves to knowledge of the stars and relied on them. For, you observe that for every <field of> knowledge there is an inception and a man who is the first to penetrate it deeply, except <however> for metaphysics (*al-'ilm al-ilāhī*) and knowledge of the stars. For you will never find <a single period in> history except that you see these two <fields> of knowledge existed before it. So were this knowledge false, then it would have been impossible for all the peoples of the world universally to have applied themselves assiduously to this <field of> knowledge, relying on its authority, from time immemorial up until this day. These considerations provide clear explanations of the truth of this knowledge. And God knows best (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 152).

37 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya fī 'ilm al-ilāhiyyāt wa'l-ṭabī'iyāt*, ed. Zayn al-'Abidin al-Musāwī et al. (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1925), vol. 1, pp. 627–629.

display the same structure, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* exhibits certain elaborations which will enrich our understanding of the explanation in *al-Sirr*.

So, having eliminated as logically possible the pre-eternal nature of the proximate efficient causes of sublunary phenomena, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* asserts that, like their terrestrial effects, they too must be originated in time.³⁸ As such, an infinite chain of temporally originated causes and effects would thus ensue. Since the sum total of such an infinite chain could not occur in one instant, it must be concluded that its occurrence proceeds sequentially, whereby each individual member of the chain is the effect of that which precedes it and the cause of that by which it is succeeded.³⁹

Therefore, reasons the account in *al-Mabāḥith*, this infinite sequence of temporally originated phenomena, which act as the proximate efficient causes of sublunary originated phenomena, must occur either as: “[(1)] disconnected instants of existence (*ḥawādith mutafāṣila āniyyat al-wujūd*) or [(2)] <as part of> a temporal continuum of existence (*zamāniyyat al-wujūd*).”⁴⁰

Not only does the account find absurd the assertion of a continuous succession of disconnected, non-contiguous instants (*tatāli al-ānāt*) to which the acceptance of the first of these logical disjuncts would give rise, but it also dismisses the proposition on the grounds that it entails an impossible contradiction since: “assuming such a continuous succession of instants, each instant would be disconnected <from the others> so the preceding <instant> would not necessarily end with the succeeding <instant> and so it would not be a cause for <the latter>—but it was indeed posited to be thus.”⁴¹

Therefore, with the elimination of the first of these logical disjuncts, the second, understood as entailing a continuous temporal flow, is affirmed. And so if the temporally originated causes of sublunary events occurred: “as a continuous temporal flow (*zamāniyya sayyāla*), then this would be motion. Thus is

38 The proximate causes of temporally originated phenomena (*ḥawādith*) must be temporally originated (*ḥāditha*) since if they were pre-eternal (*qadīma*) then their pre-eternity would be a necessary consequence of the pre-eternity of their causes. For if the causes <of the temporally originated phenomena> existed whilst they were non-existent, then by virtue of the existence of the causes, the existence of the effects (*al-musabbabāt*) would <merely> be possible (*mumkina*); so their existence, when they are brought into being, would require an extra cause – and <so their causes> would not then be causes. This is a contradiction. A fully detailed explanation of this point has already been presented to you in the Chapter on Causes (*bāb al-‘ilal*). Thus it is established that the proximate cause of originated phenomena is <itself> originated (Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 627).

39 Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, pp. 627–628.

40 Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 628.

41 Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 628.

it established that originated phenomena do not come into being except by <means of> motion.”⁴²

The causal link between the temporally originated cause and the temporally originated sublunary effect is conceived of as a geometrical relationship between the former and the latter which, being geometric, is determined by space. And since the endless contiguous sequence of individual instances of the former determines continuity in the generation and corruption of instances of the latter, the constant flow of terrestrial reality is determined just as much by time. Thus:

[. . .] if something were to occur in a body which did not hitherto exist, then between the cause (*al-‘illa*) of that thing and the body <in which it has occurred> a relation (*nisba*) has arisen which did not previously exist. So, there must be a movement which necessitates <between the cause and the body a certain> proximity after <a certain> distance, or <a certain> distance after <a certain> proximity, or a juxtaposition or contiguity, by which is secured the continuity of originated phenomena (*ittiṣāl al-ḥawādith*).⁴³

A temporally originated instance of motion brings about the geometric relationship between efficient cause and recipient cause appropriate to a certain effect in the latter. This geometric relationship is determined by the distance of the former from the latter, and its position in relation to it.

The account in *al-Mabāḥith* goes further than *al-Sirr* in elaborating on the nature of the temporally originated efficient cause which generates sublunary phenomena:

[. . .] the cause (*al-‘illa*) can either be a preparatory cause (*mu‘idda*) or one which exerts a metaphysical influence (*mu’aththira*). When a preparatory cause, it can precede the effect (*ma’lūl*) because it is not exerting an influence on the effect; rather it brings the effect into proximity <to its cause> such that it can issue from the cause. When <acting as a cause which> exerts an influence then it must be linked to the effect (*yajib muqāranatuhā li’l-athar*).⁴⁴

There are two types of efficient cause, the one preparatory (*mu‘idda*), the other metaphysically influential (*mu’aththira*). To bring about a certain effect, the former prepares the material, or the receptive cause, to receive the influence (*ta’thīr*) of the latter. The distinction between the two kinds of efficient cause is that between the essentially ordered—or metaphysical efficient—cause, and the temporally ordered—or natural efficient cause. The former bestows forms by

⁴² Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 628.

⁴³ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 628.

⁴⁴ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 628.

way of emanation on a material substrate which has been appropriately prepared by means of motion and change produced by natural efficient causes, to give specific existence to species forms.⁴⁵

When the influencing metaphysical cause exists together with a suitably receptive material substrate, the effect must occur, without any delay. This is to be contrasted with the relation that exists between a temporally ordered, preparatory cause and its effect, such as the dependence of offspring on the existence of its parents: “essentially ordered causes must exist simultaneously with their effect, whereas temporally ordered causes need not.”⁴⁶

To illustrate the difference between the two kinds of efficient cause, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* deploys the same two examples we have already encountered in *al-Sirr* to explain how motion, whether natural or volitional, enables efficient causality. In *al-Mabāḥith*, the example adduced to illustrate how this might work with natural motion replaces the clod of earth with “the weighty object.”⁴⁷ And instead of visiting a friend as he does in *al-Sirr*, the pedestrian in *al-Mabāḥith*, who illustrates how volitional motion enables efficient causality, is engaged in the more pious activity of pilgrimage.

Brief consideration of these two examples will yield a degree of insight into the nature of the causal complex which generates an effect according to the Avicennan model which Rāzī is presenting. Turning to the example of the weighty object, it is the transition between its initial ascent and subsequent descent which commands our attention.⁴⁸ The effect of the descent is the product of two efficient causes, the one preparatory, namely the completion of the ascending motion, and the other which is influential (*mu’aththir*), namely the weight of the object. The completion of the ascending motion is a necessary prior condition for the efficacy of the object’s weight to exert its influence to produce the descending motion:

That which exerts the influence <to produce> that <second> movement is in reality <its> weight. But were it not for the mobile’s completion of the preceding movement up to that

⁴⁵ McGinnis, *Avicenna*, p. 193.

⁴⁶ McGinnis, *Avicenna*, p. 193.

⁴⁷ “A paradigm for that in natural motion is that the weighty object (*al-thaqīl*), by reason of its ipseity (*fī huwīyyatihi*), does not reach a limit of <a given> distance (*ḥadd min ḥudūd al-masāfa*) except that that completion <of the distance> becomes a cause (*sabab*) for its preparedness (*isti’dāduhu*) to move from it to another point” (Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 628).

⁴⁸ The fact that the weighty object—or the clod of earth in *al-Sirr*—was initially propelled into the air by a volitional act is irrelevant, since the purpose of the example is to focus attention on the natural motion that determines the object’s subsequent trajectory.

point, then the <second> movement would have been impossible. Since, before the completion <of the first movement> to that point, it would have been impossible for the weight <of the mobile> to move it from there. But when it moved to that point the weight became such that it could move <the mobile> from that point. Movement from that point would have been impossible to have issued forth <as an effect> from that object of weight, being distant from the cause. Then when issuing forth <as an effect> became possible, it came to be close <to its cause>, and that proximity after distance only occurred on account of the previous movement: and that is what we mean when we say movement brings causes into proximity to their effects.⁴⁹

Motion conveys causes to their effects, as Avicenna asserts in the *Metaphysics*: “[. . .] the principles of generation depend on the proximity or remoteness of causes, and this is by means of motion. Therefore, motion is preceded by motion, <the latter> motion conveying the causes to this motion. The two <motions> are, hence, like two contiguous <things>.”⁵⁰

As for volitional motion, as exemplified by the pilgrim on the road to Mecca, the completion of each preceding step is the preparatory cause for each succeeding step, the metaphysical influential cause of which is the particular, renewed instance of the pilgrim’s intent, his universal volition being the metaphysical cause of the entire aggregate of steps taken along the pilgrimage route:

And its paradigm in volitional movement is that he who wishes to go on *ḥajj*, then <his> universal volition (*irāda kullīyya*) is a cause (*sabab*) for the coming to be of particular, ordered acts of volition (*sabab li-ḥudūth irādāt juz’īyya mutarattiba*), each one of which has been brought into proximity with the other. For, he does not reach the final point in the journey except that its completion at that point is a cause (*sabab*) for a particular intention (*qaṣd*) to arise from him such that he moves from that point to the point which succeeds it. And the influencing cause <which produces> the existence of those particular intentions, which follow one after the other, and which exert influence on particular successive movements is the universal intention <which links all such originated events>.⁵¹

So whilst in the example of natural motion, the preparatory efficient cause (*al-mu’idd*) is the completion of the weighty object’s ascent, in volitional motion, the preparatory cause of any but the initial step is the completion of the preceding step; and the influential cause (*al-mu’aththir*) in the case of the former is the weight of the object, whilst in the case of the latter the influential cause of each step is a particular ordered act of volition.

⁴⁹ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 628.

⁵⁰ Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, p. 301 (Marmura’s translation adapted).

⁵¹ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, pp. 628–629.

Having established motion as the paradigmatic model for change, and introduced the distinction between preparatory and influential efficient causality, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* can now explain just how circular motion acts as the cause which produces temporally generated phenomena:

So once you know this, then we say: these originated phenomena have a pre-eternal cause which has no beginning (*sabab qadīm azālī*), namely the Giver of Forms (*al-wāhib li'l-ṣuwar*). But its emanation depends on matter becoming prepared for the reception of that emanation (*fayḍuhu mawqūf 'alā ṣayrūrat al-mādda musta'iddatan li-qabūl dhālika al-fayḍ*); and that <state of> preparedness (*dhālika al-isti'dād*), having previously not existed, only comes to be by means of motions and changes such that each preceding <phenomenon> acts as a cause (*'illa*) allowing matter to become prepared for the reception of the succeeding <phenomenon>.⁵²

Successive planetary motions, which pursue their perpetual, circular courses, prepare sublunary material substrates such that they become receptive to substantial forms: these are bestowed by the Giver of Forms. Without this initial preparation by planetary motion, no form emanated by the Giver of Forms could come to inhere in a material substrate and give rise to a new sublunary phenomenon.⁵³

4.6 Conclusion

The similarity between the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*, the equivalent in *al-Maṭālib*, and the explanation of celestial causation of temporally originated phenomena in *al-Mabāḥith*, reveals a striking continuity of thought. The philosophers and Sabians as depicted in *al-Maṭālib* deemed it more credible to integrate, in the notion of ensouled celestial motion, the two possible explanations of how an infinite chain of originated causes of sublunary phenomena can occur, namely: the one that attributes their generation to the perpetual acts of intellection performed by spiritual beings; and the other which attributes it to

⁵² Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 629. On the Giver of Forms, see Jules Janssens, “The Notions of Wāhib al-Ṣuwar (Giver of Forms) and Wāhib al-‘Aql (Bestower of Intelligence), in Ibn Sinā,” in *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale. Actes du XIe Congrès international de philosophie médiévale de la Société internationale pour l'étude de la philosophie médiévale (S.I.E.P.M.)*, eds. Maria Cândida Pacheco and José F. Meirinhos (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), vol.1, pp. 551–62.

⁵³ “So if nothing can come to be except by means of motion which brings the cause into proximity to the effect - and this motion is also originated - then it must be preceded by another motion. So motion with no beginning must exist. Rectilinear motion has a beginning, so <it> must be circular motion” (Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, vol. 1, p. 629).

eternal circular motion. This is reflected in *al-Mabāḥith* and *al-Sirr* with the examples of the walking man and the air-bound earthen clod, as illustrations of how causation through celestial motion operates. As for the presentation of these two examples in the latter work, we find concealed in the philosophical subtext a theory of celestial causation which is given explicit treatment only in *al-Mabāḥith* which divides efficient celestial causes between the preparatory (*mu'idda*) and the metaphysically influential (*mu'aththira*): the former prepares the sublunary material substrate to receive the form emanated by the latter, namely the Giver of Forms (*al-wāhib li'l-ṣuwar*). No such mention of the Giver of Forms is made in *al-Sirr*, where it is replaced by the starless sphere.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, its use of the two examples of the walking man and the air-bound clod of earth indicates an implicit acknowledgement of the distinction between preparatory and metaphysical efficient causes.

However, as analogies illustrating celestial causation of sublunary phenomena, these two examples exhibit a structural flaw, an appreciation of which would afford us greater precision in problematising the difficulties which Rāzī faced in constructing a coherent account of celestial forces and talismanic efficacy. The process of sublunary generation and corruption involves two kinds of temporally originated phenomena: individual planetary motion and the corresponding sublunary effect. The analogies in *al-Mabāḥith* and *al-Sirr* only account for how the completion of one individual planetary motion can act as the preparatory cause of the next. Moreover, in both examples, the metaphysical cause of the succeeding phenomenon, of either planetary or sublunary pedestrian motion, is something which inheres in the very body that is the object of its influence. In other words, the same body is both the object and the substrate of preparatory and metaphysical efficient causes. While they might be successful as illustrations of self-perpetuating motion, the analogies lack the structure which integrates reference to the sublunary phenomenal effect, let alone the role of the practitioner of the Sabian talismanic craft whose ritualised actions can manipulate the celestial-sublunary nexus of causation.

Al-Sirr describes the talisman as: “the blending of heavenly active forces with elemental passive forces,” and identifies planetary configurations as “the principles for the occurrence of diverse originated phenomena in this world.” It would appear they are their preparatory causes, preparing a sublunary material substrate to receive a new form from the metaphysical influential cause which, in this cosmological model, is not the Avicennan Giver of Forms but the starless

⁵⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr* 3:1 mentions, however, *al-mu'ṭī al-muṭlaq*—the Absolute Giver, the nature of which we shall explore in the next chapter.

sphere. This being the case, what is the role of the talismanic practitioner? For a clear answer, we must remind ourselves of Rāzī's *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* where he comments: "know that celestial forces do not bring about extraordinary events without the bringing together (*inḍimām*) of passive receptive elemental forces (*al-quwā al-'unṣuriyya al-qābila*) with active earthly psychic forces (*al-quwā al-naḥsiyya al-arḍiyya al-fā'iliyya*) and this is the talisman."⁵⁵

Both the celestial movements, and the preparations and psychic activity of the talismanic practitioner, act as causes, the former heavenly, the latter earthly, which prepare the sublunary material substrate of the talisman to receive a form from the starless sphere, the metaphysical cause of change.

One last observation must be made before we conclude. Reference to the talisman as "blending" (*tanzīj*) would seem to suggest that the referent of "talisman" is a special kind of process. But in *al-Sirr* 3:1, the referent for the word is a physical object, specifically a planetary idol or a ring, cast at the correct astrological time, for the purpose of serving the practitioner's objective of causing remotely a specific effect in the sublunary world. Moreover, how the talisman, whether it is a process or a physical object, facilitates this objective remains unclear. These questions will now inform our analysis of *al-Sirr* 3:1, which provides both further theory and practical instructions for the talismanic process, and of the concluding passage of *al-Sirr* 1:4, which describes a talismanic ritual involving a planetary idol and a dramatic enactment of the practitioner's intended effect.

⁵⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, ed. Ali Reza Najafzadeh (Tehran: Anjoman-i Āthār-i wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005), vol. 2, p. 664.

Chapter 5

Making Talismans

5.1 Introduction

The foregoing exploration of the general theory of celestial causation and the talismanic craft, attributed in *al-Sirr* to the philosophers and Sabians, identifies three key problems in its account. Firstly, the account asserts: “[. . .] that the proximate principles of the coming-to-be of originated phenomena in the world of generation and corruption, are the planetary applications (*ittiṣālāt al-kaw-ākib*).”¹ Yet it is unclear how the planetary applications are to be understood in the context of its assumed division of efficient celestial causes between the preparatory (*mu‘idda*) and the metaphysically influential (*mu‘aththira*), unless of course we assume that the metaphysical efficient cause is the starless sphere. Secondly, how these planetary applications affect sublunary change remains unclear. And thirdly, whether the referent of the term “talisman” is a process, an object, or indeed both, is ambiguous. We shall now discover that, although it provides more information relating to the practicalities of the talismanic craft, *al-Sirr* 3:1 adds yet further layers of complication and inconsistency to this rather problematic and incomplete theory.²

5.2 *Tamzīj*: the Blending of Celestial Influence

The practical instructions for the forging of talismans in *al-Sirr* 3:1 treat the talisman as an object—a statue or a ring—rather than as a process. Thus far, we have explored the reality of the active heavenly and receptive terrestrial forces which the talismanic craft blends. However, neither *al-Sirr* nor *al-Maṭālib* provide a clear account of the precise nature of their “blending” (*tamzīj*) which is so

1 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated), p. 8.

2 The description of how to forge a talismanic statue in *al-Sirr* 3:1 reappears in modified form in *al-Maṭālib*. See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 8, pp. 179–180. Shahrastānī uses the word *talisman* primarily to refer to the astral ritual as a whole rather than the ring or idol which is manufactured as the physical product of the process. “talisman” for him is thus primarily a process word. See ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa’l-niḥal*, eds., Amir Ali Mahna and ‘Ali Ḥasan Fā‘ūr (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, 1993), pp. 308–309.

definitive of the craft. We must therefore work with the few allusions which these works do supply. In this section, we shall discuss both this process and the four heavenly bodies, the influences of which are blended within a talisman.

Two of those bodies, namely Mercury and an ancillary planet which, we shall discover, is the Moon, facilitate the process of blending. The other two bodies are a fixed star, and the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*, literally “planet of need”) appropriate for the intended goal of the operation, such as Mars for an aggressive objective, Venus for an amorous aim.³ Rāzī says:

[. . .] they have agreed that a talisman is not complete with just a fixed star alone. <Acting> on a complete talisman are one fixed star and three co-operating planets (*sayyārāt muta’awina*) by reason of which the four natures occur. One of the planets must be Mercury, for these operations are firmly bound up with it (*hādhihi al-a’ māl muta’allaqa bihā ta’alluqan shadīdan*). It is more apt (*al-awlā*) for the fixed star to be in the mid-heaven (*wasṭ al-samā’*) and Mercury in the Fourth.⁴

Why Mercury is important for this process only becomes clear in *al-Maṭālib* where, reproducing the relevant passage from *al-Sirr* with slight adaptation, Rāzī writes:

[. . .] they have agreed that a talisman cannot be struck with a fixed star alone. Rather they have said it is only complete with a fixed star and three planets (*sayyārāt*), so that the four natures (*al-ṭabā’i’ al-arba’a*) occur therein. One of the planets must be Mercury, for its nature is mixed (*ṭabī’atuhu mumtazija*) and facilitates the mixture of the natures and gives power to the mixture. They said it is more apt if the fixed star is in the mid heaven and Mercury in the fourth <house>.⁵

Mercury, being of a “mixed nature” which facilitates the “blending” (*imtizāj*) of the natures (*ṭabā’i’*) of the other heavenly bodies, is thus crucial to the talismanic craft which then blends them with elemental passive forces. Just as

³ See next section for a discussion of which planets would be appropriate for different kinds of operations. The fixed stars are discussed in *al-Sirr* 2:12, pp. 59–61. The debate as to whether the fixed stars or the wandering planets exert the greater influence in the sublunary world is discussed in *al-Sirr* p. 58. This discussion reappears in an expanded version in *al-Maṭālib* (see Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-’āliya min al-’ilm al-ilāhī*, vol., p. 157 and pp. 168–169.

⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 95.

⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-’āliya min al-’ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 189. Drawing on Abu Ma’shar, Rāzī reports that those engaged in deep investigation asserted that whilst the essences of the celestial bodies are free of (*mubarra’a*) the <four> qualities, they exert on the sublunary world the effects of heat, coldness, dryness and moistness by way of choice, since they are rational and living, possessed of volition (*aḥyā nāṭiqa mukhtāra*). (See Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 43).

crucial is the role of the Moon: “[. . .] the Moon’s motions are swift, its changes (*taghayyurāt*) many; as for the other planets, their motions are slow. The transformations <which occur> in this world are many; and so, the attribution of the transformations of this world to <the cause of> the motions of the Moon is more apt (*istinād taghayyurāt hādihā al-‘ālam ilā ḥarakāt al-qamar awlā*).”⁶

Moreover: “because of its swift motions, the Moon blends the lights of some planets with the lights of the others and so it is beyond dispute that these ways of blending <planetary lights> are the principles behind the occurrence of contingent events in this world. So the Moon is the most proximate cause of change.”⁷

Not only does *al-Maṭālib* reinforce the connection in *al-Sirr* between motion and blending, but it also amplifies the association between heavenly forces and light: “[. . .] because of the swiftness of the Moon’s motion, the lights of the planets are blended with the others (*tamtazij anwār al-kawākib ba‘ḍuhā bi’l-ba‘ḍ*), and in accordance with these blends, the states of the effects (*āthār*) which occur in this world differ.”⁸

The talisman is thus the locus of where heavenly lights, facilitated by the mixed nature of Mercury and the swift motion of the Moon, are blended.

5.3 The Operative Planet

The theoretical passage of *al-Sirr* 3:1 glosses over the issue of what the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) most effective for any given operation should be, reserving such detailed information for the following two chapters which treat respectively the talismans of Abū Dhāṭis and selections from *Kitāb Yawāqūt al-maw-*

⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 25. The phrase “*ilā ḥarakāt al-qamar awlā*” is missing in the Mirzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī Cairo lithograph edition but present in: Tehran, Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmī Library, MS 6853, f. 30a; Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, Carullah, MS 1482, f. 26a; Oxford, Bodleian, MS Marsh 125, f. 21b and Oxford, Bodleian, MS Selden Superius 66 f. 28b.

⁷ The sentence “*inna al-qamar bi-sabab sur‘at ḥarakātihi yumazzij anwār ba‘ḍ al-kawākib bi-anwār al-bāqī wa-lā shakka anna imtizājātihā mabādi’ li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādith fi hādihā al-‘ālam fa-kāna al-qamar huwa al-mabda’ al-qarīb*.” is present in: Majlis 6853, f. 30a; Süleymaniye Carullah 1482, f. 26a; MS Marsh 125, f. 21b; MS Selden Superius f. 28b, but missing from the Cairo lithograph, where it should appear midway p. 25, l. 25.

⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 170.

āqīt.⁹ So for a succinct overview of the kind of thing that is intended, we return to *al-Maṭālib*:

Know that each one of the actions sought in astral magic (*al-siḥr al-nujūmī*) must be connected with a specific planet (*lā budda wa-an yakūn muḍāfan ilā kawkab mu'ayyin*). Thus sowing division and hatred (*al-farqa wa'l-bughḍ*) is to be connected to Saturn. So perform <the operation> when Saturn is in one of its signs, <namely> Capricorn or Aquarius—Aquarius being stronger—or when in trine or sextile aspect with them; and <when> the Moon is applying to Saturn in any one of these positions, or in conjunction; [. . .] the ascendant sign (*ṭāli'*) should be one of the two signs of Saturn whilst Saturn is in it <at the same time>.¹⁰

Saturn is thus the operative planet required for the forging of any talisman by which is intended the sowing of division and hatred. For it to be effective, Saturn must either be in one of its signs or be favourably aspecting them. Ideally, Saturn should be in one of these signs as it, namely the sign, ascends from the horizon. Moreover, to effectively facilitate the process of blending the influence of the operative planet within the talisman, the Moon, being the most proximate celestial cause of terrestrial change, and acting as the ancillary planet, should either be applying to Saturn or conjunct.

The objectives of securing a living or high esteem are best achieved, *mutatis mutandis*, under the equivalent conditions appropriate to Jupiter acting as the operative planet, with the Moon in application or conjunction, the rising sign being one of the signs of Jupiter, or of its exaltation. The same principles apply with respect to Mars if the objective is to gain domination over someone; to Venus if the aim is to inflame love. It follows then that talismanic operations which are intended to ignite a consuming and obsessive passion (*al-tahyijāt*), being both aggressive and amatory, involve both Mars and Venus, when they are in conjunction with each other, and the Moon is in conjunction with both of them, or in strong aspect with them. Being associated with all things hidden, intellectual and psychological (*nafsānī*), Mercury is the operative planet appropriate for the uncovering of buried treasure; attracting the favour of a scholar; or inflicting psychological—as opposed to bodily—harm. Crucially, for all these

⁹ Literally, “*kawkab al-hāja*” means “the planet of need,” i.e., the need that the operator intends to be met by working any talismanic operation. For the “Talismans of Abū Dhāṭis al-Bābīlī,” see *al-Sirr* 3:2, pp. 96–104; for selections from *Kitāb Yawāqīt al-Mawāqīt*, see *al-Sirr* 3:3, pp. 105–109.

¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol.8, pp. 187–188.

talismanic operations, the Moon must either be applying to or conjunct with the operative planet.¹¹

So returning to *al-Sirr* 3:1, the influences of the four heavenly bodies involved in the process of forging a talisman are referred to as ‘*aṭāyā*, or “gifts,” the power of which vary in accordance with a number of factors. Explains Rāzī:

One is proximity to and distance from the Absolute Giver (*al-mu‘ṭī al-muṭlaq*) <by which> I mean the starless sphere (*al-falak ḡhayr al-kawākib*). So whatever is closer to it, the greater its power in giving. The second <factor relates> to size (*al-kibar wa’l-ṣiḡhar*), for the largest <sphere> is more giving. The third relates to speed <*al-baṭī’ wa’l-sarī’*>, for the slower it is, the more giving it is; and the higher perfects (*mukammil*) that which is below it.¹²

Since the starless—or tropical—sphere marks the boundary between the celestial and the supracellular realms, it serves as the interface between the pure forms of the intellects and the celestial souls which receive them. Thus, for example, its relative proximity to the tropical sphere; the slow speed of its rotation; and its size, confers on the sphere of Saturn a particularly powerful influence.

5.4 Images of the Planetary Degrees

Consideration of the starless sphere—the Absolute Giver—is necessary to determine in which degree of the zodiac the operative planet should be when rising on

¹¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 188. *Al-Maṭālib* organizes far more information than *al-Sirr* concerning the most appropriate position of the Moon when casting a talisman. The Moon should be free of malefics; it should be clear of being eclipsed by a margin of twelve degrees in either direction, for the ancients, Rāzī informs us, used to call the eclipse of the Moon the “Moon’s death”; it should not be in opposition to the Sun; it should not be in quartile aspect with the Sun, nor should it be halfway towards quartile aspect (*‘alā al-anṣāf*), for quartile aspect is a relationship which is halfway towards opposition; it should neither be in the first nor the last degrees of the signs; it should not be in opposition to Saturn, or in conjunction or in quartile or the halfway points of the quartile aspect, since it is a malefic planet and weakens the operation; it should not be with the lunar nodes, the Head and Tail of the Dragon (of the two, the Tail is the more malevolent); it should neither be in opposition to Mercury nor in conjunction; it is disliked for the Moon to be in Libra or in Scorpio for in these signs the two luminaries are in detriment; it should not be in the sixth degrees of Leo or Gemini. (See Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 191–192).

¹² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 95. Compare, Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 189. The passage from *al-Sirr* 3:1 then proceeds to state: “[. . .] the gifts of the planets are like things which bring perfection and the Absolute Giver is the Sun (*inna ‘aṭāyā al-kawākib yakūn ka’l-mukammilāt wa’l-mu‘ṭī al-muṭlaq huwa al-shams*)”. This would appear to flatly contradict the previous statement that the Absolute Giver is the Tropical Sphere.

the eastern horizon at the moment when the molten metal of the talisman is poured into its mould. Rāzī discusses the degrees in detail in *al-Sirr* 2:14, entitled “On the images of the degrees of the planets (*fī šuwar darajāt al-kawākib*).” It is to this chapter that we shall make a brief digression before we return to *al-Sirr* 3:1.

For his information on the images of the degrees, Rāzī relies on two versions of a work written by Ṭumṭum al-Hindī.¹³ He describes how associated with each degree of the starless sphere is an image, knowledge of which is the privilege of an elite few.¹⁴ The chapter lists the thirty degrees of each sign together with the name of each degree’s adjutant (*awn*) and a description of: the effect that each can be called upon to exert in the sublunary world; its image; and the suffumigation used in its invocation.¹⁵ The effects of each of the degrees range widely and include such actions as killing one’s enemies; increasing harvest yield; causing the milk of mothers to cease flowing; and inflicting a plague. The images are both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic. Deciding on the particular desired effect, the practitioner is to select the appropriate degree and deduce, considering a number of factors, including the term and decan in which it falls, which of the seven

13 See *al-Sirr*, p. 81, for Rāzī’s discussion of the various works on which he relied. He provides two differing lists of descriptions of images: the first is on pp. 71–81; the second on pp. 81–86. The reason for these two different lists is that, he asserts, he was relying on two versions of the work. Unfortunately, he lacked the drive (*lā maṭma’a*) to analyse the versions and arrive at an informed opinion as to which was the more reliable. He points out that there are versions of the images of the degrees other than those described in the Ṭumṭum literature (*al-ṭumṭumīyyāt*). Three versions were related by Abū Sa’īd Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Jalīl al-Sinjārī al-Sijzī in his *Kitāb al-Jāmi’ al-Shāhī*; another in the book *Tinkūlūshā the Minor*; and another version related by Abū Dhāfīs in his *Risāla fī’l-ṭilasmāt* (see *al-Sirr*, p. 81). A version of Ṭumṭum is extant in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ar. 2595, f. 59a, ‘the Book of Ṭumṭum al-Hindī on the knowledge of the degrees of the sphere and their images and talismans’: see Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrittmums*, vol. 7, *Astrologie, Metereologie und Verwandtes bis ca. 430 H* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p. 96, referred to by Charles Burnett commenting on the reference to a certain ‘Tomtom’ in Adelard of Bath’s translation of Ṭābit, *Liber Prestigiorum Thebedis*, in “Ṭābit Ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian on Talismans and the Spirits of the Planets,” *La Corónica*, 36 (2007): p. 25. On the life of the prolific astronomer, astrologer, geometer al-Sijzī, see Glen van Brummelen “Sijzī: Abū Sa’īd Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jalīl al-Sijzī,” in *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers* (New York: Springer, 2007), p. 1059.

14 “[. . .] looking down in any <given> degree from the starless sphere (*al-falak*) is such-and-such. It is a mysterious allusion (*ramz*), its aim being that none should attain its knowledge except he who is possessed of complete understanding and an excellent natural talent (*qariḥa jayyida*)” (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 70). Each image would appear to encode a mystery which none can decipher except the wise.

15 Compare Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 388, where Rāzī reports that the Masters of the Talismans averred that each of the three hundred and sixty degrees of the Zodiac has a specific spirit.

planets is associated with it in particular. He is then to draw the image of the degree and a zodiacal and a planetary diagram; then he is to perform the appropriate suffumigation and invoke the name of the spirit.¹⁶

Although it is not explicitly stated, the obvious intention is that the correct timing for the procedure is determined when the relevant planet enters the zodiacal degree of choice when it is in the ascendant.

5.5 Forging the Talisman

The basic operation that Rāzī describes in *al-Sirr* 3:1, is the talismanic statue or a homunculus. His most probable source for this is Thābit Ibn Qurra's book on talismans which survives in two different Latin versions.¹⁷

16 Rāzī reports on the authority of Abū Dhāṭis the Babylonian:

If you want to perform an operation in accordance with this book, then should you act <in pursuit> of the need which you desire. So search for it within these degrees (*darajāt*). If you find the degree and know its suffumigation and the name of the adjutant (*al-'awn*) by which it is particularised, then determine which of the seven planets is specific to it, by <establishing> for example the lord of the term (*ṣāhib al-ḥadd*) of which that degree is a part; the decan (*al-wajh*); the triplicity; and the dodecatemoron (*al-ithnā 'ashariyya*); the exaltation (*al-sharaf*) and the sign (*al-bayt*). When you know the lord of the degree, then seek the day of that planet and the planet which is lord of that day (*ṣāhib min dhālika al-yawm*). And if that planet is feminine (*unthā*) then perform your action in the night that is specific to it, in the specific hour. Then produce an image of the degree on paper and write its name in Sanskrit (*hindiyya*) beneath it; and draw a mandala and write on it the names of the twelve zodiacal signs and the seven planets and their images in Sanskrit. When you have done this, you then begin to perform the suffumigations of that degree and you invoke (*da'awta*) the lord of that degree by his name and you ask him to fulfil your need for he will indeed do so in the swiftest time. If it is delayed for three days, then repeat the operation three times such that nine days are completed, performing this operation at the beginning of each <block of> three days for that would be the furthest extent to which it would be delayed (*fa-innahā ghāyat al-ta'khīr*). Be wary lest you err in determining the degree and its lord, for if you make a mistake, then this operation would avail you naught. Know this, for it is a most beneficial introduction (*muqaddima*) to this kind <of practice>. Know that knowledge of the natures of the degrees, together with a full understanding (*iḥāṭa*) of this introduction is mighty indeed (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 71).

17 The translations by Adelard of Bath and John of Seville and Limia are described and analysed by Charles Burnett in "Thābit Ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian." Unlike the account in *al-Sirr*, Thābit's work describes in detail the necessary astrological conditions for the carving out of each part of homunculus in its mould into which the molten metal is eventually poured.

To ensure successful *tamzīj*, the weights and measures of the elements which are constitutive of the metal from which the talisman is to be forged, must balance the celestial forces acting on it at the moment that it is cast: “It is necessary to know the weights and measures of the four elements in the raw material in the lower world in accordance with the planetary forces (*bi-ḥasab quwā al-kawākib*) so that the recipient balances the active agent (*ḥattā yakūn al-qābil muwāziyan li’l-fā’il*).”¹⁸

Rāzī unfortunately declines to expound on the alchemy required to ascertain the correct measure of the metal to be used such that the four elements contained therein balance the celestial forces acting on it. Nor does he explain precisely how planetary forces are to be measured, calculated and quantified. Be that as it may, the principle which determines the general timing for the forging of a talisman is nevertheless clear. Each talismanic objective is characterised by one of the four elements and so the talisman must be forged in the season appropriate to that element. Moreover, if the objective corresponds with an extreme of the element by which it is characterised, then mid-season would be the most appropriate time for the casting of the talisman:

It is necessary to observe appropriate timing (*yajīb ri’āyat al-zamān al-munāsib*). For, if the aim of the talisman is to bring about an effect connected to heat and dryness, then <the time of its casting> should be selected for the summer. So if the heat and dryness <of the action> are extreme then <the time of its casting> should be selected for mid-summer (*al-qayz*); if <they are not extreme>, then either at the beginning or end of the summer season. The same reasoning applies by way of analogy to the other seasons (*wa-qis’alayhi sā’ir al-fuṣūl*).¹⁹

When the general timing is decided, the specific moment is to be selected in light of the following considerations:

If you wish to make a talisman, then ensure that: the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) is in the cardine of the ascendant (*fī watad al-ṭāli’*) at the beginning <of the process> of making the talisman; the rest of the planets assisting (*al-kawākib al-mu’āwina*) in the operation are in the three remaining cardines; and anything which might cause corruption to the ascendant planet is cadent (*wa-asqit ‘an al-kawkab alladhī fī’l-ṭāli’ mā yufsiduhu*). If the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) enters its term (*ḥadd*), its decan (*wajh*), and its

¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 95.

¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 95. See Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 196 for Rāzī’s classification of all such procedures under the four elements.

triplicity (*muthallath*) and the rest of its shares (*sā'ir ḥuẓūzihi*), then the operation will be more complete (*atamm*).²⁰

For any given objective, the correct astrological circumstances for casting the talismanic statue must be carefully selected and will be rare indeed. Ideally, the operative planet will be in the cardine of the ascendant; the appropriate fixed star in the mid-heaven: Mercury, preferably in the fourth house, and the Moon, other than in opposition to the Sun or Saturn, in the remaining cardine.²¹ Yet further precision of timing is demanded by the requirement, as previously discussed, that the practitioner waits for the operative planet to be in the appropriate degree of the zodiac as it rises above the eastern horizon.²² When the perfect moment arrives, the operator, who has already carved the mould into the correct form, pours into it the metal appropriate to the operative planet. The casting of a talisman is a solitary activity, for no-one else should be in the operator's company. As he pours the metal into the mould, he is to perform those suffumigations which correspond with the operative planet. Alternatively, instead of casting a talismanic statue, he can forge a ring, the stone of which should correspond to the operative planet.²³

20 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.96. Compare Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhi*, vol. 8, p. 189:

If you wish to make a talisman, then ensure that: the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) is in the cardine of the ascendant (*fī wataḍ al-ṭāli'*) at the beginning <of the process> of making the talisman; and the rest of the planets assisting (*al-kawākib al-mu'āwina*) in the operation are in the three remaining cardines. If it occurs (*in ittafaqa*) that the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) enters its term (*ḥadd*), its decan (*wajh*), and its triplicity (*muthallath*) and the rest of its shares (*sā'ir ḥuẓūzihi*), then the operation will be more perfect (*akmal*).

21 The closer the fixed star is to zenith, the more powerful its effect (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 58).

22 Being beyond the scope of this study, a close analysis of the planetary degrees and their images, treated in *al-Sirr* 2:14, pp. 70–86 will have to remain for now a *desideratum*.

23 Rāzī informs us:

He who wants to cast talismans should consider the aim for which he wants to strike a talisman. If it is for one of the aims which the Sun indicates, or one of the aims signified by the other planets as we have already mentioned, then let him seek a time in which that planet enters one of the degrees appropriate for that aim, which should also be the ascendant degree. Then he should take at that moment a statue (*tinthāl*) of the kind appropriate to that planet, <wrought> of one of the seven metals (*al-aṣṣād al-sab'a*) which we detailed earlier. He should exert his utmost in its construction, in the most correct and most perfect way possible, but without exceeding, in this action, the time during which the planet is in that degree which corresponds to the horizon of the ascendant. The way to do this is that [the practitioner] sets up in readiness before him the instrument for casting and melting the metal (*ālat al-tafrīḡ wa idhābat al-jasad*). When the appropriate time arrives, he empties it into the mould (*al-qālab*) which has been prepared for it [i.e., the talisman], [the mould] being one of the things needed

Whilst performing this operation, the practitioner should maintain complete mental focus on his objective: “Let your heart and your mind be entirely submerged in that goal, and if you utter at that time its name and description then would its <success> be more sure. For the starless sphere assumes a form in accordance with the intention (*fa-inna al-falak yatashakkal bi-ḥasab al-niyya*).”²⁴

Crucial to the success of the operation is the ability of the practitioner to maintain a fixed, one-pointed concentration on his goal. Rāzī leaves unexplained the mysterious assertion that the starless sphere—or the Absolute Giver—assumes a form in accordance with the intention.

As an illustration of such an operation, Rāzī furnishes his account with the example of a Saturnine talisman, the aim of which is to bring harm to an intended target:

And if you want to create a talisman to cause affliction to a man or to cause him illness, then seek out the entering of Saturn into one of the degrees which indicate that; you should have taken a statue resembling a man; at that moment you should undertake to cause harm to one of its limbs and a place on its body, for when you do this the limb of that man will be corrupted.²⁵

So the practitioner is required, not only to forge the anthropomorphic talismanic statue at the precise astrological moment, but also to perform on the statue a ritualised mimesis of the effect he intends to bring about in his target. This is summarised neatly in *al-Sirr* 1:5:

Know that the more these acts are performed in concert, the stronger their effect. This is dependent on knowledge of the planets, the zodiacal signs, the mansions of the Moon, and the natures of the degrees. The planet corresponding to the magical operation is sought, whilst the rest of the assisting planets should be making strong applications. Then everything which is corresponding to that planet including tastes, colours and so forth are to be gathered. Then a doll in the image of the man [i.e., who is being targeted] is fashioned from a material that is corresponding to the planet; then you smear the organ that you want affected by this operation with a potion sympathetic to the operation; then you wrap it and place it inside the image and smear it with potions corresponding to that aim, then suffumigate it

for that specific statue (*timthāl*)—as well as the other things which a man would need around him [i.e. for the performance of the operation], such that it proceeds smoothly (*ḥaythu tawaj-jaha*). When making it, let him be alone in a place in which there is no one else; let him burn aromatics specific to the planet; and he is to exert his utmost to ensure that the rest of the planets that are assisting the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*), are in the cardine of the ascendant, or aspecting it, and that the hostile planets should be cadent from it. And if your operation is <to forge> a ring, then its stone (*faṣṣ*) should be of the substance (*jawhar*) of that planet, and from that which has a specific occult power in attaining that goal (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96).

24 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96.

25 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96.

with corresponding aromatics and perform the astral ritual (*tunajjim*) with respect to the planet appropriate to that operation. When this is done then the result is assured.²⁶

5.6 Conclusion

In the terms of the model of celestial causation which emerged from our previous discussion of the general physics of talismans, it would appear that the *mu'ath-thira*—or metaphysical influential cause—which acts on the talisman to give it its power is that degree of the starless sphere which is in the ascendant at the point when the metal is poured into its mould. At this moment, the four planets which ideally would be occupying the four cardines, and moreover the actions of the practitioner and his mental focus, act as causes which prepare the material substrate of the molten metal to receive its potency from the degree of the starless sphere.

But, leaving several questions unanswered, the foregoing account falls short of providing a full explanatory model for how the talisman works. These unanswered questions relate to the three ontological levels which the craft coordinates: the supralunar; the talismanic; and the psychological.

On the supralunar level, it is by now apparent that, in the thought of Rāzī's Sabians and talisman masters, the starless sphere, as the Absolute Giver (*al-mu-ḥī al-muṭlaq*), is the first principle and metaphysical efficient cause of sublunary change—the equivalent of Avicenna's Active Intellect, which acts as *al-wāhib li'l-ṣuwar*, the "Giver of Forms" for all natural kinds in the sublunary world. As such, this represents a sharp divergence from Avicennan cosmology. This notion is initially suggested in *al-Sirr* 1:5 where Rāzī reports:

Of the <foundational> premises of this knowledge is that the Masters of Talismans are in agreement that each form in this world has its archetype in the starless sphere (*kull ṣūra fī*

26 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. Compare Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 182–183:

When you have cast the statue and want to inflict the [target's] brain with disease, then you daub the inside of its head with opium and mandrake. If you want to afflict him with heat, daub the place of its heart with hot, burning paint, or write you write the spell (*ʿazīma*) on a metal sheet and throw it onto fire, or you write the spell on paper and cast it into a vial. When you perform these procedures, void your heart completely of any action other than this action; strengthen the phantasm (*al-khayāl*) in your soul; and visualise the occurrence of that state in the organ of that man. The advantage of making that image is the concentration of thought (*jamʿ al-aḥkār*) and the strengthening of the phantasm. When strong celestial influences are brought together with all the receptive sublunary bodies; and when full, powerful psychic force is brought to bear on them; then the objective will inevitably occur.

hādhā al-‘ālam fa-lahā mithāl fi’l-falak) and that the earthly forms are subject to heavenly forms (*al-ṣuwar al-suflīyya muṭī‘a li’l-ṣuwar al-‘alawīyya*): serpents to Draco; scorpions to Scorpio; predatory animals to Leo and so on.²⁷

However, the account leaves the reader uncertain of the following issues: the ontological status of the images of the degrees of the starless sphere; the quiddity of the ‘gifts’ (*‘aṭāyā*) of the lesser planetary givers and their relationship to light; the meaning of “blending” the natures of the planets in reference to the role of the Moon and Mercury in the talismanic process.

On the level of the physical talisman itself, the method by which the four elements, which constitute the metal from which it is cast, are to be calculated and balanced against the celestial forces which act on it at the moment of its creation, is not delineated. Furthermore, the actual form of the talismanic statue, or image with which the talismanic ring is engraved, remains obscure. So for instance, the talismans of Abū Dhāṭīs al-Bābili, in *al-Sirr* 3:2, are said to: “be based on the images of the degrees.”²⁸ The first of these is a talisman to gain status and reputation and to command the awe of men. Its operative planet is the Sun, which must be in the ascendant degree at the moment when the talisman—in this instance, a ring—is forged. Any one of twenty-five separate degrees, unevenly distributed across all the signs, except Virgo, Sagittarius and Aquarius, can serve as the appropriate ascendant degree. Each of these degrees of course, has its own individual image, as described in *al-Sirr* 2:16. Nevertheless, Abū Dhāṭīs instructs that the ring is to be engraved with the

27 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.18. Rāzī’s source, either directly or indirectly, is Aḥmad Ibn Yūsuf’s commentary on the Centiloquium of Pseudo-Ptolemy (*Kitāb al-Thamara*), verbum 9: “for example, scorpions obey the constellation of Scorpio in the sphere, and snakes obey the constellation of Hydra in the sphere” (*mithl an yakūn al-‘aqārib muṭī‘a li-ṣūrat al-‘aqrab fi’l-falak wa’l-ḥayyāt muṭī‘a li-ṣūrat al-shujā‘ fi’l-falak*). See: *Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf ibn al-Dāya: Commento al Centiloquio tolemaico*, eds. Franco Martorello and Giuseppe Bezza, *Indo-Iranica et Orientalia Series Lazur 10* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2013), p. 70, lines 181–182. In the *Liber prestigiorum Thebidis* (translated by Adelard of Bath in the early 12th century), which draws from a work by Thābit Ibn Qurra on talismans, but also incorporates other material including Pseudo-Ptolemy’s *Centiloquium* and its commentary by Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf, we read that: “[. . .] the images of this composite world obey the images on the firmament—no doubt meaning by this that the images of individuals suffering corruption and regeneration under the lunar circle obey the images on the celestial circle. For example: an individual lion obeys the zodiacal Leo, and also an individual scorpion or serpent obeys the celestial Scorpius or Serpent.” Note that, like *al-Sirr*, the *Liber prestigiorum* adds a reference to Leo. I am grateful to Charles Burnett for making these observations, which are to be published in: Gideon Bohak and Charles Burnett, *Thābit ibn Qurra ‘On Talismans’ and Pseudo-Ptolemy ‘On Images 1–9’: a Reconstruction Based on the Judaeo-Arabic and Latin Texts, Together with the ‘Liber Prestigiorum Thebidis’ of Adelard of Bath* (forthcoming).

28 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96.

following image of Saturn: a man, seated on a throne, wearing a crown, around which is entwined a serpent; his right hand holds a spear and the index finger of his left hand is placed over his mouth.²⁹ Thus the relationship between the image of the enthroned man and the images of the twenty-five different degrees which can potentially serve as the ascendant is obscure.

Moving from the ontological level to the psychological, we observe that Rāzī refrains from theorising on the relationship between the operator's soul and the talisman, and its agency in ensuring the success of the operation. The practitioner is required to sustain simultaneously a firm connection with the spirit of the operative planet together with complete focus on the objective of his ritual. Intense and sustained mental concentration would seem to be just as important as the appropriate celestial configuration and the diligent crafting of the talismanic homunculus which represents the locus where macrocosm and microcosm meet:

He who would apply himself to this craft ought not to omit anything that relates to the senses, thought (*fikr*), imagination (*khayāl*), activity of the estimative faculty (*wahm*), intellect and soul except that he makes it connect either to the spirit of the heavenly body whose aid he is invoking in his act, or to that which has a connection to that heavenly body. The stronger the connection, the more complete is the realisation of the goal. Know that just as it is necessary for the one who would apply himself to these acts to make all his powers of perception connect (*ta'liq*) to the celestial spirit, so it is also necessary to connect the estimative faculty (*ta'alluq al-wahm*) to the effect that he wishes to bring about.³⁰

Rāzī continues in explanation:

For instance, if he wishes to strike a man with obsessive ardour (*tahyij*) or to afflict him with an illness, then he should fashion a statue (*timthāl*) which he makes to correspond

²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 96–97.

³⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 16–17. Rāzī says in *al-Maṭālib*:

There are those who object to this kind of action [i.e., the talismanic craft] saying it is mere idle play (*'abath*) <affording> no benefit. Rather, appropriate celestial correspondences (*al-munāsabāt al-nujūmiyya*) and the psychic activity of the estimative faculty (*al-awhām al-nafs-āniyya*) are all that is required. Jābir Ibn 'Abdullah bin Ḥayyān said: "This objection is mistaken because the coming to be of this form at the time of the planet's rising proceeds in the same way as the birth of a child at the time of a planet's rising." For just as the power of the rising planet and the <power of> the rising degree suffuses that child, so in the same way they both suffuse that carved image and cast statue. Know that when that idol (*ṣanam*) is being cast into its mould (*al-qālab*); and when the carving is being done to that stone, the practitioner (*al-'āmil*) must wear attire corresponding to that planet, gathering around him all the effects appropriate to that planet, uttering praises appropriate to the planet, his heart being present to all the effects appropriate to the planet. When this happens, the desired effect will be strong (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 180–181).

with the man and make his estimative faculty connect with it (*yu'alliq wahmahu 'alayhi*) and on the limb which he especially wants to affect by this operation. If he wants to strike a man with obsessive ardour (*tahyij*) then he heats up the limb of that statue with heat in actuality such as fire; or if he wishes to kill him, then he should he plunge needles into its limbs and wrap it up in a scrap of shroud and place it in an old cemetery; if he wants to afflict him with paralysis then he should smear it with cold potions and drugs and suffumigate it with potions that cause extreme coldness or cast it somewhere filthy and remote. These actions are required because when you bring together the raw materials which receive the special influence of the planet from which a certain effect is sought, and you bind your heart and estimative faculty to it, then the influence of that planet will inevitably flow towards that person.³¹

Once the practitioner's soul is firmly bound with that of the operative planet, whilst simultaneously focusing on the target of his operation, ritualised action ensures that the special influence of the former flows to the latter in accordance with his intention. It is the practitioner's will which intervenes in the general emanation of the planet's influence and directs it to a specific end:

The furthest reach of investigation reveals that it is established that here is a general principle that emanation flows to all forms such that receptive matter does not receive certain forms to the exclusion of other forms without something which makes that eventuality preponderant (*illā li-murajjih*). Since all elemental bodies are receptive to all forms which resist being substituted for each other, the emanation of these forms from the First Emanating Principle is no more apt than others. If, however, the talismanic practitioner's psychic connection with the celestial spirits is strong, then a specific emanation will preponderate, and God knows best.³²

All three ontological levels of the supralunar, the talismanic, and the psychological thus act in consort. Whilst the practitioner is sedulous in choosing the correct celestial configuration; in balancing the forces of the heavenly bodies with the elements of the raw material that makes the talisman; in performing the correct suffumigations and the correct ritualised action, the success of the operation lies in the mysterious connection which he establishes with the spirit of the operative planet by means of his estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). Thus, to understand Rāzī's construction of the Sabian craft, not only must we understand the cosmology and celestial causation that informs it, but we must also attempt to construct the theory of cognition and perception in which it is grounded.

³¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 17. That Rāzī is now speaking of plunging a needle into a statue would suggest that it is not made from metal.

³² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 17.

Chapter 6

Sabian Spiritual Discipline and Avicennan Cognition Theory

6.1 Introduction

It will be recalled from chapter 1 that, according to the Avicennan naturalistic theory, the prophet exerts occult power by means of an internal sense called the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). Whilst all humans possess this faculty, the prophet's is innately powerful. In *al-Maṭālib* 8, Rāzī objects that whilst this explanation is merely probable (*muḥtamal*), it does not commend itself over and above a range of other equally as plausible explanations. This being the case, the Avicennists have effectively relativised the prophetic ability. One such plausible account is that ordinary humans might train the estimative faculty using spiritual techniques in order to strengthen its occult power. This is the purpose of Sabian spiritual discipline and the focus of this chapter.

Entitled “On magic that is based on the purification of the soul and the connecting of the estimative faculty (*ta'liq al-wahm*),” *al-Sirr* 1:4 represents the psychological core of the theory of occult practice proposed by Rāzī.¹ It reveals that the purpose of the spiritual discipline required by magical training is to establish and consolidate a firm connection with the celestial spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-falakiyya*); it is by means of this connection that the adept may realise the occult power with which only a few souls have innately been imbued. Spiritual austerities purify the soul (*taṣfiyat al-nafs*) of its preoccupations with corporeal being, allowing the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*), the most important of the internal sense faculties, which mediates between the corporeal and immaterial worlds, to facilitate connection with the celestial spirits. No explanation of the nature of this mysterious faculty is provided: such knowledge is assumed of the reader.

Al-Sirr 1:4 consists of five sections:

- (1) Ten proofs that the soul's estimative faculty can affect the physical world;
- (2) A discussion on the soul innately possessed of occult power;
- (3) On the acquisition of occult power that is not innately possessed:
 - (a) On the astrological natal conditions of the one who would acquire occult power;

¹ I shall henceforth refer to *al-Sirr* 1:4 as “The *Psychology of al-Sirr*.” See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated), pp. 11–17.

- (b) On the spiritual austerities and disposition of soul required for the acquisition of occult power:
 - (i) Asceticism;
 - (ii) Purging of superfluous thoughts and humoral excesses;
 - (iii) Vegan diet and reduction of food intake to the barest minimum;
 - (iv) Fortification of the brain with fragrance, colour and music;
 - (v) Abjuring all sensory objects of desire;
 - (vi) Sabian idolatry and connection with the celestial spirit by means of the estimative faculty;
- (4) On the soul that has perfected occult power;
- (5) On operative magic.

In summary the argument proceeds as follows. Section (1) adduces ten proofs to establish the fact that the soul, and in particular its estimative faculty, can exert a powerful effect on the corporeal world. This conclusion then provides the basis on which to surmise that if the power of some souls whose occult power to act on the corporeal world is weak, then reason admits of the possibility of souls whose occult power is strong. Now, this power is either innate, or it can be acquired. The ensuing discussion in section (2) as to whether or not innate occult power is a function of the soul's quiddity or humoral temperament distracts little from the broad structure of the general argument which proceeds to section (3) and the main purpose of the chapter: the discussion of how the soul might acquire occult power. This method is encapsulated in the title of *al-Sirr* 1:4: "the purification of the soul and the connecting of the estimative faculty" (*taṣfiyat al-nafs wa-ta'liq al-wahm*) to the celestial spirits. Both the physical aspects of the soul's purification, as well as the ascetic disposition it is required to adopt, facilitate but one aim: to strip the soul of all which could distract it from establishing a connection with the celestial spirits. It is by means of this connection that occult power is acquired. If the soul's powers are divided between numerous tasks, its success at performing them will be diluted: if they are all focused on but one aim, the likelihood of its realisation would be greatly enhanced. The soul's preoccupation with digestion is an example of just such a dilution. The adept is therefore required to adopt an uncompromisingly ascetic attitude and thus sharpen his ambition (*himmā*) for the spiritual world, enabling him to develop the strength of mental focus (*al-tafakkur*) by which is achieved the very aim of magical training, namely connection with the celestial spirits.

Section (3)(b)(vi) merits particular attention. It introduces the estimative faculty as crucial for the establishment of this connection. And since the soul is subject to the senses, the planetary idol (*ṣanam*) becomes a necessary tool in

this process: once the senses connect with the idol, they are followed by the imagination and estimative faculty. The soul is then drawn, by means of the idol, to the celestial spirit. With consistent practice, the connection becomes a stabilised disposition (*malaka*) of the adept's soul and he reaches a level close in rank to the soul innately possessed of occult power. Section (4), which describes the semi-divine powers of the one who has fully developed his occult power, represents the dramatic denouement of *al-Sirr* 1:4. For he who has yet to achieve this perfection, section (5) provides instructions on how, having stabilised his connection with the celestial spirits, the adept might produce transitive magic, by connecting his estimative faculty to the outcome that he desires.

6.2 The Internal Senses: *al-Ishārāt* 3:9

In constructing his theory of Sabian magic in *al-Sirr*, Rāzī consistently highlights the crucial roles played by the estimative faculty and the imagination. However, he omits a description of their nature and activity which is essential to our understanding of his theory. His allusions to the internal faculties draw on the psychology of Avicenna and so it is *al-Ishārāt* 3:9 and Rāzī's commentary thereon that we shall consult for a particularly succinct statement concerning them.

Avicenna's account of perception is deeply informed by Aristotelian hylomorphism whereby either the forms of sense data or mental objects are impressed (*inṭaba'a*) or inscribed (*irtasama*) by agent faculties into receptive faculties. He begins his account of the internal faculties with the common sense (*al-hiss al-mushtarak*) since its sphere of activity is the closest to the external senses, and its existence is the most evident and the least controversial. The common sense receives sensible data or forms (*ṣuwar*) from the five external senses and combines them to generate an integrated experience of extramental reality. Sometimes, however, this activity can produce an experience which does not strictly accord with the extra-mental reality from which the sense data derive. Thus, a raindrop as it falls appears as a straight line; a dot painted on a rapidly rotating circle itself appears to the observer as a circle, on account of the rapidity of its circular motion. Neither the line of the raindrop, nor the circle of the rotating dot, is a visual experience produced by the vision, a faculty in which only the form of that which directly presents itself to it is represented (*al-baṣr innamā tartasim fīhi ṣūrat al-muqābil*).² Rather it is produced

² Fakh̄r al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, ed. Ali Reza Najafzadeh (Tehran: Anjoman-i Āthār-i wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005), vol. 2, p. 248.

by the common sense which combines sense data that it receives and apprehends them (*tajtami' al-maḥsūsāt wa-tudrikuhā*), generating the perception to which the soul is witness (*mushāhada*).

Rāzī accurately expounds on Avicenna's account of the common sense in the following way. He says the two examples of the rain drop and the rotating point illustrate the activity of the common sense which integrates the forms of sense data received by the external senses (*al-quwwa allatī tajtami' fihā suwar al-maḥsūsāt bi'l-ḥawāss al-khamsa*). In the case of these two examples, the observer experiences the perception of forms which describe a descending line and a rotating circle respectively. They are not in themselves sensible forms since neither exists in actuality in the extra-mental world. The question therefore arises as to where these forms come to be imprinted: the locus of their imprinting cannot be the external sense faculty of the vision, which only perceives objects which do in fact exist in the extra-mental world; nor can it be the substance of the soul which, being non-corporeal, cannot serve as the locus of corporeal forms. Their locus must therefore be an internal corporeal faculty: the common sense. The soul, by means of this sense, "sees" the shape of a line (*shakl al-khaṭṭ*) because the raindrop, when at point₁, leaves the imprint of its form, having been received by the external sense faculty of the vision, in the common sense; but before this imprint can vanish from the common sense, the raindrop leaves yet another imprint of its form when it has reached point₂; these forms are combined in the common sense which, as a result of this combination, perceives a continuous line between these two points.³ Working in concert with the common sense is a second faculty, the sensible memory (*al-khayāl*), which Avicenna also names the representational power (*al-muṣawwira*): this faculty acts as a storage facility which retains the images of sense data.⁴

3 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 248.

4 Literally "*al-khayāl*" means "the imagination." However, for the sake of clarity, I shall translate it as "the sensible memory" since in Avicenna's psychology it refers to the faculty which stores forms (*suwar*) of sensible objects (*maḥsūsāt*): it is a memory store for a particular kind of percept. When the soul recollects a physical form, it draws on *al-khayāl*—the sensible memory, which is not to be confused with the faculty of the *mutakhayyila*, a word deriving from the same root as *khayāl*. The *mutakhayyila* actively draws on forms stored in the sensible memory (*al-khayāl*) and can compose (*tarkīb*) them to produce a fantastical image such as a winged horse. Since this activity is much closer to how we conceive of 'the imagination', I shall reserve this word to translate *al-mutakhayyila*. The reader, however, must note that both Avicenna and Rāzī, confusingly, often use the word *al-khayal* to refer to the imagination. I shall draw the reader's attention to this fact whenever this occurs.

Whilst the common sense receives and apprehends sense data (*ṣuwar*) from the external senses, a third faculty called the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*), which is also possessed by higher animals, receives and apprehends a fundamentally different percept: the “intention” (*ma'nā*). This percept is non-sensible but inheres in sensible objects. An example of such a percept is that which the sheep apprehends from the wolf, or that which the ram apprehends from the ewe. Thus, with the first example, whilst the sheep perceives the wolf’s snarl and bared teeth with its external senses, which convey these data to the common sense, it is with the estimative faculty that the sheep perceives the wolf’s predatory intentions. Such intentions are conveyed for storage in a fourth separate faculty called *al-dhākira*—the estimative memory.⁵

Since it has the closest interaction with the external senses, the common sense is located at the front of the brain; the sensible memory is situated in the interior cavity (*al-baṭn al-muqaddam*); and whilst the locus of estimative faculty is to be found further to the back of the brain in the middle ventricle (*al-tajwīf al-awsaṭ*), it employs the entire brain as its instrument (*ālatuhā al-dimāgh kul-luhu*). The estimative faculty is served by a fifth faculty, the locus of which is the front part of the middle cavity. Its activity involves splitting apart and recombining forms taken from the common sense and intentions perceived by the estimative faculty. Moreover, it combines forms with intentions as well as separating the former from the latter (*turakkib ayḍan al-ṣuwar bi'l-ma'ānī wātufaṣṣiluhā 'anhā*). Thus, Rāzī describes this Avicennan faculty as being “*mutaṣarrifa*”—or “acting without restriction”—on the two different kinds of percepts which the soul perceives and stores. Its activity takes place in one of three modes: (1) autonomously; (2) under the control of the estimative faculty; (3) under the direction of the intellect. Strictly speaking, since it inheres in a physical substrate, the immaterial intellect cannot act directly upon it. Thus, the imagination can only directly serve the estimative faculty. When it does so, then according to Rāzī’s commentary to *al-Ishārāt* 3:9, it is called the imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*). However, it can also serve the intellect (*al-'aql*), but only—and this is crucial—through the mediation of its immediate master, the estimative faculty. When serving the intellect thus, it is called the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*). The close relationship between the estimative faculty and

5 “*Dhākira*” literally means “the memory”. I shall translate it as “the estimative memory” to avoid any confusion with the sensible memory.

the imagination is reflected by the fact that they share the middle cavity of the brain.⁶

On the basis of Rāzī's commentary to *al-Ishārāt* 3:9, the attribution of the cogitative and imaginative modalities of the *mutaṣarrifa* to its control, either by the estimative faculty or by the intellect (by means of the estimative faculty), seems straightforward. However, Rāzī's commentary to *al-Ishārāt* 10:14, where he suggests the cogitative faculty can operate in service of either one or the other, gives us reason to be cautious of such an overhasty conclusion. Discussing the two obstacles which prevent the imagination from impressing the forms of dreams and visions in the common sense, Rāzī says: "The second obstacle relates to the agent [i.e., the imagination which impresses the dream into the common sense] for when the intellect or the estimation uses the cogitative faculty, which becomes preoccupied with the service of one of them, it is not free to perform its own special actions."⁷

It would appear therefore that the estimative faculty also engages in cogitative activity using the *mutaṣarrifa*. What the objects of its cogitation are we shall discuss in the next section.

6 According to Lane's *Lexicon*, *ṭaṣarrifa* means: (1) "to be employed in more than one way"; (2) being synonymous with *taqallaba*, "he acted in whatsoever way he pleased, according to his own judgement or discretion or free will, or as a free agent." See Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. 4, (London, Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1872), "Ṭ-R-F." This first meaning reflects the dual use of this faculty as *al-mutakhayyila* and *al-mufakkira*. When employed neither by the estimative faculty alone nor by the intellect through the estimative faculty's mediation, it acts as a free agent, combining forms with other forms and intentions according to its own will. As we shall notice in the second part of this chapter, neither Avicenna nor Rāzī offer any speculation as to what determines the course of its activity when it acts autonomously. For the sake of clarity and precision, when I wish to discuss this faculty neutrally, neither as the imagination nor the cogitative to the faculty, I shall refer to it as the *mutaṣarrifa*. For analysis of Rāzī's critique of Avicennan internal sense theory in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, see M. Zahit Tiryaki, "From Faculties to Functions: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Critique of Internal Senses," *Nazariyat Journal for the History of Philosophy and Sciences* 4/2 (2018): pp. 75–118. Tiryaki observes that Rāzī's use of *mutaṣarrifa* is "only a terminological difference." (See: Tiryaki, "From Faculties to Functions," p. 88, fn. 27). In fact, Rāzī's use of the word brings greater precision to his analysis of the Avicennan account of this faculty, highlighting its dual-functionality which, in his view, as expressed in *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, contradicts the *ex uno unum* principle that underpins the justification for the Avicennan complex of internal senses. On the cogitative faculty as an Avicennan compromise between the immateriality of the human soul and the sensible and empirical basis of human knowledge, see Deborah L. Black, "Rational Imagination: Avicenna on the Cogitative Power," in *Philosophical Psychology in Arabic Thought and the Latin Aristotelianism of the 13th Century*, eds. L. López-Farjeat and J. A. Tellkamp (Paris: Vrin, 2013): pp. 59–81.

7 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 647.

But to conclude our overview of the internal senses, Deborah Black identifies three epistemological principles by which Avicenna adduces these five internal faculties:

- (i) Being percepts of a fundamentally different nature, sensible forms (*ṣuwar al-maḥsūsāt*) and intentions (*maʿānī*) require different faculties to be perceived;
- (ii) The same faculty cannot be both active (manipulating percepts in some way) and passive (receiving percepts as impressions);
- (iii) The same faculty cannot be both receptive and retentive, receiving the impressions of percepts as well as retaining them, since the former activity requires a malleable substrate whilst the latter activity requires a more stable substrate.⁸

It is in mindfulness of rules (i) and (iii), points out Black, that Avicenna posits two pairs of receptive-retentive faculties: the common sense and the sensible memory to receive and retain sensible forms respectively; and the estimative faculty and the estimative memory to receive and retain intentions. Rule (ii) gives rise to the need for the imagination as a separate faculty which acts on percepts, dividing and reuniting sensible forms and intentions in different combinations. It never ceases from action. So, when it is neither serving the estimative faculty alone, nor the intellect by way of the estimative faculty's direction, it continues its activity autonomously.⁹

⁸ See Deborah Black, "Imagination and Estimation: Arabic Paradigms and Western Transformations," *Topoi* 19 (2000): pp. 59–75; in particular p. 59. Avicenna's classification of the internal senses emerges from a pre-existing Arabic Aristotelian tradition. See Dag Nikolaus Hasse, "The Soul's Faculties," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, eds. Robert Pasnau and Christina Van Dyke, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): pp. 305–319; and Taneli Kukkonen, "Faculties in Arabic Philosophy," in *The Faculties: A History*, ed. Dominik Perler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): pp. 66–96.

⁹ At the same time, we must bear in mind the fact that Avicenna did not consider the soul's faculties as mereological parts, constituting a composite whole. Rather, for Avicenna, the soul was a simplex, the activities of which became manifest through its faculties. For Avicenna's ontology of the soul, see Seyed N. Mousavian and Sayed Hasan Saadat Mostafavi, "Avicenna on the Origination of the Human Soul," in *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 5, ed. Robert Pasnau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 41–86.

6.3 The Estimative Faculty

Having gained this overview of the five internal senses, let us examine more closely the estimative faculty and its intimate relationship with the imagination in order to gain a deeper understanding of their role in Rāzī's conceptualisation of Sabian worship and their use of idols in establishing noetic connection with the celestial spirits.

In *Kitāb al-Nafs*, the psychological part of Avicenna's *al-Shifā'*, the relationship between the estimation and its percepts is modelled in close analogy to the external senses and sense data.¹⁰ The estimation is the analogue of reason in the animal soul.¹¹ Its percepts are: “[. . .] non-sense-perceptible “intentions” which exist in particular sense-perceptible objects; like the faculty existing in a sheep judging that this wolf is something to flee from and that this child is something to have affection for. It is likely that this faculty is also responsible for combining and separating the forms <stored in the faculty> of the imagination.”¹²

10 Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul 1160–1300*, The Warburg Institute Studies and Texts 1 (London, Turin: The Warburg Institute, 2000), pp. 127–154.

11 For the fullest study of the the estimative faculty, its percepts and its role as governing faculty of the animal soul, see Deborah L. Black, “Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna: The Logical and Psychological Dimensions,” *Dialogue* 32 (1993): pp. 219–258.

12 Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Nafs*, published as *De Anima (Arabic Text) Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā'*, ed. Fazlur Rahman (London New York Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 45, translated by Dag Hasse in *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West*, pp. 129–130. What Hasse here translates as “imagination”, I would render “sensible memory”. For more in-depth discussion on the *ma'nā*, or “intention”, see: Deborah L. Black “Intentionality in Medieval Arabic Philosophy,” *Quaestio* 10 (2010): pp. 65–81; Marina Paola Banchetti-Robino, “Ibn Sīnā and Husserl on Intention and Intentionality,” *Philosophy East and West* 54/1 (2004): pp. 71–82; Jari Kaukua, *Avicenna on Subjectivity: A Philosophical Study*, Jyväskylä Studies in Education, Psychology and Social Research 301 (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä Press, 2007); Taneli Kukkonen, “Ibn Sīnā and the Early History of Thought Experiments,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52/3 (2014): pp. 433–459; Jon McGinnis “Experimental Thoughts on Thought Experiments in Medieval Islam,” in *The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments*, ed. Michael T. Stuart, Yiftach Fehige and James Robert Brown (London: Routledge, 2017): pp. 77–91; Alexander Key, *Language Between God and the Poets: Ma'nā in the Eleventh Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 152–195; and Rotraud Hansberger, “Representation of Which Reality? “Spiritual Forms” and “*ma'āni*” in the Arabic Adaptation of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia*,” in *The Parva Naturalia in Greek, Arabic and Latin Aristotelianism: Supplementing the Science of the Soul*, eds. Börje Bydén and Filip Radovic, *Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Mind* 17 (Cham: Springer, 2018): pp. 99–121.

This passage reveals four aspects of the nature of the estimative faculty's percepts or "intentions." Firstly, they cannot be perceived by the external senses. Secondly, they are particular. Thirdly, they inhere in sense-perceptible objects. Fourthly, their existence is independent of the estimative faculty perceiving them. The passage also reveals three aspects of the estimative faculty. Firstly, it is the faculty which perceives intentions. Secondly, the estimative faculty reacts to them in some way. And thirdly, the estimative faculty separates and combines them with forms stored in the sensible memory.

Avicenna includes in his category of intentions, together with non-sensible percepts such as the hostility of wolves, ostensibly sensible percepts associated with a form, such as the sweetness of yellow honey when it is "seen" as being sweet rather than being judged as such by means of direct taste. In this case, the sweetness of the honey is perceived neither by the external sense of vision, nor by the external sense most appropriate to apprehending sweetness, namely the sense of taste. Rather, Black argues, given its inclusion as an intention, the sweetness of the honey is being perceived other than as a sensible percept.¹³

In other circumstances of course, such as when I lick my finger, having dipped it into the honey pot, the sweetness of the honey would be a sensible form, not an intention. Whilst some objects of perception, such as the hostility of wolves, will always be intentions, the status of others as such will depend on the nature of the perception between subject and object.

What, therefore, does Avicenna imagine is the link between wolfish hostility and honey-sweetness in the context we have discussed? Black argues that the link is in memory. If in the past the perceiver has tasted something sweet that is yellow, he may come to associate yellow things with honey. Similarly, the dog repeatedly beaten by the stick will come to fear the stick. Having previously been repeatedly thrashed by a stick, the dog's estimation draws on the estimative memory (*dhikr*), evokes the intentions stored from those previous beatings and combines them with the form of a new stick. Black says: "images must be associated with the intentions that make them icons¹⁴ of particular, concrete individuals."¹⁵

Since the estimative memory and the sensible memory are retentive and thus passive in nature, a third faculty is required to make links actively between

¹³ Black, "Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna," p. 226.

¹⁴ Black's use of the word "icon," drawing on Aristotle's use of the Greek word "*eikon*" in his *De Memoria* 1.450a22–451a14, is particularly significant for the purpose of understanding how Rāzī portrays the use of idols as talismans in astral magic. See Black, "Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna," p. 228.

¹⁵ Black, "Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna," p. 227.

immediately perceived intentions and those stored from previous experiences. This faculty is the imagination, acting under the control of the estimative faculty. But this would appear to defy the principle previously stated that activity and passivity cannot obtain in the same faculty. Mercurial in nature, the estimative faculty seems to be playing both active and passive roles in the process of cognition.

This apparent contradiction can perhaps be resolved by examining more closely the principle which the estimative faculty apparently offends. The principle maintains that an internal sense faculty cannot be both active in relation to its sense objects (somehow manipulating them) and passive in relation to them (i.e., being impressed upon by their percepts). The apparent contradictory role of the estimative faculty can thus be resolved in one of two ways. One way is to modify this principle with the qualification that an internal sense faculty cannot act both actively and passively in any one given moment. Thus, it may alternate between active and passive modes of behaviour in different moments. A second way to resolve the contradiction is to maintain that whilst an internal sense faculty cannot both receive impressions from percepts passively as well as manipulate them actively, it is not precluded from the ability to receive percepts whilst at the same time actively to manipulate a second internal faculty, such as the imagination, which acts on those percepts directly, linking them to similar percepts stored in the estimative memory. A third way is to maintain that whilst the estimative faculty cannot act on any intention it is receiving in the present time, it can act on those which have already been stored in the memory (*dhikr*). This third approach, however, leaves the imagination redundant. Of these possible approaches, it is the second which fits most congruently within Avicenna's structure of the internal sense faculties.

The estimative faculty does not only perceive intentions but it also reacts to them. As Hasse points out, this becomes clear in a passage from Avicenna's *De Anima* concerning the estimation's reactions to the past and the future:

Sometimes in the course of remembering, some grief, anger and sorrow arises which resembles the state <of the soul> at the time when the <remembered> thing was present; for the only reason of grief, anger and sorrow about the past is the imprinting of this form in the interior of the senses. If the form returns, it produces this <disposition> or something similar. Wishes and expectation also produce this. Expectation is different from wishing because expectation is the imagination of something with the judgement or opinion that it probably will happen, while wishing is the imagination of something and desire for it and the judgement that joy will ensue if it takes place. Fear is the opposite of expectation

in the way of contradiction; despair is its absence. These are all judgements of estimation.¹⁶

Sorrow, for example, about a past event, is the result of a judgement that the estimation produces when it links a retained form stored with a stored intention. A similar process occurs when an actual object is perceived in present time, such as when the sheep encounters the wolf.¹⁷

Thus not only does the estimative faculty perceive intentions, but it also combines them with forms to create the perception of an integrated experience. For Avicenna, it is the governing critical faculty in the animal soul.¹⁸ The reactions or judgements which it produces such as fear or desire provide the impulse which harnesses the body and propels it into action. Moreover it can harness the imagination to produce composite images without references to external images.¹⁹ We have already encountered in the illustration of the dog and the stick an example of the estimative faculty directing the imagination which draws on the estimative memory (*dhikr*) and the sensible memory (*khayāl*), to combine form with intention, which induces the estimation to produce a judgement that results in the dog's fear, and hence aversion to the stick. This is a process which takes place within the animal soul of a dog. It is a process which also takes place within the human. But within the human, the estimative faculty can also harness the imagination to create fictional images, such as a phoenix: "creative imagination, then, presents us with an activity of human estimation which opens up the possibility of interaction between estimation and intellect, even if its results are merely vain ideas."²⁰ In such a role, the

16 Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West*, p. 133, translating Avicenna, *De Anima*, p. 187. Whether or not the estimative faculty's reaction to an intention amounts to a "judgement" must be treated with caution. In his study of the estimative faculty in Avicenna's psychology, Robert E. Hall observes: "<Judging> (along with other words from the base form *ḥ-k-m*) is greatly overused by Avicenna in connection with the *wahm*. The meaning shifts from <discriminating> or <distinguishing> to making judgements about what to do or what to believe, that is, to <directing> or <controlling>. As a term in a language of analysis it has little value unless it is clearly qualified each time." See Robert E. Hall, "The *Wahm* in Ibn Sinā's Psychology," in *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale: Actes du XI^e Congrès International de la Société Internationale pour l' Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale* (S.I.E.P.M.), eds. Maria Cândida Pacheco and José Francisco Meirinhos, vol. 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006): pp. 533–49, in particular, p. 542, fn. 28.

17 Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West*, p. 134.

18 Black, "Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna," p. 227.

19 Black, "Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna," p. 227.

20 Black, "Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna," p. 227. For fictional images, see also Deborah L. Black, "Avicenna on the Ontological and Epistemic Status of Fictional Beings," *Documenti E*

estimative faculty functions as a kind of mediator between the intellect and the world of sensibles.

Such is the degree of agency with which the estimative faculty operates in the human soul, that it can even override the intellect and deny the intelligibles it perceives. Whilst the estimative faculty's percepts are not essentially material, they are nevertheless inherent in sensible objects. Whilst it perceives non-material objects, as governor of the animal soul, it possesses a physical substrate. Insofar as this is the case, the estimative faculty only understands things to the extent that they are rooted in a material reality. Thus, it applies its judgement to non-sensible matters in the same way that it applies it to matters which have a sensible reality, giving rise to false propositions. Unlike the intellect, the estimative faculty is not possessed of self-awareness, and is thus incapable of realizing its own limitation and restraining itself from leading the soul into error.²¹ Indeed such is the strength of the estimative faculty, that it can impel the soul to accept judgements that the intellect knows to be false, such as the judgement of the uncleanness of honey on account of its resemblance to yellow bile. It is awareness of this reality that induces Rāzī, when describing the reasoning that underlies idolatry and astral magic in *al-Sirr*, to state: "The soul has been created obedient to the activities of the estimative faculty." This is a striking statement which underscores the central role played by the estimative faculty in the process of cognition.

Indeed, its range of activity does not cease there. As Robert E. Hall observes, it is by means of the agent estimative faculty (*al-wahm al-'āmil*) that the thaumaturgy of prophets, saints and sorcerers is performed. The emotional responses with which it reacts to certain stimuli can produce heat and cooling

Studi Sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale 8 (1997): pp. 425–453; and Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Avicennan Troubles: The Mysteries of the Heptagonal House and of the Phoenix," *Tópicos* 42 (2001): pp. 51–73.

²¹ Black points out that, according to Avicenna, for many the estimation overrides the intellect in its insistence that a thing must occupy space and have position, inducing them to apply the same assumption to God, thus leading them to anthropomorphism. Thus did Avicenna explain the widespread and persistent phenomenon of materialism in human culture. (see Black, "Estimation (*Wahm*) in Avicenna," p. 228). On Rāzī, and his attitude to thought experiments and the role of *wahm* in reason, see Peter Adamson, "Fakhr al-Din On Place," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 27 (2017): pp. 205–236. For the most recent and insightful study of the crucial roles played the estimative faculty and the imagination in Avicenna's account of human cognition of mathematical objects, see Mohammad Saleh Zarepour, "Avicenna on Grasping Mathematical Concepts," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

effects within the body as well as the expansion of the sexual organ due to the perception of a form generated by the imagination. Medical healing is accomplished when the form of health is transmitted directly from the estimative faculty of the physician to the patient. Furthermore, notes Hall:

[. . .] a powerful soul can go beyond its own body and through direct action establish new forms in the external corporeal world (in the natural, sub-lunar realm), that is to say, act directly on other bodies; in this connection Avicenna mentions the “evil eye” and the “operant *wahm*”. In acting on the natural world in supernatural ways, such a soul must operate in accordance with the intelligible structure of the world (*bi-ḥasab al-wājib al-aqlī*); it acts directly as soul, however without following the processes of Aristotelian science, where bodies that change must be in contact and act and be acted upon through the primary natural qualities of hot and cold, moist and dry. The production of miraculous actions at a distance by Prophets (and certain others) involves the whole soul *qua* practical i.e., the conative moving powers in the animal level of the soul (*al-quwwa al-ḥayawāniyya al-muḥarrika al-ijmā'iyya*); these, as we have seen, are under the direction of the *wahm*, here the operant *wahm*.²²

We have seen therefore that the estimation is a faculty of the soul that mediates between the sensible world and the world of the intellect. Although it has a physical substrate in the middle cavity, which it shares with the *mutaṣarrifa*, the entire physical brain represents its field of operation. It commands the *mutaṣarrifa* in both its cogitative as well as its imaginative activities and thus effectively governs the animal soul. Whilst the objects of its perception are not essentially material, they nevertheless inhere in sensible objects. Under its direction, the imagination can construct fantastical images without reference to anything extra-mental. And whilst it lacks the self-awareness of the intellect, and often extends its judgements into areas it cannot possibly understand, it plays a crucial role in delivering the sensible world to the intellect for analysis. Finally, its activity is not restricted to cognition but extends to direct action on the corporeal world.

6.4 The Soul's Occult Power to Affect the Physical World

With this knowledge of the internal senses, we are now better equipped to understand Rāzī's construction of Sabian magic. The purpose of the opening passage of the *Psychology of al-Sirr* is to establish the hypothetical reality of the human soul possessed of occult power insofar as such a reality cannot be denied or dismissed as impossible (*lā yab'ud*). This proposition rests on two

²² Hall, “The *Wahm* in Ibn Sīnā's Psychology,” p. 544.

premises: (1) the soul's estimative faculty can affect the physical world; and (2) if it were admitted that there are souls whose power to affect the physical world is weak then the reverse, namely the existence of souls whose power to affect the physical world is strong, remains at the least a logical possibility. In this section I shall present the first of these premises in detail; the second requires no further examination other than the observation which I shall make at the conclusion of this section.

The first premise is supported by ten observations which carry a number of implications which require attention. The soul's occult power is grounded in two processes: "the purification of the soul and the connecting²³ of the activities of the estimative faculty (*taṣfiyat al-naḥs wa-ta'liq al-awḥām*)."²⁴ The ten observations adduced to support the reality of the occult power that lies in potential in the soul's estimative faculty emphasise the second of these two processes.²⁵ Here they are in summary:

- (i) When an archer wants to shoot an arrow at a specific target, he will be unable to do so unless he focuses his heart (*jama'a al-qalb*): then will he strike his target (*tajrī al-iṣāba*).
- (ii) When the mountain goat wants to descend from lofty peaks then it forms an intention to reach a smaller peak (*'amadat ilā qillat al-jabal*); it then mentally focuses on a safe landing (*tafakkarat fi'l-salāma fikran ṣaḥīhan*); and then it hurls itself towards the small peak, landing safely. Were it not for its visualisation of safety (*law lā taṣawwuruhā li'l-salāma*) then it would perish.²⁶
- (iii) Both reason and scripture (*al-'aql wa'l-naql*) concur that the Evil Eye is a reality, and this can only be due to psychic influence (*ta'thīr naḥsānī*).

²³ *Connecting* is my translation of *ta'liq* which is a doubly transitive verb meaning "to make something attach or connect with something else"; its second direct object (which is not mentioned in this case) is governed by the preposition *'alā*. For the efficacy of magical ritual, therefore, that to which the estimative faculty is made to connect is of crucial importance.

²⁴ *wahm* can refer both to the estimative faculty itself as well as its activity: its plural *awḥām*, used here refers to the faculty's activities.

²⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 11–12.

²⁶ Being deprived of an intellect, the faculty with which the mountain goat visualises the non-material, particular object of safety must be its estimative faculty. The mountain-goat engages in a form of "*tafakkur*" or thought; this must be produced by *al-mutaṣṣarifa*, directed by the estimative faculty, the governing faculty in the animal soul. Of course, the mountain goat has no intellect, so I refer to the faculty which produces its "thought" with the neutral label "*al-mutaṣṣarifa*."

- (iv) Walking over a bridge near the ground would not constitute any difficulty; however, if it were situated on high ground, a man's imagination of falling (*takhayyul al-suqūṭ*) might send him over the edge.
- (v) If imaginative visualisations can act as the causes (*asbāb*) for the powers in the limbs to become principles for action, having merely existed as principles in potentiality, then it is not impossible for them to act directly on other bodies.
- (vi) Experience and reason (*al-tajriba wa'l-qiyās*) testify that visualisations can be principles for the generation of qualities in bodies (*mabādi' li-ḥudūth al-kayfiyyāt fī'l-abdān*): for example, intense anger can give rise to very intense heat.²⁷
- (vii) There is consensus that the one suffering from a nose bleed (*al-mar'ūf*) should be prevented from looking at red objects and the epileptic should be prevented from looking at excessively bright or rotating objects, for fear of inducing a seizure.
- (viii) When a hen imitates a rooster in its cry and aggressiveness, its legs grow spurs like that of a rooster and this shows that bodily conditions are subject to psychic conditions (*al-aḥwāl al-nafsāniyya*).
- (ix) Variety in visualisation exerts an effect on the body. Because of their proximity to humans, domestic animals have greater sensitivity than wild animals and have a wider imaginal range. As a result, there is, apparently, greater physical variety amongst species of domestic animals.
- (x) A man's voice and demeanour alter in accordance with his mood and visualisations (*taṣawwurātuhu al-nafsāniyya*).

From these ten illustrations, four themes emerge which anticipate subsequent discussions on the soul's purification and the process of making the estimative faculty connect with an intended goal. They will remain centrally important to the *Psychology of al-Sirr*. Firstly, the illustrations of the archer aiming at his target in (i), and the mountain goat focusing on a safe landing in (ii), underscore the fact that the measure of the soul's ability to divest itself of all distractions other than its aim, is the measure of its ability to achieve that aim which, in both cases, involves changing physical external reality. As we shall discover

²⁷ The humorous illustrative example that Rāzī adduces is as follows: "It has been related that a king was once afflicted by hemiplegia, the treatment of which the physicians were incapable. So one astute individual of their number unexpectedly assailed him with violent verbal abuse; his anger inflamed, the king leapt from the place where he was lying to strike his abuser and so the blockages were flushed away (*fa-indafa'at al-mawādd*) on account of the heat of anger and so this strong illness ceased" (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 12).

later in this chapter, purification divests the soul of those character traits and humoral imbalances which distract it from focusing on its purpose. Secondly the soul's potential to affect the physical world extends not just to the body which it inhabits, as illustrated in (vi), (viii), (ix) and (x), but also to external bodies as indicated by (v) and (iii). Thirdly the soul's activities of visualisation (*taṣawwur*), mental focus (*tafakkur*), and imagining (*takhayyul*) are crucial to the exercise of its occult power as illustrated by (ii), (iv), (ix) and (x): all three of these cognate activities are generated by the imagination closely directed by the estimative faculty. And fourthly, intense emotion, as exemplified by the fear of the man walking over the chasm in (iv), and the rage of the verbally abused king in (vi), greatly magnify occult power and the effect of the soul's visualisation and imagination. Circumstances can be manipulated such that intense emotion can be generated in order to bring about the desired result, as in the case of the enterprising physician curing the king's hemiplegia by means of verbal abuse. This is of crucial significance for the arrangement of the planetary rituals of *al-Sirr*.²⁸

The fourth illustration of the man walking over the wooden bridge suspended over a deep chasm derives from *Kitāb al-Nafs* of Avicenna's *al-Shifā'*.²⁹ It demonstrates the extent to which the soul is subject to the external senses and raises an interesting question which goes to the heart of his conception of the estimative faculty's cognitive process. The assessment of peril by the estimative faculty, leading to its reaction—or "judgement"—of fear, derives initially from its perception of the danger inherent in the situation. What role does the intention play in this process? It would appear that the estimative faculty extracts the intention of peril from the sensory data that the common sense receives, in much the same way that the sheep extracts the intention of danger from the hungry wolf. Both of these examples seem to illustrate an instinctual response to a situation, as opposed to the reaction of the dog which has learnt through painful experience to be wary of the man wielding the stick. Thus, having extracted the intention of peril from the situation, the estimative faculty of our weak-kneed bridge walker judges the danger accordingly, giving rise to fear, prompting his imagination to generate the vertiginous feeling of falling which ultimately translates into reality.

²⁸ In *al-Mabāḥith*, Rāzī adduces the same anecdote of the use of verbal abuse as a successful treatment for a king's hemiplegic state, as evidence that "imaginational activity can serve as principles for the generation of temporally originated events." See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya fī 'ilm al-ilāhiyyāt wa'l-ṭabī'iyyāt*, ed. Zayn al-'Abidīn al-Musāwī et al. (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1925), vol. 1, pp. 508–509.

²⁹ See Avicenna, *De Anima*, p. 200, lines 1–4.

The illustration is also to be found in *al-Ishārāt* 10:26 where Avicenna says: “[. . .] the estimative imagining of the man walking across a tree stump which traverses empty space (*wahm al-māshī ‘alā jadhi’ ma‘rūḍ fawq faḍā*) affects his loss of footing in a way that a similar estimative imagining does not, were the tree stump resting on firm ground.”³⁰

The estimative imagining of falling is occasioned by the walker’s vertiginous awareness of his circumstances and the fear thereby induced. That the immediate cause of the man’s loss of footing is his imagination of falling (*takhayyul al-suqūt*) is made more explicit in Rāzī’s version of this illustration in *al-Sirr*. Reading each version of the illustration in light of the other underscores the close link between the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*) and the imagination (*al-takhayyul*). Avicenna adduces this example in *Ishārāt* 10:26 in order to illustrate his assertion that: “[. . .] the disposition of belief which is consolidated [i.e., in the soul], and whatever corollaries arise from it, can flow to the body despite the fact that <the soul> is separate from it in essence.”³¹

Commenting on this passage, Rāzī says: “[. . .] psychic dispositions (*al-hay’āt al-nafsāniyya*) can act as the principle causes for the coming to be of things which come to be in bodies (*mabādi’ li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādith fi’l-abdān*) despite the fact that souls are separate from them (*ma‘a kawn al-nufūs mubāyana lahā*).”³²

Avicenna, explains Rāzī, supports this assertion with four arguments. The first three are of interest to us here:

The first is that a man can walk on a plank of wood (*khashaba*) which has been placed on the ground. But were this plank of wood placed on the edge of a wall then his foot would not be so sure (*lamma tamakkana min al-mashī ‘alayhā*) and this is for no other reason than that the estimation of falling necessitates falling (*tawahhum al-suqūt yūjib al-suqūt*). The second is that the humoral balances (*amzija*) of men change according to changes within their psychic states, with respect to anger, grief, fear and joy: that is known self-evidently (*ma’lūm bi’l-ḍarūra*). The third is that the intense focus of the estimative faculty (*al-tawahhum al-shadīd*) on illness or health may cause that very state; this is known by way of both anecdote and induction (*al-ikhtibār wa’l-istiqrā’*).³³

The ability of intense emotional states such as “anger, grief, fear and joy” to transform the humoral balance, and thus of the soul to transform the physical world is once again highlighted, resonating with the illustration of the king’s rage in *al-Sirr*.

³⁰ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 657.

³¹ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 657.

³² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 658.

³³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 658.

This is echoed in *al-Ishārāt* 10:6 which discusses the ability of the man possessed of gnosis (*‘ārif*) to perform acts with a power which far exceeds normal human capacity. Avicenna reasons in the following way: in a state of emotional equilibrium, an individual will have a limited power to act; when overcome by certain emotional states such as fear or grief, this power to act is reduced to one tenth of its usual capacity; when overcome by other states such as joy or rage, his usual capacity to act is greatly magnified. Concerning this passage, Rāzī comments:

The upshot of this reasoning is that we see <the soul's> power varying in strength and weakness in accordance with the variation in psychic states (*aḥwāl nafsāniyya*). So, it is not impossible for he who is possessed of gnosis to have a state of soul that is the cause of the intensification of his power to the extent that he can perform an act which breaches the norm (*khāriq li'l-‘āda*). This reasoning is similar to what they say in order to prove saintly power (*quwwa qudsiyya*), which is that we see people's states of understanding vary: there are those who are average; those who are above average; and those who are below. Therefore, since we see the furthest extreme of deficiency (*al-nuqṣān*) ends with those who have no understanding except but a little, then it is not impossible (*lā yustab‘ad*) that the opposite extreme of extraordinary <capacity> (*al-ziyāda*) ends with <the ability to> breach the norm (*khāriq li'l-‘āda*).³⁴

Four issues of note emerge from this commentary. Firstly, while Avicenna merely alludes to acts performed with an extraordinary capacity, Rāzī explicitly identifies them as acts which breach the norm (*khāriq li'l-‘āda*). Secondly, Rāzī couches his commentary on this passage in the language of deficiency (*al-nuqṣān*) and extraordinary capacity (*al-ziyāda*); this resonates very deliberately with the language of human perfection with which he expresses his ideas concerning prophethood and sainthood that appear in *al-Maṭālib*. Thirdly, by contrasting the deficiency of understanding of those at one end of the human spectrum with the extraordinary capacity of those who are able to perform extraordinary feats at the other extreme, Rāzī highlights the close connection between knowledge and power that is emphasised in the introduction to *al-Sirr*. And fourthly, he ends his commentary on this passage by citing the proof for the logical possibility of saintly power, which reasons that if the existence of one extreme of human ignorance were admitted, then the existence of its opposite cannot be dismissed. Rāzī deploys the very same proof to close the opening section of the *Psychology* of *al-Sirr* in order to establish the reality of the soul

34 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 637.

possessed of occult power as the main subject of the chapter's inquiry. Treating the ability of the soul to affect change in the corporeal world, he says:

[. . .] we observe that these effects differ in their strength and weakness. For, just as we see that this kind of influence can be weak in one man, it is not impossible (*lā yab'ud*) that there can be a man in whom this kind of influence is powerful such that he is capable of performing that which others are powerless to perform.³⁵

6.5 Innate Occult Power

Having grounded the soul's occult power (*quwwat al-nafs 'alā al-ityān bi'l-fi'l al-khāriq li'l-'āda*) in the processes of purification and the focusing of the estimative power, Rāzī examines the logical possibilities that such power can either be innate (*fiṭriyya*) or acquired (*kasbiyya*). Before he expounds on acquired occult power, the main focus of the *Psychology of al-Sirr*, he presents two alternative philosophical positions to explain the reality of the soul innately possessed of occult power: the first proposes that the human soul is a self-subsisting substance; the second, that the soul is identical to the humoral temperament. If this first position were accepted, then the logical possibility of a soul which differs from all other souls, by virtue of its self-subsisting substance, must be accepted; such a soul can be characterised by a unique power which enables it to perform feats which are beyond the abilities of other human souls. This is the position which Rāzī himself adopts:

The supporting proof establishing its in-born nature rests on a premise, namely whether it is a self-subsisting substance (*jawhar qā'im bi-dhātihī*) or merely equivalent to the unique humoral temperament (*'ibāra 'an hādhā al-mizāj al-makhṣūṣ*). If we accept the first disjunct then it is not impossible (*lā yamtani'*) that one man's soul can differ in quiddity from all other souls; furthermore, by virtue of its unique quiddity (*al-māhiyya al-makhṣūṣa*), it is characterised by a power (*qudra*) which does not obtain in other souls; so, it follows that this soul is able to perform acts of which others are incapable. Such is the case were we to aver that human souls differ in their quiddity—which is the truth.³⁶

The second position by way of contrast maintains that: human souls are in fact equal and one in their quiddity; the soul is identical to the humoral temperament; the differences between souls arise from variations in their humoral

³⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 12.

³⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 12–13. As we will explore in chapter 10, the essential difference in the quiddity of human souls is an important component of Rāzī's prophetology as articulated in his *al-Maṭālib*.

temperaments; and the power to perform acts that breach the norm derives from a unique humoral temperament. Rāzī says:

If we were to say that they are one in their quiddity then there can be no doubt that they differ on account of their bodily tools and the accidents of their souls (*al-a'rāq al-nafs-āniyya*). So it is not unlikely (*lā yab'ud*) that some souls (*ba'ḍ al-anfus*) can be especially characterised by a special humoral temperament (*mizāj makhṣūṣ*) which functions as its tool for the performance of acts which breach the norm (*al-af'āl al-khāriqa li'l-'āda*) or that some psychic accidents, by which they are specially characterised, empower them to perform these breaches (*al-khawāriq*); for when the light of the unseen world becomes manifest to these souls (*idhā tajallā li-tilka al-nufūs nūr 'ālam al-ghayb*), they become empowered to perform that which other souls cannot perform. [. . .] If we assert that the soul is naught but this special humoral temperament then there is no doubt that humoral temperaments vary. So, it is not unlikely (*lā yab'ud*) that there can be a wondrous humoral temperament which empowers the one possessed of it to perform that which others cannot perform. So it is established from what we have mentioned that that cannot be deemed unlikely (*lā istib'āda fī dhālika*).³⁷

Thus, on the basis of two competing philosophical positions on the nature of the human soul, Rāzī constructs two alternative theories to explain the nature of the soul innately possessed of occult power. Whilst he clearly indicates his preference for the first over the second, he provides no refutation of the latter. This is because his main purpose is to construct a theory which explains how occult power might be acquired. The internal coherence of the theory which he constructs is unaffected by which particular doctrine on the soul is to be preferred. The existence of the soul innately possessed of occult power is couched in hypothetical language: neither argument represents proof of the actual existence—but rather the possible existence—of such souls. Only empirical proof could sustain the positive assertion of their actual existence: “As for the definite assertion of its reality, it is something that cannot be known unless it is witnessed (*amā al-jazm bi-wuqū'ihī fa-min mā lā yu'raf illā bi'l-mushāhada*). All this discussion applies in the case of when the soul's power to breach <the norm> is innate (*fīṭriyya*).”³⁸

This minor and limited digression into the nature of the soul arises from the need to place the subsequent discussion on the nature of the soul's acquisition of occult power within a broader philosophical framework. A brief outline of that framework, as presented in *al-Maṭālib*, would serve to contextualize this short discussion in *al-Sirr*.³⁹ Here he lists three general positions which identify

³⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 13.

³⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 13.

³⁹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 7, pp. 33–138.

the nature of self⁴⁰ as: (1) the body; (2) an accident which inheres in the body (*'araḍ sārī fī jism*); (3) an abstracted substance (*jawhar mujarrad*). Since for Rāzī it is self-evident (*ḍarūrī*) that the soul is a substance (*jawhar*) as opposed to an accident (*'araḍ*), he immediately eliminates the second of these three disjuncts.⁴¹ The two remaining disjuncts reflect the two competing philosophical positions on the nature of the human soul which are presented in *al-Sirr*. In *al-Maṭālib*, Rāzī divides the first of the two remaining disjuncts into two competing positions, which alternatively identify the self with: (1)(a) the body or; (1)(b) a body within the body (*jism mushābik li'l-badn*). The first of these, (1)(a), is the position adopted by the *mutakallimūn* and the majority of people (*jumhūr al-nās*); the second, (1)(b), comprises eight competing positions, each of which respectively identifies the self as:

- (i) The four humors (*al-akhlāṭ al-arba'a*);
- (ii) The blood;
- (iii) The subtle blood produced in the left side of the heart;
- (iv) The pneuma (*rūḥ*) which rises from the heart to the brain;
- (v) An indivisible part of the heart;
- (vi) A subtle, luminous, lofty body (*jism nūrānī 'alawī khafīf*) which has a completely different quiddity (*māhiyya*) from the physical body;
- (vii) A part of the physical body that endures throughout a lifespan;
- (viii) The chief organs which do not endure after death.⁴²

In *al-Sirr*, the eight competing positions of (1)(b) are reduced to just one, the temperament (*mizāj*), which is equivalent to the first of these eight, namely the four humors. Moreover, the conventional position of (1)(a) adopted by the *mutakallimūn*, namely that the self is equivalent to the body, does not feature in *al-Sirr* as a possible account of the soul innately possessed of occult power, discussion of which is expedited by confining the reader's attention to the simple dichotomy of the soul as a self-subsisting substance or as equivalent to a special temperament.

In a related passage in *al-Ishārāt*, of which Rāzī must have been mindful when writing this passage in *al-Sirr*, Avicenna asserts that the soul's occult power derives from its temperament (*mizāj*).⁴³ Such power can arise from the temperament in one of three ways: (1) it can be original (*aṣlī*), characterising the soul from its very incipience; (2) it can occur to the soul at a later stage in

⁴⁰ Literally the *anā*, or the "I".

⁴¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol 7, pp. 37–8.

⁴² Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol 7, pp. 37–38.

⁴³ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 660.

its career, through no effort of its own; and (3) it can be acquired. Commenting on this passage, Rāzī observes that since Avicenna asserts that human souls are equal in their quiddity (*mutasāwiya fī tammām al-māhiyya*)⁴⁴ then special occult power must arise in a way that is not essential (*dhātī*) but accidental (*‘araḍī*): it is for this reason that Avicenna identifies occult power with the soul’s temperament. Expounding on the third way in which occult power obtains in the soul, Rāzī says: “The third is that this power obtains by way of acquisition and exertion in spiritual discipline and purification of the soul (*al-kasb wa’l-ijtihād fī’l-riyāḍa wa-taṣfiyat al-nafs*), just as it obtains in the pious friends of God.”⁴⁵

This leads us now to examine the main focus of the *Psychology of al-Sirr*: the acquisition of occult power. Rāzī’s philosophical strategy is to amplify, using Avicennan psychology, the ability of ordinary human souls to develop the level of occult power only displayed by prophets.

6.6 Acquired Occult Power

Replicating the dichotomy between souls innately possessed of occult power and those who possess such power by way of acquisition, the conditions which must be fulfilled in the case of the latter are similarly divided between those which are in-born (*ghayr muktasab*)⁴⁶ and those which can be fulfilled by means of the aspirant’s exertion. Those conditions which are in-born relate to the astrological conditions which obtain at the moment of his birth: these determine his potential for success in this endeavour. The second category of conditions, by way of contrast, can be fulfilled by the aspirant’s efforts: they relate to the observance of the correct spiritual austerities that enable the soul to connect with the celestial spirits which empower him to perform magic. They divide into those which relate to the management of the physical body and those which relate to the disposition that the adept is required to inculcate within his soul. In both content and arrangement, this section prefigures Rāzī’s commentary on *al-Ishārāt* 9:8 which treats of the conditions for successful spiritual purification, dividing them into those which are in-born (*ghayr muktasab*) and

⁴⁴ Rāzī chides Avicenna for failing to provide any proof for this position, which lies in contrast to the position that the soul is a self-subsisting substance which may therefore differ in its quiddity from other human souls, as highlighted in *al-Sirr* (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 660).

⁴⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 661.

⁴⁶ Literally meaning “that which cannot be acquired.”

those which can be fulfilled by means of spiritual exertion; this latter category is similarly divided between the management of the body and the disposition which the spiritual aspirant is encouraged to foster in his soul.⁴⁷

Let us now turn to how *al-Sirr* treats the acquisition of occult power, discussing those conditions for magical self-realisation which the adept can attempt to fulfil by means of his own exertion. I shall divide them between: (1) the spiritual austerities which relate to the physical management of the body, highlighting close affinities with Rāzī's commentary on *Ishārāt* 9:8; and (2) the disposition of the soul which the adept is required to nurture.⁴⁸

6.7 Acquiring Occult Power

The fulfilment of those conditions relating to the management of the body and those relating to the soul's disposition serves but one aim: to remove all distractions which may arrest the soul's attention so that it can focus on connection with the celestial spirits. Before examining the required disposition of the soul, I shall examine the physical austerities prescribed for the adept.

⁴⁷ In *al-Ishārāt* 9:8, Avicenna says:

The (knower) needs spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*): this spiritual discipline is aimed at three goals. The first is to remove from the path of choice that which is other than the Truth; the second is to make the commanding soul obedient to the tranquil soul (*al-naḥs al-muṭma'inna*) so that the imaginative and estimative faculties are drawn towards estimative activities (*al-tawahhumāt*) that correspond to the state of sanctity (*al-amr al-quḍṣī*), avoiding those imaginative activities which correspond to the lowly state (*al-amr al-suḥḥī*); the third is to make the innermost essence subtly sensitive to mindful receptivity (*talṭīf al-sirr li'l-tanabbuh*). Genuine asceticism assists <the realisation> of the first. A number of matters assist in <the realisation of> the second: worship mediated by contemplation (*al-'ibāda al-mashḥū'a bi'l-fikra*), melodies which are used on the faculties of the soul which have been composed to accompany discourse (*kalām*) such as are appealing to the estimative faculty (*al-awhām*); such didactic discourse is to be uttered by someone who is pure, whose turn of phrase is eloquent, whose tone is sweet, containing the best guidance. <The realisation of the third> is assisted by subtle thought, pure love, the state of which is determined by the qualities of the beloved, not by the rule of the appetite (Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 605).

⁴⁸ Since my analysis divides them into the physical and the mental, I shall not deal with these conditions in the order that they appear in *al-Sirr*.

6.7.1 Physical Austerities

The adept is required to monitor carefully the quality of his diet. An imbalanced diet would impair his ability to connect with the celestial spirits for a number of reasons: if any one of the four humors gained preponderance in the body, the nature of his thoughts and imaginings would adopt the hue of the dominant humor and thus resist focusing on the connection he is trying to achieve:

Just as he must purify his heart from base, superfluous thoughts (*kamā wajaba ‘alayhi tanqiyat al-qalb ‘an fuḍūl al-afkār al-radiyya*) he must also purify his body from base superfluous humors (*fuḍūl al-akhlāṭ al-radiyya*). For, if he is dominated by one of the four humors, then his imaginings and thoughts (*takhayyulātuḥu wa-tafakkurātuḥu*) will accord with that humor, and the purpose will not be fulfilled.⁴⁹

Whilst humoral imbalance thwarts the soul’s noetic connection, the celestial spirits are averse to connection with a human soul that has been nourished on food derived from anything that possesses a spirit: strict veganism therefore becomes a necessity during the period in which the adept is attempting noetic connection.⁵⁰ On account of their propensity to “corrupt” the brain, the Sabians, according to Rāzī, avoided all smoked foods and beans.⁵¹ Similarly, they avoided excessive eating which, being inevitably accompanied by excessive drinking, produces noxious vapours which confuse and debilitate the brain. Of course, such an understanding of the effect of nourishment on the body demands medical expertise. Rāzī remarks: “And so from this it becomes apparent that the practitioner of this craft must possess knowledge of medicine and he must also use everything which fortifies the brain and heart and which purifies them from stain and dirt.”⁵²

This strict diet is understood as purifying the brain and heart, which is necessary for the soul’s purification. The adept is also required to reduce his amount of consumption since the soul’s preoccupation with digestion diverts its attention away from employing the higher faculties:

Careful attention must be paid to one’s diet with respect to both quantity and quality. As for quantity, this involves its reduction for preoccupation with eating is a great distraction

⁴⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Why the celestial souls should disdain the non-vegan is not explained. On the broad theme of veganism in the Islamic world in the eleventh century, as emerges from the letters exchanged between the poet al-Ma’arrī and the Shi’ī missionary al-Mu’ayyad fi’l-Dīn al-Shirāzī, see Kevin Blankinship, “Missionary and Heretic: Debating Veganism in the Medieval Islamic World,” in *Insatiable Appetite: Food as Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond*, eds. Kiril Dmitriev, Julia Hauser and Bilal Orfali (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020): pp. 260–291.

⁵¹ This is reminiscent of the Pythagorean prohibition against beans.

⁵² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14.

preventing the soul from engaging in any other task. For, seldom is a man capable of perception and movement, let alone thought (*fīkr*) and remembrance of God (*dhikr*) after excessive eating. This is the case because the soul cannot combine management of eating, with perception and movement. And so it relinquishes management of perception and movement so that it is able to manage the digestive process which prevents it from managing perception and movement, despite the fact that the soul is very familiar with both—so what would you suppose would happen with respect to thought and focusing on the World of the Unseen (*inṣirāf ilā ‘ālam al-ghayb*) when the soul is unfamiliar with that?⁵³

Digestion therefore distracts the soul from engaging its higher faculties; thus, if the adept trained his soul to subsist on the barest minimum it needed to survive, the aim of connecting with the celestial intellects would be facilitated.

The ability to subsist on but little nourishment is viewed by Avicenna as one of the characteristics of those possessed of gnosis (*‘arīfīn*). In his *al-Ishārāt* he provides a naturalistic account of how this is possible.⁵⁴ He observes how fear can lead to the collapse of a man’s desire; cause the malfunctioning of his digestion; and render void his ability to perform actions of which he is otherwise entirely capable. This represents evidence that the soul’s state can affect the body. Commenting on this reasoning, Rāzī says:

If such is the case, then it is not impossible (*fa-lā imtinā’a*) that the immersion of the gnostic’s soul in the love of God the exalted, and its complete release from corporeal ties can be a cause for the descent into the <bodily> natural powers (*al-quwā al-ṭabī‘iyya*) dispositions appropriate to that disposition, with the result that the <natural powers> do not engage in the dissolution of original nourishment (*al-ajzā’ al-aṣliyya*) and hunger does not arise.⁵⁵

In his commentary to *al-Ishārāt* 10:4, Rāzī explains that when the bodily powers are disciplined by the rational soul, the former become attracted to the latter; when this attraction becomes powerful, they no longer engage in their usual activity of digestion. Since physical nourishment is not dissolved by the bodily powers, which have been drawn towards the rational soul, the one possessed of gnosis can survive on but little food.⁵⁶

The importance of reducing consumption explains the forty days’ fast to establish this noetic connection which Rāzī attributes to the Sabians. He reports:

They said it is necessary that, at the beginning <of the period> of fasting they break their fast with <an amount> similar to that which they are accustomed to eating; then they

⁵³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14.

⁵⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 782–786.

⁵⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 784.

⁵⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol 2, pp. 633–635.

should reduce it each night, regularly and in increments, bit by bit, until finally by the end they break their fast on the barest minimum needed to stay alive. As for the quality, they have said that it is necessary to avoid eating anything that derives from something possessed of a spirit; indeed the food must consist of seeds, olive oil, and if not then of sesame oil and if they want to mix these seeds with herbs which people traditionally cook with these seeds, then there is no problem with that. Once the forty days have been completed in this way then their souls have become pure, and their spirits immaculate; they become masters of the occult sciences (*ghawāmiḍ al-'ulūm*); and they are empowered to strike healthy bodies with disease and the reverse.⁵⁷

Strict diet and fasting thus purifies the human soul, releasing it from bodily preoccupations to connect with the celestial spirits from which it receives two things: occult knowledge and power.

6.7.2 Fortification of the Brain and the Heart: *al-Sirr*

The effect of such a dramatic reduction in food intake would no doubt be debilitating, causing deficiencies in the heart and the brain: this imbalance would thus thwart connection with the celestial spirits just as much as the excessive consumption of food. Rāzī lists three means of correcting this imbalance and fortifying the soul, which are available to the adept observing this spiritual regimen. The first involves: “fortifying <the soul> by means of perfume. For fragrant scent greatly fortifies the heart and mind in such a way that the soul is not required to manage it in the same way that it is required to manage eating, so the fortification occurs without distraction.”⁵⁸

The second stratagem involves the use of “simple, bright joyful visuals” (*al-mubṣarāt al-basīṭa al-muḍī'a al-bahija*) that uplift the spirit. They must not however be so attractive as to distract the soul from its focus. They must therefore be simple in their arrangement and cannot involve intricate patterns: “they must be simple. For, were the wall of a house painted with intricate patterns of many colours then souls would be distracted by their contemplation and would be cut off from their objective. For this reason it is prohibited to place a man afflicted by delirium in a painted house.”⁵⁹

They must employ bright colours which, deriving from light, provide the soul respite from its privations: “The second condition is that they must be bright and that is because by its very nature, light is beloved, whilst darkness is something

⁵⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 14–15.

which frightens the soul; for this reason, he who is struck by melancholia is always in a state of fear; when the soul sees light it relaxes (*insharaḥat*), is strengthened, and finds rest.”⁶⁰

Moreover, they should be as joyful as they are bright:

[. . .] since colours are of two types: illuminating and bright (*mushriqa wa-muḍī'a*) like pure white, yellow, pink, and green; and dark (*muzlīma*) such as black, ambergris, and grey. Gazing on bright colours imbues the heart with joy and since the colour closest to light and simplicity is white, the Prophet, on whom be peace, said: “the best clothes are white.”⁶¹

But so that the use of a visual object does not defeat the purpose of fortifying the soul and maintaining its focus on the matter at hand, it is stipulated that:

Yearning for something else should not be consequent on gazing upon it for were that the case then the soul would be distracted with that consequence just as when the gaze falls upon the form of a beautiful human, the desire is stirred; or just as when the gaze falls upon gold and silver and fine clothes, then covetousness is stimulated.⁶²

The third stratagem involves:

Fortifying the soul through music (*samā'*): this is because sound in itself cannot be described as pleasant or ugly. For, were any sound just to be extended just as it is, no pleasantness would there be in it: rather delight arises only when it moves from high to low (*al-intiqāl min ḥādd ilā thaqīl*) and vice versa. For pleasantness in reality arises from how it occurs to the soul when it compares some sounds to others; this pleasantness only arises when the soul is engaged and we have already explained that the human soul is innately disposed towards love of perception (*majbūl 'alā ḥubb al-idrāk*). So, when it hears comely sounds, the two phenomena occur to it and the attainment of that which is beloved is delightful. So, it follows that music is a principle for the purification of the heart and brain. Know, moreover, that these matters only bring benefit in the course of spiritual discipline if <used> sparingly, like salt in food. Were they employed excessively such that the soul becomes distracted by them, then they would be an obstacle in the way of the goal. Thus, is the discourse on how to abstract the soul and strip it away from its habits (*al-ma'lūfāt*); and let that be a gradual, not an excessive, process or the soul will be unable to endure it.⁶³

The description in *al-Sirr* of the methods for the soul's fortification during this period of fasting anticipates Rāzī's commentary on *al-Ishārāt* 9:8. The content however has been differently arranged. As in *al-Sirr*, Rāzī divides those requirements

⁶⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

⁶¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

⁶² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

⁶³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

which must be fulfilled to ensure the success of spiritual discipline into those which cannot and those which can be secured by the aspirant's individual efforts.⁶⁴ The requirements which fall into the latter category, as in *al-Sirr*, are further divided into those which relate to the physical regulation of the body and those which relate to the disposition which the aspirant must nurture in his soul. It is to the description of physical regulation that we now turn our attention.

Physical regulation involves the “relinquishing of superfluities and the correction of necessary things (*tark al-fuḍūl wa-iṣlāḥ al-ḍarūriyyāt*).”⁶⁵ The former entails the exercise of self-restraint towards the acquisition of objects of desire such as wealth, reputation, power and knowledge of the kind which does not avail the soul propinquity to God. The realisation of this station (*maqām*) is difficult, for such pleasures are immediately present, whilst the pleasure of the intellect is not (*ghā'ib*); the former pleasures are familiar to us whilst the latter are unfamiliar; and the former, with which we are intimately familiar, must be sacrificed if the latter are to be realised.⁶⁶

The “necessary things” which are to be corrected relate to those things which feed stimuli to the five external senses. He treats sensory objects in the following order: taste, sight, hearing, smell and touch. All are to be modified and controlled in the pursuit of the disciplining of the soul. The objects of taste (*al-madhūqāt*) are given priority only insofar as the equilibrium of the body, and thus of the soul, is profoundly affected by the physical nourishment on which it depends: the state of the stomach often determines the soul's sensitivity or coarseness. The soul's pre-occupation with the digestion of large amounts of food constitutes an impediment to its engagement with the intellectual world, “the original direction of prayer” (*al-qibla al-aṣliyya*). Conversely, if the stomach is empty for any length of time, the major organs become enfeebled and imbalanced; the soul becomes confused;

64 In contrast with the astrological conditions relating to the adept's natal chart, Rāzī's commentary on *al-Ishārāt* 9:8 stipulates that the aspirant's:

[. . .] soul is suitably receptive and suited to the task (*musta'idda li-hadhā al-ḥadīth mulā'ima lahu*) for were it not, then spiritual discipline would be of no avail because its effect is but to remove obstacles, to raise veils and curtains; the removal of obstacles does not suffice for the realisation of the goal; rather there must be someone to receive who has the correct receptivity (*qābil musta'idd*). If the soul does not have the correct receptivity then spiritual discipline will not provide any felicity at all. It will, however, provide peace, for when bodily ties reduce and are weakened, the soul will not be tormented after it has left craving the body (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol 2, pp. 605–606).

65 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 607.

66 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 607.

thought agitated; and the intellect loses its equilibrium. With respect to nourishment therefore, a diet which comprises small portions of high quality food is recommended. The careful selection of high quality food targets the needs of the body's major organs, freeing the soul from the imbalances of malnourishment and the sloth of excessive consumption.⁶⁷

Objects of vision (*al-mubṣarāt*) are divided into colours and bodies and are discussed firstly in terms of the general effects they exert on the soul, and then specifically as visual foci of contemplation. Colours are divided into those which are bright (*mushraq*), a category which includes pure green, red, yellow and white; and those which are dark (*muḥlama*) such as black and brown.⁶⁸ Gazing at bright colours: "gives succour to the spirit; gladdens the heart; and delights the soul. For, light is the object of the spirit's love and desire. And gazing at dark colours disturbs the spirit and aggrieves the heart."⁶⁹

The aspirant must therefore ensure his abode and his clothing are of those colours which fortify the spirit, compensating for the privations it must endure as a consequence of spiritual discipline. Complex patterns of variegated colours (*nuqūsh daqīqa mukhtaliṭa*) are to be avoided: "since the soul becomes preoccupied with their contemplation, and increases in exhaustion. It is for this reason that doctors prevent those struck by delirium (*al-musarsamīn*) from gazing at patterns (*nuqūsh*)."⁷⁰

As a general rule: "when a colour is closest to simplicity and purity, then it is the most apt. And that <colour> is pure white. It is for this reason that the most beloved of garments to the Messenger of God was white."⁷¹

Bodies are divided into those whose contemplation inculcates nothing but yearning for divine gnosis; and those whose contemplation, whilst according some advantage in the mystical pursuit, often entail the unfortunate consequence of inflaming carnal desire (*shahwa*). Bodies which fall into the first category include scenes of natural beauty, contemplation of which fosters wonder at the divine wisdom of their creation; the second category includes ships, palaces and servant-boys (*ghilmān*).⁷²

67 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 607.

68 Of course, these words could be read as *mushriqa* and *muḥlima* meaning "illuminating" and "darkening" respectively.

69 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 608.

70 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 608.

71 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 608.

72 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 608.

In relation to audible objects, Rāzī focuses on the capacity of poetry, when accompanied by music, to inflame the soul's ardour for the object of its love, isolating it from all other preoccupations. As for objects of olfaction, two observations are offered. Firstly, seeing that the quality of air is one of the six factors which influence change in the constitution of the body, the aspirant is advised to make his abode in the desert where the air is consistently clean and pure; and secondly, the use of fragrance (*tīb*) provides support for the major organs. Finally, Rāzī uses the sense category of touch to advocate the use of fasting as a means of curtailment of carnal desire, marriage merely being a concession to those who find such a practice too arduous.⁷³

6.7.3 Disposition of the Soul

We return to the *Psychology of al-Sirr*. The physical regimen to which the aspirant must subject himself must be accompanied by an ascetic attitude which involves a:

[. . .] rejection of the material world as a refuge <for the soul>, disavowing any desire for it and its pursuit (*tark al-iltifāt ilayhā wa-ilā ṭalabihā*). For, once he abandons it, then the cares of the world and preoccupation with the joy to be found therein fall from his heart; at that point, his heart becomes pure and his spiritual ambition soars and his innermost being is voided of all but his goal (*ta'lū himmatuhu wa-yakhlū sirruhu 'an kull mā siwā hādhā al-maṭlūb*); at that point he is able to focus mentally on anything he wants (*yaqdir 'alā al-tafakkur fī mā yuriduhu*) and so reach his goal.⁷⁴

Denial of the world is less of a virtue, more of a practical measure, the adoption of which facilitates connection with the celestial spirits. Preoccupations (*al-shawāghil*), whatever their nature, are impediments which frustrate this purpose. The most stubborn of these impediments are sensory objects, to which the soul before the age of forty is naturally attracted:

The soul's predilection (*ilf*) for sensible objects is very strong because the intellectual faculty (*al-quwwa al-'āqila*) does not reach maturity until after the age of forty. Before that age, the soul is distracted by sensible things, is intent on them, making towards them; such obsession causes the generation of dispositions (*kathrat al-muzāwala sabab li-ḥudūth al-malakāt*). So, it follows that the soul, on account of its excessive distraction by sensible objects, develops a disposition for sensible objects and for being attracted towards them. And since engagement with thought does not emerge unless sensible objects are abjured,

⁷³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 609–10.

⁷⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

then the measure of the soul's predilection for sensible objects and the delight it derives from them is <the measure of> its aversion to and dislike of thought. If such were the case then, right from the outset, with sensible objects present, it would be impossible for the soul to abjure them and direct its attention towards thought. So, it follows that he who desires that the connection ('*alāqa*) between him and the higher spirits becomes firm then he must, from the outset, flee from external distractions to the utmost of his capacity.⁷⁵

Furthermore, as was illustrated earlier by the example of the mountain goat casting itself down from a lofty peak, when the soul is focused on but one task, its ability to accomplish its goal is greatly enhanced: "when one faculty (of the soul) is entirely employed in one task then it will no doubt be more powerful than if it were divided between numerous tasks for not every task, nor every part of a task, makes equal demands on the faculty."⁷⁶

Moreover, the soul never ceases from activity. Whether engaged by the intellect, or the estimative faculty, or neither, its cogitative or imaginative faculty is constantly at work, constructing and deconstructing arguments and images, travelling by way of all manner of mental associations in various directions.⁷⁷ Were this activity harnessed in devotion to one task, it would be accomplished in the most complete way:

God the Exalted created the rational soul such that it never ceases from activity. As for the theoretical faculty (*al-quwwa al-naẓariyya*), it is always cogitating on something and imagining something, either by way of composition or deconstruction (*wa-immā bi'l-tarkib wa-immā bi'l-tahlīl*) such that it is said that man draws analogies by his very nature (*al-insān qayyās bi'l-ṭab'*). As for the practical faculty, Man is seldom capable of spending any extended period of time without doing something or making some movement such that if no particular task occurs to him, then he will play with his beard or move one of his limbs—all this because he is unable to remain <still> devoid of action: for this reason it is said that Man is by nature a doer. If he is thus, and then he devotes himself to one task and one action, then he will perform this action in the most complete way.⁷⁸

The man of complete mental focus is he who has reached the centre point of meditation (*markaz al-fikr*), described by Ṭumṭum, whose concentration allows him to commune with the celestial spirits and to control the elements in the sublunary world.⁷⁹

75 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

76 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

77 We shall explore in further depth the workings of the internal faculties of the soul later in chapter 7 and thereby make better sense of Rāzī's frequent allusion to the intellect, the estimative, the cogitative and imaginative faculties.

78 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

79 See section 2.4.

Chapter 7

Sabian Perfected Man and the Avicennan Theory of Prophethood

7.1 Introduction

The planetary ascent ritual of *al-Sirr*, which establishes noetic connection with the celestial souls, represents the perfection of human knowledge and power. Epistemologically, it is the perfection of the knowledge of particulars which are received from the heavenly spheres, illuminating the soul with knowledge of hidden things and future events. Practically, it is the consummate realisation of the power to act throughout the sublunary world in ways which breach the empirical norm. Since *al-Sirr* refrains from providing a convenient term with which to refer to the individual who has achieved such realisation by way of the planetary ascent ritual, I shall for the sake of convenience refer to him as “the perfected man”. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the intellectual background against which Rāzī has projected the image of the perfected Sabian adept possessed of complete occult knowledge and power.

These two aspects of perfection, which we encountered in the introduction to *al-Sirr*, correspond very closely to the first and the last of the three properties which characterise Avicenna’s theory of prophethood. As articulated in *Aḥwāl al-nafs* (“The States of the Soul”), historically attributed to Avicenna, these are: (1) imaginational prophethood by means of connection with the celestial souls; (2) the extraordinary ability to intuit, by means of connection with the Active Intellect, the middle terms of syllogisms; (3) the ability to perform acts which breach the habitual pattern of events in the world by means of the *muḥarrrika* or “*motive faculty*”.¹ Prophets do not have a

1 I rely on the edition of Aḥmad Fu‘ād al-Aḥwānī, published under the title: *Aḥwāl al-nafs: Risāla fī’l-nafs wa-baqā’ihā wa-ma‘ādhā* (Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1952). Meryem Sebtī argues that *Aḥwāl al-nafs* is a compilation of passages extracted from Avicenna’s *al-Najāt* to which were added three pseudo-epigraphic chapters: see Meryem Sebtī, “La question de l’authenticité de l’Épître des états de l’âme (Risāla fi aḥwāl al-nafs) d’Avicenne,” *Studia Graeco-arabica*, 2 (2012), pp. 331–354. Even if pseudo-epigraphical, the significance of *Aḥwāl al-nafs* lies in its influence on the reception of the Avicennan doctrine of prophethood. For a study of its influence in the works of al-Ghazālī, see M. Afifī al-Akītī, “The Three Properties of Prophethood in Certain Works of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī,” in *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies 56, ed. Jon McGinnis (Leiden: Brill, 2004): pp. 189–212, in which article, see p. 195, fn. 20 for Akītī’s observation of the influence of

unique claim on these properties: any human can either possess any one of these properties innately, or indeed develop them.²

The Avicennan account of imaginational prophethood is central to Rāzī's construction of Sabian practice. Now, it should be borne in mind that this account is distinct and separate from that which explains the occult power that is wielded by prophets: the former is achieved by celestial soul noesis; the latter is achieved purely by means of a powerful estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). I shall argue that, observing the importance of the estimative faculty in the process of celestial soul noesis, Rāzī fuses the Avicennan accounts of imaginational prophethood and prophetic occult power to produce a new synthesis which explains how the Sabian might, through ritualised connection with the celestial soul, acquire both occult power and knowledge. This chapter will therefore examine: (1) Rāzī's understanding of the Avicennan theory of celestial soul noesis and the role of the estimative faculty; (2) the role of the estimative faculty in

Avicennan prophetology on Rāzī's *al-Mabāḥith*. See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya fi 'ilm al-ilāhiyyāt wa'l-ṭabī'iyyāt*, ed. Zayn al-'Abidin al-Musāwī et al. (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1925).

² Al-Akiti observes that although the “three properties of prophethood” are not explicitly named as such, except in Avicenna's *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*, they are partially treated in his *al-Najāt*, whilst his discussion of them is distributed over various sections, and in different orders, in *al-Shifā'*, *al-Ḥikma al-mashriqiyya*, *al-Hidāya*, and *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt* (see al-Akiti, “The Three Properties of Prophethood in Certain Works of Avicenna and al-Ghazālī,” p. 190. For a list of passages in Avicenna's oeuvre discussing the three properties of prophethood, see p. 193). On prophethood in Avicenna more generally see Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958) and Michael E. Marmura's, “Avicenna's Theory of Prophecy in the Light of Ash'arite Theology,” in *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of T.J. Meek*, ed. William Stewart McCullough (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964): pp. 159–178; and “Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 22 (1963): pp. 49–56. In addition, see James Morris, “The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna's Political Philosophy,” in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Charles Butterworth (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): pp. 142–188; Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West: the Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul 1160–1300*, *The Warburg Institute Studies and Texts* 1 (London, Turin: The Warburg Institute, 2000), pp. 154–174; Frank Griffel, “Al-Ghazālī's Concept of Prophecy: the Introduction of Avicennan Psychology into Ash'arite Theology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004): pp. 101–144; Mohammad Azadpur, *Reason Unbound: On Spiritual Practice in Islamic Peripatetic Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011); Ayman Shihadeh, “Aspects of the Reception of Avicenna's Theory of Prophecy,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association: Philosophy in the Abrahamic Traditions* 86 (2012): pp. 23–32.

Sabian astral ritual; (3) the Avicennan background against which Rāzī projects his image of the Sabian perfected man.

7.2 Context of Celestial Soul Noesis in *al-Ishārāt* 10

Given his reliance on *namaṭ* 3 of Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt* to construct Sabian cosmology; the close parallels between key passages in *al-Sirr* 1:4 and his commentary on *namaṭ* 9 of *al-Ishārāt*; and Rāzī's reliance, in *al-Maṭālib* 8, on *al-Ishārāt* 10 for his summary of the Avicennan account of imaginational prophethood, we shall in the following sections turn to *al-Ishārāt* 10 to gain a deeper insight into the Avicennan background to the celestial noetics that informs Rāzī's construction of Sabian practice. In *al-Ishārāt* 10 Avicenna asserts that there are four signs (*āyāt*) which indicate the station of one possessed of gnosis. These signs are displays of occult power for which he provides naturalistic explanations:

The tenth *namaṭ* deals with the four causes for the breaching of the norm (*asbāb al-khaw-āriq*): (1) on the cause of being empowered to forsake nourishment for an extended period of time (*sabab al-tamakkun min tark al-ghidhā' muddatan madīda*) (2) on the cause of being empowered to perform tremendous acts (*sabab al-tamakkun min al-af'āl al-shāqqā*) (3) on the cause of being empowered to receive knowledge of the unseen world (*sabab al-tamakkun min al-ikhbār 'an al-ghuyūb*) (4) on the cause of being empowered to act on the elements (*sabab al-tamakkun min al-taṣarruf fī'l-'anāshir*).³

We have already examined the first two of these issues. *Al-Ishārāt* 10 devotes most attention to the third. In short, since events in the sublunary world are determined by the motions of the heavenly spheres; and since they are cognisant of themselves and their effects, it can therefore be concluded that they possess knowledge of past and future events in the sublunary world and all that is hidden therein (*ikhbār 'an al-ghayb*). It is therefore by means of a psychological connection with the celestial souls that human knowledge of the unseen world becomes possible.

In his commentary, Rāzī breaks down Avicenna's exposition of the issue in the following way. After introducing the topic in chapters 7–8, he establishes the two premises on which his account of noesis rests: firstly, the assertion that the heavenly sphere possesses a rational soul which is perceptive of the effects of the celestial motions, namely the entirety of particulars in the sublunary

³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, ed. Ali Reza Najafzadeh (Tehran: Anjoman-i Āthār-i wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005), vol. 2, p.631.

world; and secondly that the human soul can connect with the celestial rational soul and thus be afforded occult knowledge. The first premise, the grounds of which have already been established in *al-Ishārāt* 3, is treated in chapter 9; the second premise, which entails a much more involved argument drawing on the presentation of the human soul's internal faculties in *al-Ishārāt* 3, is discussed in chapters 10–17. The noetic process itself is described in chapters 18–24.

Avicenna embarks on the discussion by establishing: (1) the reality of occult and preternaturally prescient knowledge; (2) that such knowledge can be derived from dreams; and (3) that if such knowledge can be attained in the dream state, then there exists no obstacle precluding it from occurring during the waking state. Rāzī remarks that Avicenna's assertion that such knowledge can be received whilst in a dream state "is supported by experience and anecdotal evidence (*al-tajriba wa'l-tasāmu'*)."⁴ Experience, asserts Rāzī interpreting Avicenna, teaches that a man can sometimes see something in his sleep which comes to pass in actuality, either literally in accordance with the dream, or in accordance with some interpretation thereof. This he says is supported by the considerable weight of anecdotal evidence. Indeed, he says its occurrence during sleep is so frequent that its reality cannot be dismissed; and so if knowledge of unseen things is possible in sleep, then it is more apt (*awlā*) that it should occur in a waking state.⁴ Exercising his characteristic epistemological rigour, Rāzī comments that whilst the second premise cannot definitely be inferred (*al-istidlāl bi'l-qaṭ'*) from the first, it can at least be inferred to the extent that its possibility cannot be ruled out; indeed the assertion of its possibility is the most probable and apt (*al-akhlaq wa'l-aḥrā*) inference that can be drawn.⁵

7.3 Celestial Knowledge

And so we turn to Rāzī's exposition of the first of the premises on which Avicenna's account of noesis relies: that the heavenly spheres possess souls perceptive of all particulars in the sublunary world.⁶ Associated with each

⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 474.

⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 639.

⁶ Avicenna says:

Earlier, you have learned that particulars are engraved (*manqūsha*) in the intellectual world in a universal way. Then your attention was drawn to the fact that the celestial bodies have souls that possess particular perceptions (*idrākāt juz'iyya*) and particular acts of the will (*irādāt juz'iyya*) which issue from a particular opinion (*ra'y juz'i*). There is nothing

heavenly sphere is an “abstracted” (*mujarrad*) or “separated” (*mufāraq*) intellect (*‘aql*), so called because it is abstracted and separated from space and time and thus can neither inhere in, nor have any relation to, a body. By way of contrast, the celestial sphere possesses a soul which acts as a bodily power, perceptive of particular phenomena which exist within space and time. This soul produces motion in the celestial sphere: it is the motions of the celestial spheres and the resultant geometrical relationships between the heavenly bodies which produce the myriad particular phenomena that we witness in the sublunary world. Knowing itself, the celestial bodily soul possesses knowledge of itself as a proximate cause of the celestial motion, which is in turn the proximate cause of coming-into-being in the sublunary world. Thus, the celestial soul possesses knowledge of all that comes to be:

The abstracted intellects possess knowledge of all particulars in a universal way because all particulars lead to them by means of a chain of dependency (*muntahiya ilayhā salsalat al-ḥāja*) and knowledge of the cause necessarily entails knowledge of the effect; and we have demonstrated also that the celestial sphere possesses a soul, which is a bodily power which perceives particulars; and we have demonstrated that the things which come to be in this world depend on the movements of the spheres; and we have demonstrated that the proximate cause of these movements is the <celestial> soul, and you already know that knowledge of the cause necessarily entails knowledge of the effect; and so it follows from all these premises that the celestial soul possesses knowledge of all that occurs in this world by way of particulars.⁷

Whilst the abstracted intellect is beyond space and time, the celestial soul governs a bodily reality, namely the heavenly sphere; whilst the knowledge of the former comprises universals (*kulliyāt*), that of the latter includes particulars.

that impedes these souls from conceiving the particular concomitants, which pertain to their particular movements, and from which arise the existents in the elemental world. Moreover, if that to which a certain kind of reflection alludes, in a way that is veiled, except to those who are firmly rooted in the august wisdom, is true, <namely> that they [i.e., the celestial bodies] possess, after the separate intellects which function for them like principles, rational souls that are not imprinted in their matter but rather possess a certain relation to them, just as our souls have with regard to our bodies, and that by means of this relation, they [i.e., the celestial bodies] attain some real perfection—then the heavenly bodies come to have an additional meaning (*ma’nā*) in this, such that they manifest a particular opinion and another universal one. It becomes apparent to you, from that to which we have drawn your attention, that particulars are engraved in the intelligible world in a universal manner, but in the world of soul in a particular manner, perceived in time; or they are engraved in both ways simultaneously (Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 639).

7 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 640.

There would thus appear to be a gap in “the chain of dependency” that links particulars in the sublunary world with the abstracted intellect; this gap leaves unanswered how the universals of the abstracted intellect are transformed into the particulars of the celestial bodily soul. Avicenna fills this gap by positing the existence of the celestial rational soul which links the former with the latter. Being neither a body nor bodily in its essence the celestial rational soul nevertheless has a relation with the celestial sphere on account of which, explains Rāzī, the former: “receives renewed perfections (*kamālāt mutajaddida*) just as our own rational soul, though it is not a body nor is it bodily, has a certain relation with our bodies, by reason of which it is able to acquire intellectual perfections (*kamālāt ‘aqliyya*).”⁸ In completing the chain of dependency by positing a celestial rational soul, it is safe for Avicenna to conclude that, in Rāzī’s words: “all particulars that occur in this world are known to the separated intellect (*al-‘aql al-mufāraq*), the rational soul and the bodily soul.”⁹

As Rāzī points out, hylomorphism deeply informs Avicenna’s account of knowledge in the celestial spheres. Thus, when Avicenna says particulars are “engraved” (*manqūsha*) in the intelligible world, engraving denotes knowledge.¹⁰ As it receives knowledge from the abstracted intellect, being engraved with different universal objects of intellection, the celestial rational soul undergoes change; this change induces the celestial bodily soul, which is forever subject to the rational soul, to produce motion in the heavenly sphere. Rāzī expounds on Avicenna’s theory in the following way:

If <the sphere> has a soul which perceives particulars and another soul which perceives universals, and this rational soul undergoes change as it moves from one object of intellection to the next (*mutaghayyira mutanaqqila min ma’qūl ilā ma’qūl*) then celestial motions would arise as a result of the combination of two opinions (*ṣādīra ‘an majmū’ ra’yain*), one being the universal opinion which belongs to the rational soul, and the other being particular which belongs to the celestial bodily soul; and so then these movements proceed in a manner that is analogous to human actions (*tilka al-ḥarakāt ḥīna’idhin jāriyatun majrā al-af’āl al-insāniyya*). For that which first begins with intellection (*al-ta’ aqqul*) and then imagination (*al-takhayyul*) is nobler than that which begins in pure imagination.¹¹

Rāzī here draws a close analogy between Avicenna’s conceptions of the celestial rational-bodily soul complex and the human rational-animal soul

⁸ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 640.

⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 640.

¹⁰ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 640–641.

¹¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 641.

complex.¹² When the imagination in the human soul is not governed by the intellect, through the mediation of the estimative faculty, its activities either proceed autonomously, with no guided direction or purpose; or they proceed according to the direction of the estimative faculty, the governing faculty of the animal soul. What is produced therefore has limited epistemological value. Such a situation is to be contrasted with that of the rational human soul in which the estimative faculty directs the imagination in service of the intellect. Thus, when functioning as the rational soul, the human is in mimetic concord with the harmony that exists in the celestial rational-bodily soul complex; when the estimative faculty usurps the government of the intellect, the contrary situation obtains. A significant implication of this analogy I would argue, which Rāzī leaves unsaid, is that if the former situation is analogous to the activity of the celestial rational-bodily soul complex, then it would appear that the celestial bodily soul is the analogue of the human soul as governed by the estimative faculty in service of the intellect. And just as the celestial bodily soul drives the motion of the heavenly sphere which is the proximate cause of particular phenomena in the sublunary world, so the estimative faculty of the human soul possessed of occult power can be the cause of change which runs contrary to the usual pattern of events in this world of generation and corruption.

Since the celestial rational-bodily soul complex receives universals from the abstracted intellect, whilst simultaneously acting as the proximate cause of particulars in the sublunary world, its knowledge is both universal and particular and is possessed eternally, since its knowledge of its own essence is eternal. Therefore, if the human rational soul were to connect with the celestial soul, then the former could be engraved by the latter with knowledge of future sublunary events:

[. . .] rational souls can connect with those principles (*al-nufūs al-nāṭiqa yumkinuhā al-itti-ṣāl bi-tilka al-mabādi'*); and since those principles have knowledge of all these particulars, then these <human> rational souls can be engraved with their knowledge such that they <come> to perceive that which will come to pass before they occur. So then, they gain command over knowledge of the unseen (*ikhbār al-ghuyūb*).¹³

This reasoning, explains Rāzī, prepares the way for the second major premise on which Avicenna's account of noetic connection with the celestial souls relies: the fact that the human soul can connect with the celestial souls and

¹² I use the word "complex" loosely: despite his assertion of the rational-animal distinction in the soul, Avicenna asserted at the same time the soul's absolute simplicity.

¹³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 642.

thereby receive knowledge of the unseen world (*'ālam al-ghayb*) by way of veridical dreams and waking visions.¹⁴

7.4 Celestial Soul Noesis

Avicenna's naturalistic account of veridical dreams and waking visions is as sophisticated as it is nuanced, allowing as it does—in the case of dreams—for degrees of purity in the way in which they are experienced and retained. These degrees are determined by both the intensity of the original “spiritual trace” (*athar rūḥānī*) which the human soul receives and the extent to which the imagination then proceeds to distort it. He also distinguishes them from normal dreams which his account explains as merely the product of the unfettered and unceasing activity of the autonomous *mutaṣarrifa* when acting as the imagination during sleep. Dreams are thus of two kinds: those which are solely the product of the imagination and those which are the result of connection with the celestial souls. In this section we shall discuss both in that order, and touch briefly on waking visions. But before we proceed, we must first examine two principles which govern the behaviour of the internal sense faculties in producing such cognitive phenomena which have no connection to the external senses.

The first relates to the fact that the soul's preoccupation (*ishtighāl*) with one goal will prevent it from the effective pursuit of another; it is the psychological principle which explains the prescription in *al-Sirr* that, as a prerequisite of occult training and establishing connection with the celestial spirits, the aspirant must abjure all material desire and sensory distraction.¹⁵ Commenting on Avicenna's

14 Avicenna succinctly states the second premise in the tenth chapter of *al-Ishārāt* 10 as follows: “Your soul can be engraved with the engraving of that [i.e., the intelligible] world in accordance with its receptiveness (*isti'dād*) and the elimination of that which impedes. You have already learned this, so do not deny that some of the unseen can be engraved in your soul from that world. I shall surely increase your insight” (Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2 p. 642).

15 Says Avicenna:

The powers of the soul are mutually attractive and mutually repellent. So, when aroused, anger distracts the soul from appetite, and vice versa. Thus, when devoted exclusively to its activity, the internal sense is diverted from <preoccupation with> the external sense, and so <the former> would barely hear or see—and vice versa. Hence, if the internal sense is drawn to the external sense, it would make the intellect incline towards its instrument, <with the result that> it disperses (*inbaththa*), without availing itself of the cogitative motion that it so frequently relies on as its instrument. Something else will also occur, which is that the <rational> soul will also be drawn to the side of the strong movement, and it

discussion of this principle, Rāzī explains that the soul cannot be gripped by both the irascible and the appetitive powers at the same time. And if the soul requires the bodily power to perform some vigorous action, then it will relinquish its activities in order to assist it. Moreover, if the internal senses are preoccupied with stimuli received by the external senses, then the intellect will be unable to engage the *mutaṣarrifa* as the cogitative power (*al-mufakkira*). By way of contrast:

[. . .] when the soul uses the internal senses, the external senses are bewildered, that is, they weaken. And so, for this reason, when a man is immersed in the act of imagination or contemplation (*takhayyul aw tafakkur*), perhaps a strongly visible or audible phenomenon may present itself to him but, despite the fact that his external sense may be sound, he does not perceive it at all.¹⁶

The second principle which governs the operation of the soul's internal senses in the production of such cognitive phenomena relates to the state of receptivity of the common sense. Sensory experience can be occasioned either by the perception of an external object or by an internal factor which bears no relation to any external object of perception. Avicenna enigmatically alludes to this latter type of engraving as occurring to "the tablet" of the common sense.¹⁷

Rāzī brings clarity to this enigmatic allusion in the following way:

Know that forms which are imprinted in the common sense have four levels <in the way in which> they are sensed. The first is when external sensible objects come to be witnessed as soon as they are imprinted in the common sense; the second is when they continue to be sensed together with the sensible objects remaining in the external world; the third is when they continue to be sensed even after the external sensible object no longer remains; and the fourth is when they are sensed even though there is no sensible object in the external world. When you know this then we say: the examples of the descending line and the revolving point provide evidence of the first three of these levels. The fourth requires its own evidence.¹⁸

We have already encountered Rāzī's explanation of Avicenna's examples of the raindrop and the dot painted on a rotating circle in our introductory discussion on the internal senses (see section 6.2). The cause of engravings which fall into this fourth category is internal to the soul and requires a separate supporting

will relinquish those acts that are uniquely within its purview. If the soul regains the power to bring the internal sense under its control, then the external senses will also be enfeebled, and will not convey to the soul that of which reckoning has been made (Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 643).

16 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 644.

17 Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 644.

18 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 644–645.

proof, evidence for which Avicenna finds in the visual experiences of those struck by illness and bilious imbalance (*al-marḍā wa'l-mamrūrīn*). The cause of such engravings in the common sense, he reasons, must be internal. Moreover, just as forms from the common sense can be engraved in the imagination, so too can forms from the imagination be engraved in the common sense.¹⁹

Avicenna's supporting proof is compact: Rāzī expands it to reveal fully the structure of the argument which it implies. Those afflicted in this way see forms which others do not see: therefore, these forms must either be non-existent (*ma'dūm*) or existent (*mawjūd*). They cannot be non-existent because this would entail absolute negation, and that which is characterised by absolute negation can never be witnessed. Therefore, their existence must be affirmed. Now, this existence is either extra-mental or it is internal to the witness's soul. The fact that no-one else possessed of sound external senses witnesses these forms negates the first of these disjuncts: they cannot be extra-mental. Therefore, their existence must be internal to the soul of the witness. This being the case, they must either exist in the rational soul or in a bodily faculty (*quwwa jismāniyya*). The first disjunct is false because the rational soul cannot perceive particulars; nor can it be inscribed with the forms of sensible things (*lā tartasim fihā ṣuwar al-maḥsūsāt*). Therefore, they must be inscribed in a bodily faculty capable of perceiving visible things. This bodily faculty cannot be the vision (*al-quwwa al-bāṣira*) which only perceives that which exists externally. Moreover, these kinds of visual experiences are also reported by blind people. Thus, are we led to the conclusion that it must be the common sense that perceives these forms; and since it is established that these forms do not occur to the common sense from the outside, their source must be internal. This source can therefore be one of two internal faculties: the sensible memory (*al-khayāl*) from which stored forms migrate to the common sense, where they are inscribed and witnessed; or the imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*) which composes forms which are inscribed in the common sense.²⁰

19 Avicenna explains:

Sick and bilious people may witness sensible forms as clear and present which have no relation to an external sensible object. Therefore, their engraving (*intiḡāsh*) is due to an internal (*bāṭin*) cause or due to a cause influencing an internal cause. The common sense may also be engraved upon (*yantaḡish*) by forms that arise from the mine of the imagination and the estimation (*al-ṣuwar al-ḥā'ila fī ma'dīn al-takhayyul wa'l-tawahhum*), just as these forms are also engraved in the mine of the imagination and estimation from the tablet of the common sense, in a way similar to that between facing mirrors (Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 645).

20 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 645–646.

When inscribing the common sense thus, the *mutaṣarrifa*, operating as the imagination, acts autonomously, directed neither by the estimative faculty nor by the intellect by way of the estimative faculty's mediation. Two preoccupying factors (*shāghilān*) prevent the *mutaṣarrifa qua* imagination from operating in this way. Firstly, if the common sense is preoccupied (*mashghūl*) with forms which are presented to it from the external senses, it is unable to encompass (*lam yattasi'*) other forms, and the *mutaṣarrifa qua* imagination will not be able to inscribe the forms which it has composed. The second preoccupying factor merits close scrutiny. Avicenna describes it as:

[. . .] either internal <pertaining to> the intellect, or internal <pertaining to> the estimative faculty (*'aqlī bāṭin aw wahmī bāṭin*); it seizes control of the imagination (*al-takhayyul*), preventing it from acting autonomously on it [i.e., the common sense] with that which assists it [i.e., either the intellect or the estimative faculty]. And so, it [i.e., the imagination], by yielding to its control, is preoccupied from <acting on> the common sense and it is not able to engrave in it, because the movement <of the imagination> is weak, since it is led and does not lead (*li'annahā tābi'a lā matbū'a*). If one of the two preoccupying factors is at rest whilst the other remains, then it may be that <the latter> might be incapable of holding <it> under control, so the imagination prevails over the common sense in which it imprints (*lawwaha*) a form as something which is sensed and witnessed.²¹

Rāzī comments on Avicenna's account of this second preoccupying factor as follows:

As for the second obstacle, it relates to the agent: for when either the intellect or the estimative faculty employ the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*), and the cogitative faculty becomes preoccupied in the service of either one of them, then it is no longer free to perform its own particular actions and it is no longer able to compose, deconstruct and generate simulacra of forms. And when those forms do not exist, they cannot flow to the common sense.²²

It is curious that whilst Avicenna alludes to the control exerted either by the intellect or the estimative faculty on the imagination, Rāzī refers instead to the control exerted by either on the cogitative faculty. Rāzī may be entitled to do so since the imaginative and the cogitative faculties are merely different modalities of the same internal sense organ which, for the sake of clarity, is best referred to as the *mutaṣarrifa*. But he surely confuses these modalities when he explains that, under the control of either the intellect or the estimative faculty, the cogitative faculty is “no longer free to perform its own particular actions,” namely composing, deconstructing, and generating simulacra of forms: such activity would

²¹ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 646–647.

²² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 647–648.

normally be expected of the imagination. Be that as it may, Avicenna makes a very deliberate distinction between the control exerted by the intellect, and the control exerted by the estimative faculty, over the *mutaṣarrifa* in preventing it from engraving in the common sense.

If however the imagination is free to act autonomously, whilst at the same time the common sense is free of preoccupation with forms received from the external senses, the former can act on the latter, inscribing forms which come to be witnessed. This is the situation in which normal dreams occur. Explaining Avicenna's account of this process, Rāzī says that during sleep, since it is preoccupied with assisting the digestive power in the process of digestion, the rational soul does not engage the imagination:

Know that there is no doubt that sleep is an obstacle for the external senses in the performance of their functions; it is also an obstacle for the rational soul in the performance of its functions. This is when the rational soul is preoccupied with assisting the digestive power with processing nourishment, and we have shown that when the <rational> soul is engaged with those functions over which it uniquely exercises control (*al-a'māl allatī lahā bi'l-istibdād*), whilst <at the same time> nature (*al-tabī'a*) is engaged with digestion, then digestion will not be finished and completed. Indeed it will be deficient and weak. And so for this reason it is correct that the soul is drawn towards assisting nature when it is engaged in digestion. Furthermore, sleep is more similar to illness than to health.²³

Thus, with the release of the rational soul's grip, the imagination operates as an independent active faculty, working on the receptive faculty of the common sense which is undistracted by external stimuli:

When you know this, then we say that during sleep, both the active <faculty> and receptive <faculty> are present to these simulacra (*ḥaṣala al-fā'il li-hādhihi al-ashbāḥ wa'l-qābil lahā*). As for the active faculty, it is because the soul is engaged in administering the body and assisting the digestive power, and so it is not free to administer the imaginative faculty (*al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila*); the imaginative faculty thus becomes autonomous (*mustaqilla bi-nafsihā*), empowered to create simulacra (*tashbih*) and imprints (*talwīḥ*) in

23 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 648–649. Here, “rational soul” can only mean the human soul in its most general sense, and not the specific sense of the intellect which is immaterial and thus incapable of directly affecting the very material digestive process. Rāzī clarifies the way in which sleep resembles illness in the following way:

In the case of an illness, the cause of the witnessing of these images is but one thing: it is that the soul, on account of the fact that it is engaged in the body's repair, is too weak to administer the imaginative faculty (*al-mutakhayyila*) and so the imaginative faculty takes control and is empowered to create simulacra (*tashbih*) and so these simulacra are imprinted in the tablet of the common sense (*fa-lāḥat tilka al-ashbāḥ fī lawḥ al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*) (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 649).

whatever way it so wills and desires, without any impediment. As for the receptive faculty, it is because the tablet of the common sense is free of the engravings (*nuqūsh*) which derive from the external senses. When the active and receptive faculties operate in a perfect and complete manner (*matā ḥaṣala al-fā'il wa'l-qābil bi'l-kamāl wa'l-tamām*) then this activity (*fī'l*) inevitably takes place. Thus, it follows that these forms appear in sleep and become phenomena that are witnessed.²⁴

So far Avicenna has been speaking very generally about normal dreams, produced when the imagination is acting purely autonomously, inscribing forms in the common sense that is undistracted by the impression of forms from the external senses. But in the case of dreams induced by contact with the celestial spheres, the soul must possess sufficient strength to retain the essence of what it perceives therein if it is to benefit from the experience. Were it to lack such strength then the imagination, acting autonomously, would begin to generate a series of images by way of imaginative association (*muḥākāt*). Each image is connected with its predecessor by way of a certain resemblance: by the end of the process, an image is produced which bears no resemblance whatsoever to the original. Rāzī expounds on Avicenna's account of imaginative association by saying:

When the soul is strong, it is empowered to retain the essence of that which it perceives (*qawiyat 'alā ḥifz 'ayn mā adrakathu*) and it does not move on from it to that which resembles it (*mā yuḥākīhi*). If the soul is weak, then it is too weak to retain perceptions (*al-mudrakāt*) and so it may travel from one thing to that which imitates it and with which it shares similarities in certain aspects; and then <it may travel> from that to something which imitates it in turn; and so it may continue to travel from one thing to another which imitates it until it arrives at something which bears no relation to the first object of perception (*al-mudrak al-awwal*) in any respect. This intention (*ma'nā*) only occurs when the imaginative faculty assumes control and the soul is too weak to reform and discipline it.²⁵

Significantly, Rāzī refers to the cognitive object produced at each stage in the process of imaginative association as an “intention”—a *ma'nā*—the very same term that Avicenna applies to the particular percept apprehended by the sheep's estimative faculty when it encounters the hostility of the wolf (see section 6.2). Not only does the strength of the soul, nurtured by spiritual discipline, fix the insight of the original image produced in a veridical dream, but it also enables the soul to administer the body without any loss of connection with the intellectual world (*al-'ālam al-'aqlī*). Thus, says Rāzī, interpreting Avicenna:

In general, the strong soul suffices for both domains (*wāfiya li-jānibayn*), namely the domain of the intellect and the domain of the body (*al-jānib al-'aqlī wa'l-jānib al-badani*),

24 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 648–649.

25 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 649–650.

and the direction of its attention to one of these domains is no impediment to its attention being directed to the other. Moreover, if these souls, together with their power, have undergone spiritual discipline (*murtāḍa*), then its ability to abjure things which negate spiritual discipline and to perform that which is sympathetic (*yunāsib*) to it is stronger.²⁶

For the average human soul, which falls short of the ranks of the prophets and those possessed of divine gnosis, the states of either sleep or illness afford fleeting opportunities in which it can find deliverance from the distraction of the imagination and connect with the “realm of sanctity” (*jānib al-quḍs*) by which it is engraved with forms; it then commands the imagination to engrave in the common sense imaginative forms which correspond to those objects of intellection: thus do they come to be witnessed in a particular, sensory way. Such a situation arises during sleep since the external senses are shut down, freeing the common sense to be engraved by the imagination; during illness or indeed vigorous movement, the pneuma of the imagination suffers dissolution and the imagination consequently becomes inert. With the imagination thus weakened, the soul is no longer burdened by the task of maintaining control of it, and it is attracted to the realm of sanctity. Rāzī explains the process thus:

When the imaginative faculty experiences weakness, either on account of an illness by which it has been struck, or due to the dissolution of the pneuma (*taḥallul al-rūḥ*) which serves as its tool, which occurs because of vigorous movement and activity, it <the imaginative faculty> inclines towards calmness and inertia; thus the rational soul is freed from its administration and disciplining to connect with the intellectual world, and there occurs to it something which derives from the intellectual souls (*al-nufūs al-‘aqliyya*) and the holy realities (*al-jalāyā al-quḍsiyya*). When this happens the imaginative faculty is roused towards generating a simulacrum (*tashbīḥ*) of the universal meaning in a particular form.²⁷

Having enjoyed some respite and recovered from the dissolution of its pneuma, the imagination returns to its habitual activity of generating and imprinting simulacra and, marshalled by the rational soul, it: “is roused to compose particular forms which correspond to that universal psychic intention (*al-ma‘nā al-kullī al-naḥsānī*). And when these forms flow to the common sense they come to be witnessed.”²⁸

However, the soul which enjoys a stronger substance need not rely on the opportunities provided by sleep or illness in order to slip away to the supernal realm. Rather, whilst awake it can simultaneously engage with both the higher world of the celestial souls and the lower world of its own body, such

26 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 649–650.

27 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 651.

28 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 651.

that management of the latter does not thwart connection with the former. It then marshals the imagination to compose forms which correspond to those items of supernal knowledge; these are then imprinted in the tablet of the common sense to be witnessed in a sensory way (*ṣārat mushāhadatan maḥsūsatan*). At this point visual perception of form and aural perception of speech occur, even though these phenomena in of themselves have no extra-mental existence.²⁹

7.5 Imagination

The traces which the human subject receives from the celestial souls, whether during sleep or the waking state, must be translated by the imagination into particular forms which are imprinted in the common sense if they are to be witnessed as sensory experiences. Therefore, the activity of the imagination to a large extent determines the degree to which the human soul can derive insight and benefit from what was in origin a pure celestial form.

Avicenna provides a fuller description of the autonomous activity of the imagination in the twentieth chapter of *al-Ishārāt* 10. Its innate constitution (*ji-billa*) is to move unceasingly from one cognitive object to another on the principle of similarity or antithesis between the former and the latter. He explains:

Such is the innate constitution of the imaginative faculty that it imitates (*inna al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila jubilat muḥākīyatan*) whichever perceptual or temperamental configuration dominates it, moving swiftly from one thing to its like or to its opposite—in short, to whatever causally derives from it (*bi'l-jumla ilā mā huwa minhu bi-sabab*). Without a doubt, the specification [i.e., of cognitive objects generated by the imagination] has particular causes (*asbāb juz'īyya*), though we might not discern them concretely. If the imaginative faculty did not have such an innate constitution, then we would not possess that on which we can rely (*nasta'īnu bihi*) with respect to: [(1)] cogitative motion (*intiḡālāt al-fikr*) that seeks to generate the middle terms <of syllogisms> (*mustantijan li'l-ḥudūd al-wuṣṭā*)³⁰ and whatever serves

²⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 652.

³⁰ The use of the word *mustantijan* is awkward, given its technical meaning of “seeking the conclusion (*natīja*) of a syllogism.” By way of contrast, to seek the middle term of a syllogism is a distinct, though intimately related, epistemological process. In his commentary to *al-Ishārāt*, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī observes this awkwardness. Availing himself of the testimony of an alternative manuscript witness to *al-Ishārāt*, Ṭūsī prefers *mustaliḥan*, meaning “to endeavour to discern.” See Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, ed. & comm. Ḥasan Zādeh Āmoli (Qom: Bustān-i Kitāb-i Qom, 2007) vol. 2, p. 1136. The reading of *mustaliḥan* is also preferred by Mujtabā Zārī'ī in his edition of Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt*: see Avicenna, *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, ed. Mujtabā Zārī'ī (Qom: Bustān-i Kitāb-i Qom, 2002), p. 382.

their function, and [(2)] the recollection of things which have been forgotten; and [(3)] other benefits. Every input (*kull sāniḥ*) to this faculty stimulates it either into motion or being placed under control (*tuḍbaṭ*). This control is occasioned either by the power of the soul's resistance <to input>; or by the intensity of the clarity of the form that is engraved in <the imagination> such that it is received in a way that is intensely lucid and sharply represented —this deters its distraction and vacillation, and holds the imagination still, such that what appears in it is as powerful as that which the external senses convey.³¹

Avicenna is here describing a process of free imaginative association of ideas or images, which he calls “*muḥākāt*.” Thus, when a certain image or idea is present to the imagination, it generates a second within a presumably limited range of images or ideas that are either similar or antithetical to the original cognitive object. A third is then generated from the second, a fourth from the third, and so on, for however long the process lasts. Between each object of imaginative cognition and that which precedes it is a relationship either of similarity or antithesis. Two factors determine this process of imaginative association: (1) the original cognitive input datum—or what he terms “perceptual configuration” (*hay'a idrākīyya*)—received by the imagination; and (2) the “temperamental configuration,” or humoral balance that characterises the pneumatic substrate in which the imaginative faculty operates.³² However, Avicenna refrains from more detailed theorising on what determines whether a generated image is similar or antithetical to the preceding image from which it is produced.

This activity of imaginative association springs from the spontaneous nature (*gharīza*) of the *mutaṣarrifa* which is thus disposed in order to allow the cogitative process to hit on the middle terms of syllogisms and to recollect things stored in the memory. In fact, this process is essential to cogitation, the construction of syllogisms, and thus to the practice of science. The “movements” of this activity never cease unless impeded by one of two obstacles. As Rāzī explains:

One is when the rational soul dominates it, impeding it from its movements, and disciplining it. The second is when the forms which are engraved (*munaqqasha*) in it are powerful and clear: then by reason of their clarity and power, they prevent <the imaginative faculty>

³¹ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 652–653.

³² Concerning the effect on the cognitive experience exerted by the temperamental balance, Ṭūsī explains that if the dominant humor is yellow bile, or black bile, then the resultant image would be characterised by a yellow or black hue respectively. See Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 1136. For his formulation of the idea of *muḥākāt*, Avicenna was deeply influenced by al-Fārābī, who uses it especially in the context of his treatment of divination and prophecy. See Deborah L. Black, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*, Islamic Theology and Philosophy 7. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 198–201.

from moving away from them to other forms: this is due to what you already know from of his [i.e., Avicenna's] explanation that bodily powers have no awareness (*shu'ūr*) of dimly perceptible objects (*al-mudrakāt al-ḍa'īfa*) when they are perceiving powerfully perceptible objects (*al-mudrakāt al-qawīyya*).³³

Having expounded on his idea of imaginative and cogitative association, Avicenna describes how this cognitive process might affect the degree to which a “spiritual trace” (*athar rūḥānī*), which occurs to the human soul from one of the celestial souls, might be accurately retained. He envisages three general grades of intensity, each comprising varying degrees. The first grade comprises traces which are so weak that they leave no enduring impression. The second comprises those which are sufficiently strong as to stir the imagination which, however, continues in its movement to generate new images, by way of association, such that only the imagination's associated images, rather than the original trace, are retained. And the third grade comprises those traces of such intensity and power that they are clearly imprinted in the imagination and stored in the memory undistorted by the confusion of associated images.³⁴

Although the purity of the original spiritual trace from the celestial souls is vitiated in the second of these grades, its original state can be recovered or reconstituted from the distortions of the imagination's associated images by means of interpretation (*ta'wīl* or *ta'bīr*). Avicenna says that a number of considerations would inform the hermeneutics of this process including those relating to the personal disposition of the recipient, time and custom. Unfortunately he does not elaborate further—nor, for that matter, does Rāzī.³⁵

7.6 Inducing Celestial Soul Noesis

So, as we have explored, when received from the celestial realm during sleep, the spiritual trace is experienced as a veridical dream; when received during waking hours, it is experienced as a vision. This kind of noetic connection with the celestial souls can be established through very deliberate physical means which affect the internal sense faculties, rooted as they are in the physical substrate of the brain. The key passage is chapter 23 of *al-Ishārāt* 10.³⁶

³³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 652.

³⁴ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 654.

³⁵ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 655.

³⁶ On this chapter, Rāzī provides no commentary. See Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 655–656.

As an example of such a practice, Avicenna here provides an intriguing description of a Turkic divinatory procedure. When the tribe (*qawm*) requires knowledge from the supernal realm (*taqdimat maʿrifa*) in order to make a certain decision, they consult their diviner. He launches himself into an intense sprint (*faziʿa huwa ilā shadd ḥathīth jiddan*) during which he pants so heavily (*yalhath*) that he faints. In this state of delirium, his imagination is set to work (*yukhayyal ilayhi*) and those around him listen to what he utters, committing it to memory: then they decide their affairs accordingly.

Physical procedures such as these cause bewilderment (*ḥayra*) to the common sense and bring a halt to the incessant movement of the imagination. For, as we have already learnt, intense physical movement can cause the dissolution of the imagination's pneuma, rendering the faculty inert and perfectly receptive to influxes from the unseen world, the supernal realm of the celestial souls.

Moreover, the estimative faculty has already been primed for a particular purpose, namely the pressing concern that occupies the tribe. Says Avicenna: “[. . .] some natures (*ṭabāʿi*) may have recourse to activities, on account of which, the <common> sense is bewildered and the imagination arrested, such that the faculty which is receptive to the unseen becomes primed for sound reception, and the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*) is directed towards a <particular> purpose which specifically determines its reception <of the unseen> (*fa-yatakhaṣṣaṣ bi-dhālika qabūluhu*).”³⁷

Close scrutiny of this passage reveals a more detailed account of the noetic process. “The faculty which is receptive to the unseen” is the *mutaṣarrifa qua* imagination which, having been arrested, is primed for reception of cognitive data from the celestial souls. But of course, since the *mutaṣarrifa* itself cannot receive percepts from the extra-mental world, it is the estimative faculty that establishes connection with the supernal realm, receiving from it intentions—or *maʿānī*—in much the same way as the sheep perceives the intentions of the wolf.³⁸ The specificity of the intention—or *maʿnā*—received, is determined by

37 Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt waʾl-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 655.

38 Herbert Davidson asserts that, according to Avicenna, it is by means of the imagination that the prophetic human soul may establish connection with the supernal realm: see Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 123. Dag Nikolaus Hasse, however, asserts that were this the case then, given that the imagination belongs to the animal soul, “animals could become prophets as well” (Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West*, p. 159). Adopting Hasse's reasoning, Dimitri Gutas argues that it is by means of the practical intellect that the human soul establishes this noetic connection: see Dimitri Gutas, “Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge in Avicenna,” in *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy, from the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank*, ed.

the purpose (*gharaḍ*) with which the estimative faculty has been primed—in this case, the pressing issue with which the tribe is concerned. It is with the estimative faculty that the Turkic diviner establishes connection with the super-nal realm.

Such physical means are employed to distract the common sense and stupefy the imagination, allowing the estimative faculty to direct itself to the celestial realm with specific purpose. Other examples of such methods require the diviner, or scryer, to focus on a transparent or glittering object, or one with wavy patterns, so that his common sense and imagination might be bewildered. Like the diviner of the Turkic tribe, the raw data received by way of noetic connection is conveyed by means of inspired speech which he utters whilst in the grip of the experience. Those who attend him, who are usually the very ones who requested the act of divination in the first instance, record and retain what he utters:

[. . .] those who seek to induce inspired speech (*yastanṭiq*) in such a manner by focusing (*ta'ammul*) either on something transparent which makes the vision tremble by means of its tremulous quality (*bi-rajrajatihi*); or on something which causes stupefaction on account of its transparency; or on such as that which causes distraction such as a patch of shiny black; or objects which glitter or which have a wavy pattern. All of that preoccupies the common sense with a kind of bewilderment and stirs the imagination (*khayāl*) in a way that occasions bewilderment as though it were coerced, not natural. In the bewilderment <of the common sense and the imagination> is to be found the aforementioned opportunity to slip away [i.e., to the celestial realm].³⁹

Avicenna underscores the key role of the estimative faculty in achieving noetic connection in the following terms: “when the estimative faculty is intensely engaged in its objective (*idhā ishtadda tawakkul al-wahm bi-dhālika al-ṭalab*) then <noetic> connection (*al-ittiṣāl*) is instantaneous.”⁴⁰

There appears to be, however, a qualitative difference between the practice of the Turkic diviner and those who rely on scrying. The function of the rapid sprint of the former is to induce a state of hyperventilation which dissolves the pneuma of the imagination, rendering it still and inert, whilst perplexing the

James Montgomery, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 152 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006): pp. 337–354, particularly p. 343. Seyed N. Mousavian and Seyed Hasan Saadat Mostafavi disagree, arguing that both Hasse and Gutas have conflated the “animal soul” in its specific sense as a species, with the animal soul as a power of the rational human soul. See Seyed N. Mousavian and Seyed Hasan Saadat Mostafavi, “Avicenna on the Origination of the Human Soul,” in *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 5, ed. Robert Pasnau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 41–86, in particular pp. 73–75. Chapter 23 of *al-Ishārāt* 10 provides strong support for the interpretation advanced by Mousavian and Mostafavi.

39 Avicenna quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 655.

40 Avicenna quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 655.

common sense. Bewilderment, however, can be induced in the scryer, who being usually young and gullible, with an undeveloped intellect, is easily led into a state of bewilderment through the power of suggestion: “[. . .] <these means> are most effective in one whose nature is most prone to stupefaction and most suited to accepting dubious stories (*al-aḥādīth al-mukhtaliṭa*) such as simple-minded youth. Sometimes this is facilitated by lengthy, confused speech (*al-ishāb fī'l-kalām al-mukhtaliṭ*) and falsely suggesting the influence of jinn (*al-ihām li-masīs al-jinn*) and everything <which involves> bewilderment and stupefaction.”⁴¹

What Avicenna meant by “confused speech” (*al-kalām al-mukhtaliṭ*) is not clear; nor does Rāzī’s commentary assist us. However, if we consult *al-Sirr*, a clearer picture of what, at the very least, Rāzī thought Avicenna may have meant emerges. Discussing the effect of reciting incantations in unknown languages during occult ritual, Rāzī says: “when the soul hears these incantations, whilst understanding or comprehending nothing of them, then is it overwhelmed by bewilderment and stupefaction; and on account of this bewilderment, its ties to the corporeal world are severed and its connection with the world of the unseen is established.”⁴²

In this passage from *al-Sirr*, Rāzī is manifestly drawing on chapter 23 of Avicenna’s *Ishārat* 10, which continues to say: “sometimes the flash of the unseen (*lamḥan al-ghayb*) will take the form of a powerful supposition (*ẓann qawī*); at other times it may resemble the speech of jinn or a call from someone remotely distant (*hutāf min ghā’ib*); and at other times it may take the form of something absent <but which nevertheless> can be witnessed despite the fact that its distance from the vision would <normally> prevent it from being so witnessed.”⁴³

The eventual form which the diviner’s imagination inscribes in his common sense, to generate a direct witnessed experience, will be the product of the process of *muḥākāt*, or imaginative association. This will depend to a large degree on his culture, the context of his immediate surroundings, and his personal experiences and beliefs.⁴⁴

Avicenna’s theory of cognition enables him to explain dreams and visions as the product of the individual imagination, informed by culture and belief,

41 Avicenna quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārat wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 655. It would seem that the practical intellect plays no role whatsoever in the ability of a dull-witted, gullible youth to establish noetic connection with the supernal realm.

42 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mīrẓā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated), p. 18.

43 Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārat wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 655.

44 Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārat wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 655.

whilst simultaneously affirming their extra-mental and ontologically independent cause. The veridical dream or vision is experienced irrespective of whether the recipient affirms or denies the reality of their celestial cause and regardless of his religion or confession. From prophets and those possessed of divine gnosis, to diviners of Turkic tribes, to dull-witted and suggestible youths: noetic connection with the celestial souls can be established by all.

What distinguishes prophets and those possessed of divine gnosis from the rest of humanity is that they need not rely on sleep or illness or physical techniques to attain this state: whilst awake they can engage with the realm of the celestial souls and the lower corporeal world of the internal sense faculties such that management of the latter does not thwart connection with the former. Possessed of mastery of his soul, the prophet or *ʿarif* can then marshal the imagination to compose forms which correspond to those traces left by the celestial souls, imprinting them on the common sense.

Those outside their elite ranks must rely on physical means to cause the bewilderment of the common sense and the imagination, freeing the estimative faculty to connect with the celestial souls. Since they are incapable of simultaneously engaging with the celestial realm and maintaining full control of their bodily functions, especially speech, they must rely on those around them to listen to and retain the purport of what they utter. The imagination plays the important role of imprinting forms in the common sense, produced in imitation of the spiritual trace that it receives from the estimative faculty which, being primed with a particular purpose and intent, specifies the kind of data that it seeks and receives from the celestial realm. Both the estimative faculty and the imagination are thus crucial to the noetic process.

7.7 Correspondence and Noetic Connection

We have yet to form, however, a clearer picture of how the noetic connection is established between human and celestial souls. Specifically, what is the function of astrological timing and the use in ritual of items which participate in a corresponding sympathy with the planets? Dimitri Gutas identifies in Avicenna's *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād* ("Provenance and Destination") an important passage that discusses this noetic connection, and reveals, yet further, how Avicenna's psychology provided Rāzī with such a useful framework to account for the talismanic craft. Gutas translates the relevant passage as follows:

As for the reason for the knowledge of <future> events (*al-kā'ināt*), it is the contact of the human soul with the souls of the celestial bodies which [. . .] know what happens in the

world of the elements [. . .] For the most part, these <human> souls come into contact with them <the souls of the celestial spheres> by virtue precisely of a congeneric similarity (*mujānasa*) between them. The congeneric similarity is that thing (*al-ma'nā*) which, there <in the heavens>, is close to the concerns of these <human souls>. So most of what is seen <by the human souls> of what is to be found there <in the heavens> is congeneric to the states of the bodies of these <human> souls or to the states of one who is close to these bodies. And although the contact <of the human souls with the celestial souls> is total, the majority of the influence they receive from them is for the most part close to just their <own> concerns. This contact comes about on the part (*min jiha*) of the estimation and imagination (*al-khayāl*) and through their use, and concerns particular things.⁴⁵

Note that, when noetic connection with the celestial realm is established, the percept apprehended by the human is referred to as *ma'nā*—or intention. It will be recalled that it is precisely the *ma'nā* of hostility that the sheep perceives in the wolf. Furthermore, this *ma'nā* is deeply influenced by the specific concern of the human subject, whose contact with the celestial realm is established by means of the estimative faculty and imagination. Gutas observes how the concept of congeneric similarity (*mujānasa*) in *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād* is expressed in *al-Shifā'*, as a relation—or *nisba*—between celestial and human souls:

[. . .] for this knowledge to be transmitted, there must come about a necessary relation or connection (*nisba*) between the source of this knowledge, the supernal world, and its recipient, the rational soul and the imagination as a unit, and also, since this knowledge manifests itself through the imagination, between the rational soul and the imagination. In other words, what in the *Provenance and Destination* had been a congeneric similarity between the upper world and the human soul here [i.e., in *al-Shifā'*] is expressed as a connection or relation between the two.⁴⁶

It is evident from *al-Sirr* that the occult *munāsabāt* of Sabian astral ritual are crucial in establishing the *mujānasa* between the operant's soul and the celestial soul upon which he focuses. The resulting noetic connection enables the reception of both knowledge of the unseen and power to affect change in the sublunary world. To understand how, we must explore in greater detail the central role of the estimative faculty in the occult ritual described in *al-Sirr*. This will be the task of the next section.

45 Avicenna, *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*, ed. 'Abdullah Nūrānī (Tehran: The Institute of Islamic Studies, 1984), p. 117, as translated by Dimitri Gutas in "Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge in Avicenna," p. 339.

46 Gutas, "Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge in Avicenna," p. 348.

7.8 The Estimative Faculty and Sabian Astral Ritual

Rāzī cites Ibn Waḥshiyya who says the Sabian method of establishing noetic connection with the celestial spirits entails the worship of the idols of the Sun and Mercury:

Of the concerns of the practitioner is to make firm his connection with the celestial spirits: this is the main objective (*al-maqṣūd al-muhimm*). Said Ibn Waḥshiyya, may God have mercy on him: “it is necessary, each morning of these forty days, to come and praise the idol of the Sun and of Mercury; to pray to them, burning for them aromatics which are appropriate, devoting himself to them, calling on their assistance in the attainment of that <main> aim.”⁴⁷

Ibn Waḥshiyya was not a philosopher: he did not theorise about the contribution made by each of the soul’s internal faculties to this noetic process. So drawing on Avicenna’s psychology, Rāzī speculates about what must be going on. In so doing he formulates a theory on how astrolatrous idolatry works:

And I say: this craft is not accomplished unless thought and the estimative faculty are made to connect with the spirit of the assisting heavenly body (*ta’līq al-fikr wa’l-wahm bi-rūḥ dhālika al-kawkab al-mu’īn*) such that that becomes a stabilised capacity (*milka mustaqarra*). Moreover, we have explained that souls are created subservient to the activities of the estimative faculty, in most matters, subject to the senses (*khuliqat al-nufūs muḥī’atan li’l-awhām wa-tābi’atan li’l-ḥawāss*). So, it is necessary to take statues for these celestial spirits (*lā budda min ittikhādh tamāthīl li-tilka al-arwāḥ al-falakiyya*) and to place them before the eye so that the senses connect with them, followed by the imagination (*al-khayāl*) and the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*) which is drawn powerfully towards it. For, the faculties act more powerfully when they act in concert (*fa-inna al-quwā idhā taṭābaqat kānat aqwā ‘alā al-fi’l*).⁴⁸

The following justification for astrolatrous idolatry thus emerges from this account. The human soul connects with the celestial spirit by means of its estimative faculty. Since the estimative faculty only understands things to the extent that they are rooted in a material reality; and given that meteorological, diurnal and nocturnal conditions disqualify the planetary bodies as reliable foci for adoration, the Sabians wrought idols to facilitate the connection between the estimative faculty and the planetary spirit. Consistent worship during the forty-day period of fasting stabilises this connection within the soul. So, since the soul is subject to the senses; and since, wherever they focus, the imagination and estimative faculty follow, planetary idols and litanies in adoration of the heavenly bodies, become central to this worship. When the noetic connection becomes

⁴⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 16.

stabilised, special occult knowledge and power is acquired. It is for this reason that the Sabians:

[. . .] took idols (*aṣnām*) for these heavenly bodies for every purpose that could be sought such as love, hate, sickness, health, ill-fortune and good-luck. And they turned themselves in their worship and they occupied their eyes with gazing at those statues; their tongues with the recitation of incantations which comprised mention of their attributes and influence until the forms <of the statues> reached their souls twice; for a man cannot describe something with his tongue unless its meaning occurs to his mind; then when he expresses it with his tongue, that sound reaches his ear and the soul understands the meaning of that speech, so he perceives that object of description once more. So the remembrance of the tongue is preserved by two conceptualizations (*al-dhikr al-lisānī maḥfūẓan bi-taṣawwurayn*)—one prior and one posterior—and so when it occurs that the senses are drawn in a concerted way to the spirits of those heavenly bodies, the soul becomes connected (*ta'alluq*) with them and the soul, when it perseveres in these acts, reaches a level close in rank to that soul innately disposed towards this special occult power (*al-naḥs al-maḥtūra 'alā hādhihi al-khāṣṣiyya*).⁴⁹

Sensual stimuli are co-ordinated to draw the estimative faculty and the imagination towards the celestial spirit. As we have already discovered, the imagination operates under the direction of the estimative faculty: the latter, having received the *ma'ānī*, or intentions, of the celestial spirit, leads the former to create simulacra which embody the intentions of the spirit. With the completion of the forty-day period of fasting and worship, the aspirant's soul becomes master of the occult sciences (*ghawāmiḍ al-'ulūm*) and he is imbued with occult power.

7.9 Sabian Perfected Man

Al-Ishārāt 10 and *Aḥwāl al-naḥs* represent attempts at a naturalistic account of how the properties of prophethood can be individually displayed, to varying degrees by ordinary humans, as well as prophets.⁵⁰ It is in light of this attempt that the beliefs and practices of Rāzī's Sabians are to be understood. Imaginational prophecy by means of celestial soul noesis can be exhibited by the Turkic shaman; piercing philosophical intuition (*ḥads*) can be displayed by a thinker like Avicenna himself; and occult power can be exerted by a man possessed of divine gnosis, a malevolent sorcerer or even the evil eye of an envious neighbour. Philosophical accomplishment is certainly present in the subtext of *al-Sirr*, the

⁴⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 16.

⁵⁰ For the varying degrees to which philosophical intuition (*ḥads*) can be displayed, see ch. 14 of *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, pp. 122–123.

theoretical passages of which are presented as the thought of “the philosophers and the Sabians.” Whilst the knowledge extolled in the introduction to *al-Sirr* pertains to particulars, the philosopher Sabians, as contrasted with their more earth-bound idolatrous co-religionists, are certainly not excluded from insight into the universals. So, each of the three properties can be individually displayed by ordinary humans and severally displayed by great prophets. Crucial to the operation of the imaginational property is the estimative faculty which mediates between the sublunary and celestial realms. It is just as vital in the exercise of occult power.

Nowhere in *Aḥwāl al-nafs* or in *al-Ishārāt* is the assertion made that only prophets might exhibit all three properties of extraordinary human capacity. Whilst the account in *Aḥwāl al-nafs* appears under the title “On establishing prophethood” (*Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwa*), it is by no means restricted to prophets. Indeed, both *Aḥwāl al-nafs* and *al-Ishārāt* allude to non-prophetic figures who have attained such completion, whose occult power can extend throughout the sublunary world, exerting its authority on all physical phenomena. But whilst Avicenna attributes the occult-practical capacity to a power in the soul that is innate, it is the innovation of *al-Sirr* to extend the logic of Avicennan psychology to suggest that noetic connection with the celestial souls has the potential not only to impart knowledge of the unseen but also to develop occult power in a soul which is not otherwise so innately disposed. Thus, the man who has successfully completed the arduous ritual of planetary ascent described in *al-Sirr*, to whose command the very planets humbly submit, becomes the Sabian analogue of Avicenna’s perfected man.

7.9.1 Perfected Man in Avicenna’s *al-Ishārāt*

In linking noetic connection with the celestial souls with the acquisition of both occult knowledge and power, Rāzī extends the logic of Avicennan psychology beyond the point that Avicenna himself was prepared to go. However, it would not be an unnatural inference to draw: if noetic connection with the celestial souls occasions the transference, to a human recipient, of their knowledge of themselves as the effective causes of sublunary phenomena, then why could it not also involve the transference of the power to cause change? Whilst Avicenna does not venture this far, Rāzī’s commentary on *al-Ishārāt* makes fleeting allusion to the fact that his theory might indeed allow for such an understanding. Having presented his theory of celestial soul noesis as an explanation of the ability of those possessed of gnosis to attain occult knowledge,

Avicenna then moves on to examine their ability to produce effects which breach the empirical norm (*khawāriq al-‘ādāt*). He says:

Reports might have reached you about the knowers which, <since they> nigh invert the norm (*al-‘āda*), you are swift to dismiss, such as when it is said: a knower sought rain for people, and so they received rain; or sought healing for them, and so they were healed; or prayed against them (*da‘ā ‘alayhim*), and so they were swallowed up <by the earth>, were struck by an earthquake, or were annihilated in some other way; or he prayed for them, and plague, pestilence, torrents and floods were averted; or <when it is said> wild beasts tamely submit to one of them, or birds do not take flight from him—and similar such things that are not to be deemed as manifestly impossible. Pause, and hasten not! For such things have causes, <to be found in> in the secrets of nature. Perhaps it is feasible for me to relate some of these matters to you.⁵¹

The ability to cause rain, floods and earthquakes bears a close resemblance to the extraordinary capacities described by Ṭumṭum al-Hindī as reported in *al-Sirr* 1:4. But, says Rāzī commenting on these extraordinary feats described by Avicenna: “they are all related to the ability to act on the elemental world (*muta‘allīqa bi’l-taṣarruf fi’l-‘ālam al-‘unṣurī*) and he [i.e., Avicenna] mentions that their causes are known, without mentioning at all anything that relates to the celestial bodies because the ability to act on them by way of changing their courses is, according to him, impossible.”⁵²

Of course, Rāzī here is clarifying the fact that the one possessed of such power acts directly on elemental reality without any need to control the planets, the proximate causes of change in the sublunary world. But perhaps in addition to this Rāzī, realising the potential of Avicenna’s theory of celestial soul noesis, expects Avicenna to make the link with occult power. And yet he holds back from doing so. Perhaps Rāzī’s expectation was encouraged by Avicenna’s commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Theologia*: “It is not impossible that the celestial bodies should in some way be employed by souls other than their own. Especially when a soul has perfected its power within its own body, it may, when need or expediency so demand, employ, in its place, a higher and more noble body than its own.”⁵³

51 Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 656–657.

52 Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, p. 657.

53 Avicenna in Aristū ‘inda al-Arab: *dirāsa wa-nuṣūṣ ghayr manshūra*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Badawī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1947), p.72, translated by Fazlur Rahman in *Prophecy in Islam*, p.85, fn. 75. Avicenna’s commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Theologia* was part of a much larger work, now lost, called *al-Inṣāf* (“The Fair Judgment”), the only other surviving part of which is his verdict on Book Lamda of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: see Peter Adamson, “Correcting Plotinus: Soul’s Relationship to Body in Avicenna’s Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 47/83.2 (2004): pp. 59–75, in particular p. 59.

Unfortunately, Avicenna does not explain how such a soul can “employ” the heavenly bodies without, as Rāzī observes, “acting on them by way of changing their courses.” Another way, perhaps, is by completion of the planetary ascent ritual, which accords the man thus perfected power over the sublunary world. In *al-Ishārāt*, Avicenna admonishes his reader: “Deem it not remote that one soul <can> possess a stabilised capacity (*milka*), the influence of which reaches beyond its body, its power being such that it is like a soul for the world.”⁵⁴

The reasoning here is that if the human soul can affect its own physical body, then it can also affect other bodies; this gives rise at least to the logical possibility of a soul possessed of occult power of such magnitude that it can act directly on the entire world as though it were its own body.

He goes on to say:

So, do not deny that one soul <can> possess this power (*takūn li-ba‘d al-nufūs hādhihi al-quwwa*) to the extent that it can act on other bodies such that they respond to it just as its own body does. Deny not that this soul can extend beyond the faculties proper to it (*tata‘addā ‘an quwāhā al-khāṣṣa*) to the faculties of other souls, acting on them—especially if <those souls> have honed their stabilised capacity by subjugating their own bodily faculties, subjugating desire, anger or fear of others.⁵⁵

Avicenna extends his reasoning to assert the possibility that such a singularly powerful soul can also directly affect the faculties of other souls, its ability to do so being secured by their co-operation in mastering their own lower desires and instincts. Whatever the philosopher meant by this, his language at the very least supports a soteriological construction.

Thus, Rāzī comments as follows:

It is not impossible that one soul (*ba‘d al-nufūs*) can have a special property (*khāṣṣiyya*) by which it is enabled to act on the elemental reality of this world. The relationship of that soul to the totality of the elements of this world is as the relation of our souls in relation to our bodies; neither is it impossible for the effects of that soul to extend to other souls such that they, by virtue of their connection with that soul (*li’l-ittiṣālīhā bihā*), become empowered to act in a similar way or in a way that approximates to it. If this is possible (*muḥtamal*) in the substance of the soul, then if it also receives spiritual discipline (*riyāqāt*), by which I mean the breaking of the powers of desire and anger (*quwwatay al-shahwa wa’l-ghaḍab*), then there is no doubt that then they become even more powerful.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 657.

⁵⁵ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 657–658.

⁵⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 658.

Rāzī represents Avicenna as asserting three serially connected possibilities: (1) the existence of a soul so powerful that it can act throughout elemental reality in the sublunary world; (2) by virtue of their connection with this soul possessed of such singular power, other souls can be empowered to perform feats which approximate to its own; (3) the power, which is accorded by such a connection, can be augmented in individual souls by means of their own spiritual discipline and mastery of their own base passions.

He detects in Avicenna's reasoning an allusion to the logical possibility of a number of human souls who possess occult power by virtue of their connection to one singular soul possessed of a unique capacity to operate throughout nature. Such a soul, of course, need not be that of a prophet: after all, Avicenna in this section of *al-Ishārāt* 10 is discussing the power of those possessed of gnosis (*'ārifīn*) to perform feats which breach the empirical norm.

In *al-Maṭālib* 8, Rāzī amplifies the first of these possibilities as one which was accepted by the philosophers, including presumably Avicenna. Summarising "the position of the philosophers on the reason by which prophets and saints can perform miracles and saintly wonders," Rāzī says: "the estimative faculty possessed by man can be so powerful that it can affect bodies [. . .]; the existence of a man who possesses this power perfectly is not impossible; so it follows that he would be able to act on prime matter in this world howsoever he wills and desires."⁵⁷

We are reminded of course not only of Ṭumṭum al-Hindī's description in *al-Sirr* 1:4 of the man whose complete meditative focus affords him control over all the elements of sublunary reality but also of the perfected man to whose command the planets humbly submit at his completion of the planetary ascent ritual.

7.9.2 Perfected Man in *Aḥwāl al-nafs*

Entitled "On establishing prophethood," the thirteenth chapter of *Aḥwāl al-nafs* ("States of the Soul"), a work historically attributed to Avicenna, explains the imaginal property of prophethood in light of the same cognitive theory of celestial soul noesis that we encountered in *al-Ishārāt*.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 8, p. 137.

⁵⁸ See *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, p. 117. Meryem Sebtī argues that the thirteenth chapter of *Aḥwāl al-nafs* is pseudo-epigraphical. See Meryem Sebtī, "La question de l'authenticité de l'Épître des états de l'âme (Risāla fi aḥwāl al-nafs) d'Avicenne," *Studia graeco-arabica*, 2 (2012), pp. 331–354.

The three levels of power and clarity in the noetic experience which we read in *al-Ishārāt* also appear in *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, where they are explained in terms of the receptivity of the human soul to the transmission of particulars from the celestial souls and the strength of the human imagination to render these traces appropriately.⁵⁹ But *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, adds a fourth degree which is distinguished from the rest by a superlative propensity (*tahayyu'*) for noetic reception.⁶⁰

For Avicenna, the revelation of a prophet, the veridical dream and the utterances of a Turkic shaman fall within the same broad category of cognitive experience. Thus, insofar as Avicenna's formulation of the imaginational property of extraordinary human capacity is concerned, the *ilhām* (inspiration) which the Sabian sages of *al-Sirr* receive when connected with the celestial souls must also fall within this same category. This is, of course, completely unacceptable for any Ash'arī theologian.

After the corresponding levels of philosophical intuition (*ḥads*) possessed by the theoretical intellect are described, ranging from the weak to the powerful, the following chapter of *Aḥwāl al-naḥs* then moves onto the familiar Avicennan argument that forms in the soul, such as those igniting anger or desire, exert an effect on the body, spurring it to action; and that therefore:

[. . .] we do not deny that there can be powers of the soul which exert a more powerful effect than our own such that their effect is not restricted to the matter of their own body but rather, if they will, they can produce in the matter of the world that which is visualised by the same means by which they act on their own soul; the principle of that is naught but producing movement or rest; coolness or heat; rigidity or suppleness; just as it produces in its own body. As a result of that clouds and winds, lightning and earthquakes are produced and waters and springs burst forth, and so on, in the world of men, by means of the will of that man (*irādat hadhā al-insān*).⁶¹

Those who have perfected this occult-practical capacity “can produce in the matter of the world that which is visualised by the same means by which they act in their own soul.” With a fixed and one-pointed imaginative focus, they visualise the nature of the effect they intend to produce in terms of movement and

⁵⁹ Just to remind ourselves, during our exploration of *al-Ishārāt* we learnt of three degrees to which a “spiritual trace” from the celestial souls might be received and retained by the human soul: (1) those traces which are so weak that they leave no enduring impression; (2) those which are sufficiently strong as to stir the imagination which, however, continues in its associative motion, such that only the subsequently generated images, rather than the original trace, are retained; and finally (3) those traces of such intensity and power that they are clearly imprinted in the imagination and stored in the memory undefiled by the confusion of associated images.

⁶⁰ *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, p. 119.

⁶¹ *Aḥwāl al-naḥs*, pp. 124–125.

quality. Such is the magnitude of their power that they are able to control meteorological and geological phenomena. Once more, we are reminded of Ṭumṭum al-Hindī's meditator who "dispatches rain, lightning, thunder, lightning bolts and earthquakes" and "is in command of the Earth's elements." In contrast with *al-Ishārāt*, *Aḥwāl al-nafs* draws together all three properties of extraordinary human capacity in one individual:

[. . .] the most pre-eminent kind of human is he who has [(1)] realised perfection in the philosophical intuition of the theoretical intellect, such that he is completely free of need of a human teacher; and [(2)] <has realised perfection> in his practical divinatory ability (*fī kahānatihi al-'amaliyya*) such that he witnesses the realm of soul (*al-'ālam al-nafsānī*) [i.e., the realm of the celestial souls] and that which therein relates to the states of the lower world, establishing them whilst awake so that the imagination completely performs its action for him to witness them in a specific way, as we have already explained and; [(3)] the power of his soul exerts its effect throughout the natural world.⁶²

By reason of his perfection, this individual moves freely throughout the three realms of Intellect, Soul and Physical Nature. As such he commands the sole rightful claim to sovereignty over the rest of humanity. Such a person is described in *Aḥwāl al-nafs* as:

[. . .] the real king who, by virtue of his essence, deserves to rule [. . .] if he links his soul (*in nasaba nafsahu*) to the realm of the intellect (*'ālam al-'aql*), he will be found to have achieved spontaneous noetic connection with it; if he links his soul to the realm of soul (*'ālam al-nafs*) he will be found to be one of the inhabitants of that realm; if he links his soul to the realm of nature (*'ālam al-ṭabī'a*) [i.e., the sublunary world] then he will be able to affect it in whatever way he wills.⁶³

Moreover, those who follow him will, by virtue of that fact, gain rank and distinction amongst the rest of humanity: "he who follows him also will be a great ruler (*ra'īs kabīr*), only of a lesser rank, and the rest will be the nobles and honoured men of humankind."⁶⁴ Just as we saw in *al-Ishārāt*, we here detect an allusion to a hierarchy of humans distinguished by their connection with the

⁶² *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, p. 125.

⁶³ *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, p. 126.

⁶⁴ *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, p. 126. The theme of the philosopher-king, the "natural ruler of the world," possessed of occult power by virtue of his connection with the celestial souls, is pursued by Rāzī's contemporary Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Ibn Ḥabash Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) in the last chapter of his *Partū Nāmāh*. See Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, *Partū Nāmāh—The Book of Radiance: A Parallel English-Persian Text*, Bibliotheca Iranica Intellectual Traditions Series 1, ed. & trans. Hossein Ziai (California: Mazda, 1998), pp. 79–85. For alternative dates for Suhrawardī's death, see John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardī and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 14.

perfected man who acquires supernal knowledge by means of celestial soul noesis; and whose estimative faculty is so powerful that it can extend across the sublunary world. This Avicennan perfected man represents the conceptual background against which the Sabian adept, perfected through the long ritual of planetary ascent, has been projected.

Chapter 8

Occult Epistemology

8.1 Introduction

The aspiring practitioner of the occult practices recorded in *al-Sirr* must have command of astrology, to ensure correct ritual timing, so that a congenereity might be established between his soul and that of the heavenly body whose aid he endeavours to attract. So crucial is this knowledge that its mastery is one of the twelve conditions which must be fulfilled if occult practice is to meet with success.¹ I shall argue that, whilst ritual timing is crucial, the very practice of catarchic astrology, by the practitioner himself, is of commensurate importance in the establishment of human-celestial psychic congenereity; for just as the estimative faculty is the vital link between the celestial realm and the *mutaṣarrifa* in producing noetic connection, so it is also the operative faculty in the practice of astrology. Such is the importance of astrology that, aside from the treatise on astral correspondences, Rāzī devotes two chapters in the first treatise to discussing the Sabian epistemological basis of astrology. It is my contention that his formulation of this epistemology draws on Avicenna's account of the ways in which the estimative faculty arrives at its conclusions about the extra-mental world. In this way I hope to show that the cognitive processes in which the estimative faculty engages during the activity of astrological practice play a vital role in Sabian occult ritual.

8.2 Rāzī's Solution to the Epistemological Problem of Astrology

The empirical limitations which hinder certainty in the science of astrology are arranged by Rāzī systematically in *al-Sirr*. He begins by circumscribing its field of inquiry to what can be known empirically, to highlight the vast area which lies beyond the ken of observable reality. He then proceeds to introduce doubt into the field about which astrology does indeed make positive truth claims.

¹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shirāzī lithograph, undated), p. 6.

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He reasons therefore that the heavens contain bodies which are so small that they cannot be observed. Thus, we are entirely unaware of their existence and of the influence they exert on the sublunary world. Even those heavenly bodies which we can detect with the eye, such as those which constitute the Milky Way, are so small that their natures (*ṭabā'i'*) cannot be ascertained. Moreover, the perpetual motions of the heavenly bodies, and the constant alteration of their configurations, resist any definite conclusions about their natures.² Furthermore, the precise effect of the heavenly bodies on sublunary phenomena cannot be ascertained with any degree of certainty:

[. . .] as for sublunary material, complete apprehension (*al-wuqūf al-tāmm*) of their natures is impossible since complete reception (*al-qabūl al-tāmm*) does not occur unless it be with the fulfilment of the conditions of quality, quantity, position and others; sublunary material is not stable in one state. Rather it is in a state of perpetual transformation and change though this may not be apparent to sense perception. Thus, it becomes obvious from what we have mentioned that complete apprehension of the states of the active heavenly forces and the passive terrestrial forces does not occur in man. Were it to occur to anyone, then that individual necessarily would know all the minutiae (*tafāṣīl*) of the past and the future, and would be able to cause wonders (*umūr 'ajība*).³

Recalling the discussion on talismans in the previous chapter, Rāzī's attention here turns to the relationship between active heavenly and passive terrestrial forces and, in so doing, emphasises the relationship between astrology, knowledge of sublunary materials, and the practical craft of striking talismans. Even terrestrial phenomena defy apprehension by sense perception which is sometimes incapable of discerning the inevitable changes and transformations to which they are subject. In general, the infinitely intricate complex of celestial and terrestrial factors which constitutes sublunary reality resists any attempt at complete human apprehension.⁴ However, in the remote event that a single

² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 9–10.

³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 10.

⁴ The doubts on astrology as a science which Rāzī raises echo those raised by Avicenna who, Jon McGinnis observes, in principle could accept a science of astrology as a subdivision of physics, but rejected it for the reason that:

[. . .] the notion of science that he adopts essentially involves having necessary knowledge. In the case of astrology, there are simply too many factors and precision calculations that need to be made in order to attain the required necessity. Consequently, for Avicenna, the astrologer can at best have only probable and approximate knowledge, which, to Avicenna's mind, would not have been science properly speaking. [Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna*, Great Medieval Thinkers Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 231].

exceptional individual were indeed able to grasp such a bewildering array of phenomena, then he would have the power to perform prodigies.

In response to these epistemological doubts, Rāzī acknowledges their validity but rejects as unreasonable the impossible standards of empirical certainty which they implicitly demand: “what a fine saying it is that not everything which cannot be entirely perceived merits abandonment (*mā lā yudrak kulluhu lā yutrak kulluhu*) for although human intellects fall short of knowing the higher active forces and <their corresponding> lower, passive phenomena (*al-munfa‘ila al-sāfila*), they are nevertheless capable of being apprised of some of their conditions.”⁵

The reasoning of Rāzī’s putative critics of astrology asserts that if an object of empirical inquiry cannot be completely and entirely observed, then those observations of it which can be made are devoid of any epistemological value. The underlying assumption of this assertion therefore is that if a field of inquiry is to yield a body of true knowledge, it must be founded on apodictic demonstration. Rāzī responds by appealing to a sense of pragmatism: although reliable empirical observation is limited, the knowledge which it yields should not be disdained but rather valued as the best that can be achieved within the narrow scope of human apprehension. In responding in this way, Rāzī attempts to redeem astrology, and by extension the “craft” (*ṣinā‘a*) of striking talismans, from the anathema of those who insist on apodictic demonstration as the *sine qua non* of any field of true knowledge. The means by which he does so demands close scrutiny as it represents an attempt to construct an epistemology of astrology: repeated observation (*al-tajārib*)⁶ must be augmented by veridical inspiration (*ilhām ṣādiq*). He says:

Insofar as long-term repeated observation and veridical inspirations (*al-tajārib al-mutaṭāwila wa’l-ilhāmāt al-ṣādiqa*) are concerned, that portion (*qadr*) <of knowledge>, though it be paltry and insignificant in relation to everything in existence, is immense in relation to the capability and power of man. We are not <logically> compelled <to conclude> that, if we are incapable of mastering <a field of knowledge> entirely, that which we have mastered of it will bring no benefit; nor are we <logically> compelled to conclude from the absence of apodictic demonstration (*burhān*) its disqualification as a science (*‘ilm*). For a

For Avicenna’s rejection of astrology as a science, see Yahya Michot’s “Introduction” in his edition and translation of Avicenna’s *Risāla fī ibṭāl ‘ilm al-nujūm*, published as *Avicenne: Réfutation de l’astrologie* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2006).

⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 10.

⁶ In his systematic survey of Avicenna’s empiricism, Dimitri Gutas translates *tajriba* as “testing and proving” (see Dimitri Gutas, “The Empiricism of Avicenna,” *Oriens* 40 (2012): pp. 391–436. In the context Rāzī’s discussion of astrology it is best translated as “repeated observation.”

science based on apodictic demonstration (*al-‘ilm al-burhānī*) is more specific (*akhaṣṣ*) than a <general> science (*‘ilm*) and the fact that the specific science does not exist does not necessarily mean that the more general does not exist (*lā yulzam min ‘adam al-akhaṣṣ ‘adam al-a‘amm*).⁷

Thus, fields of inquiry based on albeit limited empirical observations, rather than the certainties of apodictic demonstration, nevertheless contain real knowledge value. And where sense perception fails, intuition succeeds, at least to some degree, in bridging the epistemological gap which must be traversed if a particular field of inquiry is to be established as a true body of knowledge. Rāzī's allusion to the “non-existence” (*‘adam*) of a specific apodictic basis to astrology mirrors the reference made by Abu Ma‘shar in his *al-Madkhal al-kabīr* (Great Introduction) to the “existence” (*wujūd*) of astrology, as though it were independent of the astrologer's mind, awaiting discovery and exploration.⁸ But whilst Abu Ma‘shar restricts all forms of prognostication, including the professions of astrology, medicine and husbandry, to repeated observation (*al-tajārib*), Rāzī supplements this method with that of veridical inspiration. Taking his cue from Abu Ma‘shar, Rāzī adopts as a useful illustrative comparison the example of medicine, a field of knowledge based on a similar epistemological foundation:

So, knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) of drugs and medicines (*adwiya wa-aghdiyya*) occurs despite the fact that this knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) is not based on demonstrative proof. Indeed, this craft (*ṣinā‘a*) is more deserving of attention than the craft of medicine because, though they might share in not being based in logical demonstrative proof, this craft is distinguished from medicine on account of the fact that either it brings benefit or it brings no harm. But as for medicine, it can either bring benefit or it can harm, for potions when taken can bring harm just as they can benefit. Thus it is established that attention must be paid to this craft.⁹

Being a body of practical knowledge grounded in observation, medicine, like astrology, is referred to as a *ma‘rifa*, a term which Rāzī seems to apply here in a technical sense to designate a form of knowledge which is more general (*a‘amm*), rather than the more specific (*akhaṣṣ*) form of knowledge which is based on apodictic demonstration (*‘ilm burhānī*). It is with this distinction in

7 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 10.

8 “*fī wujūd ‘ilm aḥkām al-nujūm*.” See Charles Burnett, “Doctors versus Astrologers: Medical and Astrological Prognosis Compared,” in *Die mantischen Künste und die Epistemologie prognostischer Wissenschaften im Mittelalter*, ed. Alexander Fidora (Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau, 2013): pp. 101–112.

9 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 10. Compare Abu Ma‘shar as observed by Brunett in “Doctors versus Astrologers: Medical and Astrological Prognosis Compared,” p. 107.

mind that he refers to each of medicine, astrology, and the general subject matter of *al-Sirr*, as a *ṣināʿa* or “craft” which is grounded in repeated observation and veridical intuition.

This latter way of knowing is explored in further depth in the third chapter of the first treatise entitled “the method by which the conditions of the heavenly bodies are known.”¹⁰ The generally held position (*al-mashhūr*) of those who would defend astrology restricts its means of inquiry to repeated observation (*tajriba*). However, astrology makes claims about phenomena, such as thousand-year cycles and certain planetary conjunctions, which occur over such vast periods of time that they defy observation by any single individual.

This position in my opinion is false, for observation requires repetition (*tikrār*), but in this case, such <observational acts> do not suffice for their lengthy periods such as when they speak of thousands, conjunctions, and the precession of the equinoxes [. . .] Rather the truth is that the method is repeated observation in some things and revelation and inspiration (*waḥy waʿl-ilhāmāt*) in the rest such as with respect to the images of the degrees, the thousands and the conjunctions (*ṣuwar al-darajāt waʿl-ulūf waʿl-qirānāt*).¹¹

Rāzī’s solution therefore is to ground astrology in the method of repeated observation for those phenomena which do in fact submit to such scrutiny, and in “revelation and inspiration” (*al-waḥy waʿl-ilhām*) for those which do not. With the allusion to images of the degrees Rāzī segues into a discussion of more explicitly occult matters: the images, glyphs and incantations associated with the heavenly bodies. Since such data is also apprehended by means of inspiration and revelation, the crucial role of noetic connection with the celestial souls in both astrology and occult practice is brought into sharp focus:

Indeed there are no means to attain the images, unknown characters, and incantations (*al-ṣuwar waʿl-ruqūm al-majhūla waʿl-riqā*) which the masters of talismans prescribe except by means of inspiration. Tinkūlūshā claimed that many matters were revealed to him whilst he was sleeping in the temples of the heavenly bodies, having offered acts of obeisance and sacrifices. And it is related on the authority of Zawāyāy, the first man (*sayyid al-bashar*) that he saw in the World of the Two Poles (*ʿālam al-quṭbayn*) [i.e., the outermost sphere] marvellous things the like of which do not exist in the World of the Centre (*ʿālam al-markaz*) [i.e., the Earth]. And he claimed that he only came to know them because the Sun revealed them to him, because Zawāyāy stood in praise of the Sun for forty-two days, day and night, extolling it in a way that none had done before, craving for propinquity to the Sun, until he saw in his sleep the idol of the Sun saying: “the God of gods is utterly free of need of you and anyone else so do not torment yourself.” Know that

¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 10–11.

¹¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 11.

the doctrine of these Sabians is that these heavenly bodies are living, intelligent and rational, capable of action; and they are agreed that each one of the spirits of these heavenly bodies (*arwāḥ hādhihi al-kawākib*) can become manifest to man at any time and reveal to him these characters (*ruqūm*) and incantations (*riqā*): they are the names of these spirits and their adjutants (*a'wān*). All their books contain this assertion. Moreover, it is not unlikely that it be said that these incantations, which are unknown to us, <consist of> meaningful words (*kalimāt ma'lūma*), but they are uttered in languages which have in our day become archaic (*mahjūra*), for most of this knowledge is transmitted from the Kasdānians who lived in ancient times. As for now, these languages have become extinct and so it comes as no surprise that these words remain obscure (*mubhama*). We surmise that these words consist of praise of the heavenly bodies and the enumeration of their special occult properties (*khawāṣṣ*) and effects; so, it is not a remote possibility that a man might enumerate the attributes of the heavenly bodies in the words of <a known language> which could stand in their place, according their <same> benefit. This is my opinion on this topic.¹²

So Rāzī's solution in *al-Sirr* to the epistemological problem of astrology, and by extension to other crafts (*ṣinā'āt*) such as medicine and talisman making, is to navigate the field of inquiry using the methods of repeated observation and revelation. However in chapter three of the third treatise of *al-Maṭālib* 8, entitled "On the method by which is attained knowledge of the natures of the celestial bodies," the solution is developed and refined with the addition of a third approach to knowledge: analogical association (*qiyās*). Thus, he says: "Know that this method comprises three approaches (*umūr*): analogical association (*qiyās*), repeated observation (*tajriba*) and revelation (*waḥy*)." ¹³

As the first of these approaches, analogical association begins a process that eventually leads to the reception of data by means of revelation (*waḥy*). He explains the process of analogical association with an appropriately medical illustration, alluding to black bile, emphasizing the affinity between the two crafts:

As for analogical association it is that when they witness the darkness in the colour of Saturn, and this darkness corresponds to *sawdā'* [i.e., black bile/melancholy], they conclude (*ḥakamū 'alayhi*) that the nature of Saturn is cold and dry. And when they witness the redness in the colour of Mars—and this colour resembles the colour of fire—they conclude that its nature is fiery and dry.¹⁴

If adopted as the sole approach to knowledge, analogical association is a weak means of proof and the conclusions to which it gives rise are unreliable. But as

¹² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 11.

¹³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhi*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 8, p. 159.

¹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhi*, vol. 8, p. 159.

a way of generating hypotheses which can be tested by repeated observation, analogical association can serve as a useful tool of inquiry:

In our opinion (*al-mukhtār 'indanā*), this method (*al-ṭarīq*) [i.e., analogical association] is weak indeed and cannot be relied upon. For it is established in the field of medicine, that inferring from specific colours the occurrence of certain natures (*ṭabā'i*) is the weakest form of diagnosis (*aḍ'af aqsām al-dalā'il*). Rather, the truth is that whilst <reliance> on colour as evidence for a diagnosis is weak, when they add to it repeated observation (*al-tajārib*), and the repeated observation is consistent with the analogical association (*muṭābaqa li-hādihā al-qiyās*), then the knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of the natures which is generated is based on the application of the two approaches. So, analogical association is the principle motor of intellects and ideas (*al-mabda' al-muḥarrik li'l-'uqūl wa'l-khawāṭir*), whilst repeated observation constitutes completion and perfection.¹⁵

Despite being weak when adopted as the sole means of investigation, analogical association nevertheless plays an important role in its ability to stir motion within the soul in order to generate a working hypothesis. Since, strictly speaking, the soul is immaterial, and an absolute simplex, the use of the word *muḥarrik*—or motor—to describe the activity of analogical association would imply that its locus is an internal organ with a physical substrate. Of course, as we have already learnt, this activity is characteristic of the *mutaṣarrifa*, when operating either *qua* the imagination or the cogitative faculty. We also know that it shares its seat in the substrate of the brain with the estimative faculty. The aim of the investigator is to establish a consistent correspondence (*muṭābaqa*) between the hypothesis, which has been generated by analogical association, and the data produced by repeated observation. The greater the number of repeated corroborating observations, the stronger the correspondence, and the stronger the supposition (*ẓann qawīyy*) that the hypothesis is in fact correct:

Know that the method of repeated observation is that when a certain kind of event (*naw' min anwā' al-ḥawādith*) occurs in this world, then a man engaged in such observation establishes knowledge of how the celestial configurations were, by means of perfect and detailed examination (*'alā sabīl al-istiṣā' wa'l-kamāl*); and so, if the like of this event occurs a second time, then a third, a fourth and a fifth, and he establishes the celestial configurations are like the first, then there arises in his heart a strong supposition (*ẓann qawīyy*) that that specific celestial configuration gives rise to the occurrence of that certain kind of event from among the events which take place in this world.¹⁶

Once a hypothesis that a certain celestial configuration gives rise to a particular kind of terrestrial event is confirmed by repeated observation, the investigator

15 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 159.

16 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 159–160.

can then move on to make inferences about the “nature” of that celestial configuration:

The upshot (*al-hāsil*) is that repeated observation involves the inference, from the coming to be of certain events in this world, of knowledge of the natures of the celestial configurations (*ma'rifat ṭabā'i' al-awqā' al-falakiyya*). So, if these repeated observations are established, then after them he infers, from the arising of that specific celestial configuration, the occurrence of that kind of terrestrial event.¹⁷

Astrology, like medicine, builds its knowledge on the accumulated observations, inferences and conclusions of generations throughout time. And just like the astral religion of the Sabians, described by Rāzī in his *al-Taḥṣīn* as the “oldest religion of mankind,” the epistemological approach which characterises astrology has overseen the incremental accumulation of human knowledge since time immemorial:

Know that this <mode> of inference was held in esteem by the peoples of the earth since time immemorial until today. So he who wants to become an expert in this knowledge (*'ilm*) then, each time he sees a certain kind of event in this world (*naw' min al-hawādith fi hādihā al-'ālam*), he must engage in a detailed examination in order to know the celestial configuration which is associated with the coming to be of that event (*ḥudūth dhālika al-ḥādith*), and compare his observation (*tajribatuhu*) with the sayings of the ancients (*al-mutaqaddimīn*). If he perseveres in this method for a prolonged period, and it so happens that his soul is suited to this knowledge (*'ilm*) by virtue of his original innate disposition (*fiṭra aṣliyya*), then he will attain a mighty portion (*mablaghan 'aẓīman*).¹⁸

Since it is one of the most ancient fields of human knowledge, the investigator must compare, although not necessarily be bound by, the transmitted sayings of the ancients which preserve the intellectual tradition. Rāzī observes: “Know that you never see a religion or sect except that most of its principles are based on transmission from predecessors (*al-naql min al-salaf*). The like of this is therefore not unlikely with respect to this knowledge (*'ilm*), and God knows best.”¹⁹

The third complementary approach to astrology is of course revelation and inspiration. Again, Tinkūlūshā and Dhawānāy are the sources cited for the illustration of this point. But whilst in *al-Sirr* the revelation is the result of a richly described process of purification and idolatrous solar worship, in *al-Maṭālib* the revelation is more soberly presented as being solely the product of purification:

As for the third method, it is the method of revelation and inspiration. This is also agreed upon by the masters of this knowledge. Tinkūlūshā related that, when Dhawānāy, the father of mankind (*sayyid al-bashar*), had completed the purification of his soul and the

17 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 160.

18 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 160.

19 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 160.

training of his mind (*taṣfiyat al-nafs wa-riyādat al-dhihn*), ineffable forms from the celestial world would become manifest to him.²⁰

Thus, in *al-Maṭālib* the agency of celestial souls in the education of the human soul in the context of astrology is minimised. Nevertheless, for the reader who is familiar with *al-Sirr*, its shadow remains in the background.

8.3 The Crafts and the Estimative Faculty

Rāzī's formulation of the epistemology of the crafts such as astrology, medicine, and talisman making draws its inspiration from Avicenna's account in *al-Shifā'* of how the estimative faculty experiences the extra-mental world and reaches its conclusions concerning its phenomena.²¹ A brief consideration of this account would illuminate our understanding of how Rāzī adapted it to his theory of occult practice.

Avicenna poses the question: "How does the estimative faculty, without being associated with the intellect at the time of its estimative activity (*ḥāl ta-wahhumihī*), apprehend (*yanāl*) the intentions (*ma'ānī*) which are in sensible objects, when the external sense apprehends their form, without those intentions being sensed, and without many of <those *ma'ānī*> bringing benefit or inflicting harm in that moment?"²²

20 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 160.

21 See Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Nafs*, published as "De Anima (Arabic Text) Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā'," ed. Fazlur Rahman (London New York Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 182–185. For my introduction to this important passage on the estimative faculty, I am grateful to Dimitri Gutas for the paper he presented in Gothenburg, July 2016: "Estimation, the Most Crucial Internal Sense in Avicenna," delivered at the *Internal Senses in the Aristotelian Tradition Conference*, University of Gothenburg, held by the Representation and Reality: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Aristotelian Tradition Project, June 11, 2016. Although differing in some important respects, my translation is adapted from his, which he generously provided in a handout entitled: "Avicenna on Estimation, The Most Crucial Internal Sense, The Ecological Sense." My reading of the relevant passages attempts to construct Rāzī's understanding of the epistemological function of the estimative faculty in the crafts.

22 Avicenna's *De Anima*, p. 183, ll. 14–16. Gutas translates as follows: "How does the Estimation that was not accompanied by intellect at the moment that it is estimating attain the connotational attributes of sensibles as the senses are attaining their form, although none of those attributes was sensed and many of them were at that moment neither beneficial nor harmful?" [Gutas, "Avicenna on Estimation, The Most Crucial Internal Sense, The Ecological Sense," (2016), p. 5.]. Gutas translates the phrase: "*al-ma'ānī allatī hiya fī'l-maḥsūsāt*," as "the connotational attributes of sensibles." I render it more literally as "the intentions (*ma'ānī*) which are in sensible objects."

He identifies three ways of apprehension. The first is inspiration (*ilhāmāt*) “which emanates on the all from divine mercy.”²³ Examples of the emanation of inspiration include the natural impulse (*gharīza*) of the baby to grab onto someone when made to stand upright, or to shut its eye when something is brought close to it. Animals also share in this kind of inspiration, by means of which the sheep is wary of the wolf even though it may have never previously encountered one.²⁴

The second method of apprehension is “similar” to experience (*tajriba*):

When an animal experiences pain or pleasure or is touched by some sensible benefit or harm associated with a sensible form, such that the form of the thing and the form of that which is associated with it are inscribed in the form-bearing faculty; and the intention (*ma'nā*) of the relationship (*al-nisba*) between them and their judgment (*al-ḥukm*) are inscribed in the recollection (*al-dhikr*); then the recollection, through its essence and natural disposition (*jibilla*), apprehends that. So, when this form appears to the imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*) from the outside, it stirs in the form-bearing faculty, together with the beneficial or harmful *ma'ānī* associated with it, and in general the *ma'nā* which is in the recollection, by way of transference and mental presentation (*'alā sabīl al-intiqāl wa'l-isti-rād*), which is in the nature of the imaginative faculty. And so the estimative faculty senses all of that simultaneously, and sees (*ra'ā*) the intention (*ma'nā*) together with the form. This <occurs> in a manner which approximates to experience (*tajriba*). It is for this reason that dogs are frightened of stones and pieces of wood.²⁵

The third method resembles the analogical association involved in identifying the correspondence between Saturn and bile or melancholia:

Other judgments may occur to the estimative faculty by means of identifying similarity (*al-tashbīh*) <between objects> whereby a thing may have a form associated with an estimative *ma'nā* in some sensible particulars (*fī ba'd al-maḥsūsāt*) but which are not always associated with all of them; so with the presence of this form <the estimative faculty> turns its attention towards its *ma'nā* which could be different.²⁶

23 Avicenna's *De Anima*, p. 183, ll. 17–18.

24 Avicenna's *De Anima*, p. 183, l. 18-p. 184. l. 12.

25 Avicenna's *De Anima*, p. 184, ll. 13-p. 185. l. 3. In the language of the *De Anima* of *al-Shifā'*, the “form-bearing faculty” (*al-muṣawwira*) denotes the memory which stores forms; the “recollection” (*al-dhikr*) denotes the memory which stores intentions (*ma'ānī*). As for dogs being frightened of stones and pieces of wood, Gutas comments: “The text has literally, lumps or clods of earth or dry mud (*madar*) for stones. What is meant is that dogs are afraid of things lying around on the ground that people might throw at them. In certain localities, apparently where Avicenna was writing his work, or perhaps where he first observed this phenomenon, clods of dry mud or earth were something that one could find more easily on the street than stones.” [Gutas, “Avicenna on Estimation, The Most Crucial Internal Sense, The Ecological Sense,” (2016), p. 5, fn. 14].

26 Avicenna's *De Anima*, p. 185, ll. 4–6.

Since the estimative faculty is the governor of the animal soul, most of the examples with which Avicenna illustrates these three approaches relate to animal cognition. The inspirations (*ilhāmāt*) received by babies and animals have the quality of what moderns would understand as instinct, which are somehow neurologically hard-wired into the physical substrate of consciousness. For Avicenna, their source is divine and extra-mental. But there is a qualitative difference between the nature of those inspirations that determine the behaviour and actions of pre-toddling babies and wolf-wary sheep, and those inspirations that are received by Rāzī's astrologers which impart to them knowledge items pertaining to the celestial spheres, which lie beyond the ken of human sense perception.

A parallel distinction can be discerned between Avicenna's account of the estimative faculty's way of processing quasi-experience (*shay' ka'l-tajriba*)²⁷ and the "experiences" (*al-tajrib*), or "repeated observations," of the astrologers. Avicenna's quasi-experiences are illustrated by the bitter lessons learnt by dogs fleeing the dry mud missiles of irritable passers-by. Gutas explains that such lessons are only quasi-experiences: "[. . .] because in the logical and epistemological discussions of experience elsewhere he associates syllogism building with experience proper, something that can be accomplished only by the human rational soul."²⁸

The "experiences"—or repeated observations—of Rāzī's astrologers are, by way of contrast, very much part of an empirical inquiry. Avicenna himself distinguishes between the nature of estimative cognition in animals, and in humans operating on the level of the animal soul, and the cognition of the estimative faculty which is ennobled by its proximity to reason. He describes the nature of the estimative faculty in the former category as follows:

The estimative faculty is the greatest judge in animals, judging by way of stimulation of the imaginative faculty (*inbi'āth takhayyulī*) without this being subjected to verification. The like of this is what occurs to a man when he deems honey vile on account of its resemblance to yellow bile. For the estimative faculty judges that it [i.e., the honey] falls into the same category (*fa-inna al-wahm yahkum bi-annahu fī hukm dhālika*) <as the yellow bile> and the soul follows the estimative faculty even though the intellect deems <its judgement> false. Animals, and those humans who resemble them, only follow this judgement of the estimative faculty which possesses no logical discrimination of its own.²⁹

²⁷ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p. 184, l. 13.

²⁸ Gutas, "Avicenna on Estimation, The Most Crucial Internal Sense," p. 5, fn. 13. For a fuller discussion of this point see Gutas, "The Empiricism of Avicenna."

²⁹ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p. 182, l. 14-p. 183, l. 2.

But for one whose estimative cognition falls into the latter category:

[. . .] there could occur to his senses and his faculties, on account of their proximity to reason (*al-nuṭq*), that which almost renders his internal faculties rational, in contrast with animals. So it is for this reason that he can apprehend from the benefits of composite sounds, colours, fragrances, and tastes, and from hope and desire, things which other animals cannot. Because it is as though the light of reason outpours and flows on these faculties; and the imagination which the man possesses may have become subject to reason, whilst in animals it is subject to the estimative faculty. As a result, he can derive benefit from it [i.e., in the pursuit of various branches] of knowledge, and his memory can bring benefit in such knowledge, just like the experiences (*al-tajārib*) which <are recalled> by the memory, and observations of particulars (*al-arṣād al-juz'īyya*) and so forth.³⁰

Thus, the estimative faculty of the one who abjures the world of gross materiality, is more aligned with the immaterial intellect, and is able to apprehend “the intentions (*ma'ānī*) which are in sensible objects” as they truly are, without being led to erroneous conclusions by an undisciplined imagination which would have him believe that honey is as vile as yellow bile. In the context of occult ritual, the estimative faculty of the Sabian natural philosopher will enable him to relate all the intentions (*ma'ānī*) which inhere in the sensible objects of ritual, including “composite sounds, colours, fragrances, and tastes,” to the celestial soul with which he strives to generate congenereity within his own soul—an ultimately noetic connection.

³⁰ *Avicenna's De Anima*, p. 183, l. 3–11. For an insightful analysis of Rāzī's restrained epistemological optimism concerning the *wahm*, see Peter Adamson, “Fakhr al-Din On Place,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 27 (2017): pp. 205–236.

Chapter 9

An Alternative Account of Astral Visions

Thus far we have established how, just as Avicennism dominates Sabian cosmological doctrines, so Avicennan internal sense theory deeply informs the account which *al-Sirr* presents of how spiritual discipline and astral ritual facilitate noetic connection with the celestial souls, imbuing the practitioner with occult knowledge and power. But we have also seen how Rāzī includes alternative cosmological views within the Sabian heterogeneous construct. We will now examine his inclusion of an account of visions which is alternative to the Avicennan psychological analysis.

In section 3.4.5, we saw how in *al-Sirr* 4:1, Rāzī presents two competing theories on the shape of the heavenly bodies: one attributed to the philosophising Sabians, who assert that they are simple spheres; the other attributed to the Chaldean Sabians who assert that they are theriomorphic. We learnt that the latter draw this inference from the *a priori* assumptions that: (1) the heavenly bodies are the causes of corresponding theriomorphic forms in the sublunary world; and (2) a resemblance necessarily exists between the cause and its effect. The Chaldean Sabians, in contrast with their philosophising cousins, understood the causal relationship between the celestial principles and sublunary phenomena as one of congenereity between higher and lower, this being the simplest account necessary to account for the efficacy of their occult practices.

When, in *al-Sirr* 1:5, Rāzī reports the opinion that the objects perceived in astral visions are extra-mental, its justification, expressed in a condensed form, represents a theory of the visionary experience that is opposed to the Avicennan account.¹ Rāzī attributes it to the mysterious “masters of talismans” (*aṣḥāb al-ṭilasmāt*).² Observing the same Hermetic dictum of “as above so below” that was applied by the Chaldean Sabians in *al-Sirr* 4:1 to justify their belief in the theriomorphic shape of the heavenly bodies, so the masters of

1 By way of contrast, we should remind ourselves that, for Avicenna, the content of veridical dreams and visions that are the direct experience of the soul are the creation of the imagination, in response to a trace or *ma'nā* received from the celestial realm. On Avicenna's theory of vision see Jon McGinnis, “New Light on Avicenna: Optics and its Role in Avicennan Theories of Vision, Cognition and Emanation,” in *Philosophical Psychology in Arabic Thought and the Latin Aristotelianism of the 13th Century*, eds. L. López-Farjeat and J. A. Tellkamp (Paris: Vrin, 2013): pp. 41–57.

2 Rāzī gives no further information on these talisman masters. They reappear in *al-Maṭālib* 7—see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 7, pp. 387–395.

talismans prefer to assert the extra-mental reality of the objects of their visionary perception over accepting Avicennan internal sense theory.

Their basic *a priori* assumption is that: “each form in this world has its archetype in the starless sphere (*kull šūra fi hādihā al-‘ālam fa-lahā mithāl fi’l-falak*) and that the earthly forms are subject to heavenly forms (*al-šuwār al-sufliyya muṭī‘a li’l-šuwār al-‘alawīyya*): serpents to Draco; scorpions to Scorpio; predatory animals to Leo and so on.”³

Now, on this assumption, they go on to consider the ontological status of the fantastical form which can be constructed in the imagination.⁴ Such a form cannot be characterised by absolute existential negation since the imagination can apprehend it, conferring on it such attributes as magnitude and extension. This would simply be impossible for that which is absolutely non-existent. They say:

The form which can be imagined, such as a man with a thousand heads, or a ruby as long as a *farsang*, can either be said to be absolutely non-existent (*ma’dūm maḥq*) or to have existence. The first <disjunct> is false because our imagination (*khayālunā*) points towards it and bears witness to its magnitude (*miqdār*), length, width, distance and extension (*maṣāḥa*): absolute negation is not like this.⁵

They then proceed to examine the issue of whether such a form exists: (1) within us (*mawjūd fīnā*); or (2) externally (*fi’l-khārij*). Reason would admit of only two possible modes of existence were the first limb of this disjunction correct. Either: (1)(a) it would exist in the mind as an abstracted substance (*jawhar mujarrad*); or (1)(b) it would exist in a bodily faculty, as a state inhering in a physical substrate such as the heart or brain. (1)(a) is eliminated for the reason that the imagined form (*al-šūra al-mutakhayyala*) is subject to division, the resultant parts being distinguishable from the other, and thus cannot be, at the same time, an abstracted substance; (1)(b) is dismissed for the simple reason

3 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shirāzī lithograph, undated), p. 18.

4 This discussion on the status of such forms resonates with a much broader debate in the two centuries after Avicenna concerning mental existence and the status of non-existent objects of thought. See Heidrun Eichner “‘Knowledge by Presence,’ Apperception and the Mind-Body Relationship: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Suhrawardī as Representatives of a Thirteenth century Discussion,” in *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century*, ed. Peter Adamson, Warburg Institute Colloquia 16 (London, Turin: the Warburg Institute, 2011): pp. 117–140; and Fedor Benevich, “The Reality of the Non-Existent Object of Thought: the Possible, the Impossible and Mental Existence in Islamic Philosophy (eleventh-thirteenth centuries),” in *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 6, ed. Robert Pasnau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): pp. 31–61.

5 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18.

that a large form, such as a man with a thousand heads, or a ruby as long as a *farsang*, cannot inhere in an internal sense like the common sense, rooted as it is in a physical substrate as small as the front ventricle.⁶

In rejecting the logical possibility that the imagined form can exist within us, they reject the Avicennan account that the astral vision is the creation of the imagination, albeit as a result of a trace (*athar*) received from a celestial soul. The object of this astral vision therefore can only exist extra-mentally, independent of the observer (*mawjūda fī'l-khārij 'annā*). And considering that, were it to exist in the lower world, then all would partake in the same cognitive experience of it—which is patently untrue—it must follow that it exists outside of the mind in the higher world: “it either exists in the lower world—and this is false for otherwise anyone present with us would see it. So, it becomes necessary to concede that they exist in the higher world.”⁷

Rāzī's talisman masters refute the Avicennan analysis of their visionary experiences by deploying an argument which constitutes the reverse mirror image of Rāzī's interpretation of Avicenna's account, in the tenth *namaṭ* of *al-Ishārāt*, of the cognitive experiences of people suffering from fevers. This interpretation, appearing in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, represents an original argument, formulated by Rāzī, to defend Avicenna's position.⁸ Although we have already encountered the argument, it is worth reminding ourselves of its structure in order to appreciate the talisman masters' mirror reversal.⁹

Firstly, a logical disjunction is established by considering whether the forms apprehended during fevers are non-existent (*ma'dūma*) or existent (*mawjūd*). The

6 Rāzī's talisman masters say:

The first <disjunct> is false because our imagination (*khayālunā*) points towards it and bears witness to its magnitude (*miqdār*), length, width, distance and extension (*maṣāḥa*): absolute negation is not like this. Thus it is established that it exists either within us or extra-mentally. This first <disjunct> is false because either it exists in its own self, which is an abstracted substance (*jawhar mujarrad*), or <it exists> in a bodily power, as a state in the heart or the brain: the first <disjunct> is false because the abstracted substance cannot be divided, one part being indistinguishable from the other: this imagined form (*al-ṣūra al-mutakhayyila*) is not thus. The second <disjunct> is also false because since one's entire body in respect of this imagined form is as the relation of the small to the large and large magnitude cannot inhere in a small substrate (*yumna' ḥulūluhu fī'l-maḥall al-ṣaghīr* (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18).

7 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18.

8 We must be cautious, however, not to rush to the conclusion that Rāzī himself is committed to the position which his novel argument defends.

9 See section 7.4.

first limb of this logical disjunction is eliminated on the ground that they cannot be non-existent because this would entail absolute negation, and that which is characterised by absolute negation can never be witnessed. This being the case, they must either exist extra-mentally or not. They cannot exist extra-mentally, for were this the case, then everyone with sound external sense faculties would perceive them. Their existence must therefore be entirely subjective.¹⁰

Being subjective, they must either exist in the rational soul or in a bodily faculty (*quwwa jismāniyya*). The former possibility can safely be ruled out because the rational soul cannot perceive particulars, and the forms of sensible things cannot be imprinted therein. So, these forms must exist in a bodily faculty. Now this bodily faculty can either be an external sense faculty—namely the vision (*al-quwwa al-bāṣira*)—or an internal sense faculty—the common sense. Since it is possible for a blind man to perceive such forms, the power of vision can be eliminated as the bodily faculty in which these forms are imprinted. Thus, are we led to the conclusion that it is the common sense, with its physical substrate in the brain, which is witness to these forms. The hallucination of the feverish man, which arises when the *mutaṣarrifa qua* imagination and the common sense stand opposite each other, is compared to the optical phenomenon which occurs when two mirrors are placed in opposition.¹¹

Both the novel argument, which Rāzī writes exploratively to support Avicenna's account of feverish hallucinations, and his talisman masters' defence of the extra-mental reality of the objects of their astral visions, begin by posing the question of whether the objects of these cognitive experiences have some manner of existence, or if they are characterised by absolute negation. Both affirm that they must indeed have some manner of existence and proceed to consider their subjective or extra-mental reality. Of course, the Avicennan account affirms the former whilst the talisman masters affirm the latter. But when examining their potentially subjective reality, both consider whether they are experienced as abstracted substances or as forms imprinted in a faculty which inheres in the physical substrate of the brain. Moreover, in drawing their respective conclusions of either purely subjective experience or cognition of an extra-mental reality, both then proceed to pose a further logical disjunction: whilst the former considers if the seat of the subjective experience is an internal or external sense faculty, the latter considers if the extra-mental object of cognition exists in the lower or higher worlds.

¹⁰ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, ed. Ali Reza Najafzadeh (Tehran: Anjoman-i Āthār-i wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005), vol. 2, p. 645.

¹¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 645–646.

So the talisman masters' reasoning is a mirror reversal of the argument that Rāzī adduces to elucidate the Avicennan account of feverish hallucinations. In rejecting the assertion that a perceptual object of large magnitude can inhere in the relatively small physical substrate of the brain, their reasoning entails an implicit polemic against the Avicennan internal sense theory which informs the psychological discussions in *al-Sirr*. Rāzī himself is sympathetic to their opposition to this theory which, together with the Avicennan intromission theory of optics, he criticises in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*.¹² The account of the talisman masters is discordant with the Avicennising account of psychology by which much of *al-Sirr* is characterised. However, this is entirely in keeping with the spirit of a work which represents more of an intellectual work in progress, attempting to engage philosophically with the Sabian craft, on its own terms. Its success would provide an important stimulus for his subsequent systematising thought at the end of his career.

¹² For these critiques, see his commentary on the third namaṭ of Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, in *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, pp. 216–264.

Chapter 10

A Clarification

10.1 Introduction

Although he disavows all that opposes the true faith in the introduction to *al-Sirr*, Rāzī nevertheless devotes *al-Sirr* 1:6, to providing a “clarification” (*bayyina*) of the weakness (*ḍuʿf*) of the Sabian way in light of Ashʿarī insistence on God’s power (*qudra*) extending to all things. He entitles the chapter: “A clarification of the weakness (*ḍuʿf*) of what we have related of the philosophers and the Sabians and an explanation of the correctness of the religion of Islam.”¹ The only other explicit note of discord against Sabianism appears briefly in *al-Sirr* 4:1, which we have already examined. Of interest here is the nature and extent of Rāzī’s dispute with the philosophers and Sabians.

As we discussed earlier, Rāzī identifies three theologically distinct categories of Sabian: pure polytheists; Avicennising emanationists; and those who believe in a creator God, as an agent possessed of choice (see section 3.2). In this chapter we shall make two observations. Firstly, the critique of Sabianism in *al-Sirr* 1:6 addresses only the first two of the three Sabian categories: on the third category, he is silent. This is because his real target appears to be Avicennan emanationism. Secondly, in the brief critique of Sabianism in *al-Sirr* 4:1, Rāzī concedes that the belief in celestial motion as the pattern of the divinely mandated empirical norm, does not offend against the fundamental belief in God’s power (*qudra*) over all things. And thirdly, Rāzī expends considerable effort reconciling Sabian belief in an ensouled cosmos with Islamic scripture. This should come as no surprise since, as a people of the book, the Sabians were at one point, albeit remote in time, the recipients of an originally pure revealed monotheistic faith. Thus, it should be possible to imagine a form of their religion, and an approach to their natural philosophy, which does not fundamentally conflict with primordial monotheism, the original purity of which the Islamic dispensation avers that it restores.

10.2 Critique of the Sabians in *al-Sirr* 1:6

The critique encapsulates the essence of Sabian error in the following terms: “Know that the axis of their discourse (*madār kalāmihim*) <centres on> the eternity

¹ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shirāzī lithograph, undated), pp. 19–20.

of the world and the existence of <a series of > temporally originated phenomena without beginning (*ḥawādith lā awwala lahā*). This doctrinal position is false <as a number> of arguments (*wujūh*) prove.”²

The target is clearly defined as those who believe in the eternity of the world and that the endless series of phenomena therein has no beginning: these are none other than the unrepentant polytheist Sabians and their Avicennising emanationist cousins. The critique proceeds in two stages: The first is to prove that all existents but the Necessarily Existent are merely possible (*mumkin*); the second is to prove that every existent that is merely possible is also originated in time. It therefore follows that: “all existents except for the One are possible and temporally originated.”³ Thus the two categories of Sabian, both heresiological conceits, provide the need for a critique which functions simultaneously as a positive proof for belief in the God of the Islamic theologians, a choosing agent (*fā’il mukhtār*), besides whom all existents are originated in time, the products, of His volitional acts.

10.2.1 All Existents Except the Necessarily Existent, Are Merely Possibles

So the first stage of the argument, an elegantly condensed adaptation of Avicenna’s proof for the absolute unity of the Necessarily Existent in the fourth *namaṭ* of his *al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, sets out to prove that all besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible.⁴ It rests on two limbs: (1) the proposition that the Necessarily Existent must exist; and (2) that there can only be one Necessarily Existent.⁵ Rāzī does not dwell for too long on the first limb, impatient to present the three premises on which he hopes to demonstrate the second: (2)(i) necessity of existence (*wujūb al-wujūd*) is a positive attribute (*ṣifa thubūtiyya*); (2)(ii) the determinate existence of an entity (*ta’ayyun al-shay’*) is an individuating specificity additional to its quiddity and a matter of positive affirmation (*qayd zā’id ‘alā māhiyyatihi wa-huwa amr thubūti*); (2)(iii) that in which participation between two

² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.19.

³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.19.

⁴ Rāzī scrutinises Avicenna’s proof for the unity of the Necessarily Existent in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* as the fourth issue (*mas’ala*) arising from the fourth *namaṭ*: see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*, ed. Ali Reza Najafzadeh (Tehran: Anjoman-i Āthār-i wa-Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005), vol. 2 pp. 353–73. Whilst here in *al-Sirr*, Rāzī seems to endorse and adopt the proof, in *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, he is far more sceptical.

⁵ Concerning the first limb, Rāzī simply says: “this is something which we have already proved when we made it clear that all possibles must end with a necessarily existing existent.” The second limb is expressed specifically in the following terms: “the existence of two existents, each one of which is necessarily existent, is impossible.” Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19.

things occurs is distinct from that by which two things are distinguishable from each other.⁶

Simply stated, (2)(i) asserts that the attribute of necessity of existence, like for instance that of sight, involves positive affirmation: this is to be contrasted with the example of blindness, a negative attribute, which entails the negation of its positive contrary. No existent can be positively affirmed by the contrary of existence—namely, non-existence—for this, of course, would entail that thing's negation. So, if necessity of existence cannot be non-existent, and thus a negative attribute, then it follows that it must be a positive attribute.⁷

6 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. For my translations of the terms *ta'ayyun*, *māhiyya*, and *qayd* respectively as “determinate existence,” “quiddity” and “individuating specificity,” see Ayman Shihadeh, “Avicenna's Corporeal Form and Proof of Prime Matter in Twelfth-Century Critical Philosophy: Abū'l-Barakāt, al-Mas'ūdī and al-Rāzī,” *Oriens* 42 (2014): pp. 364–396.

7 “Necessity of existence (*wujūb al-wujūd*) is a positive attribute (*ṣifa thubūtiyya*). Its proof is that necessity of existence is the positive affirmation of existence (*ta'akkud al-wujūd*) and the thing [i.e., existence] is not positively affirmed by its opposite (*al-shay' lā yata'akkad bi-naqāḍihi*). So necessity of existence cannot be non-existent (*fa-wujūb al-wujūd yamtanī' an yakūn 'adaman'*)” (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 9). In *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, Rāzī explains this Avicennan proof as having two limbs:

the first is that necessity <of existence> is the contrary of impossibility <of existence> which is a matter of non-existence; and the contrary of non-existence is positive affirmation; so existence is a matter of positive actuality. The second is that necessity is an expression of the affirmation of existence. So if necessity is non-existent—and non-existence is the contrary of existence—then existence would be positively affirmed by that which negates and is contrary to it. And that is absurd (*al-awwalu anna al-wujūb munāqīḍ li'l-imtīnā' alladhī huwa amr 'adamī wa-munāqīḍ al-'adam thubūt, fa'l-wujūb amr thubūti. al-thānī wa-huwa anna al-wujūb 'ibāra 'an ta'akkud al-wujūd. fa-law kāna al-wujūb 'adaman, wa'l-'adam munāqīḍ li'l-wujūd, la kāna al-wujūd muta'akkidan bi-munāfihi wa-munāqīḍihi wa-huwa muḥāl*) (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 364).

Rāzī is sceptical about Avicenna's designation of necessity of existence as a positive attribute. He asks: “why is it not permissible that it be said that necessity is a negative description (*wasf salbī*)? Supposing this were the case, then this proof becomes invalid.” (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 364); see pp. 364–367 for Rāzī's proof that necessity of existence can be argued to be a negative attribute: and, of course, since a multiplicity of existents can be characterised by a negative attribute, Avicenna's failure to prove that necessity of existence is a positive attribute, constitutes his failure to prove that there can only be one necessarily existing existent. If this debate were transposed to the context of the Sabians of *al-Sirr*, it would mean that the Avicennising philosopher Sabians would be unable to prove that the heavenly spheres only derive their existence from the process of emanation from the Eternal Producer of Effects: they would thus lack the rational proofs to defend their compromised philosophical monotheism and to resist the slide into the degenerate polytheism of their idolatrous Sabian cousins.

Now, according to (2)(ii), the individual existence of any existent requires determination by an attribute superimposed on its quiddity (*qayd zā'id*): it is this superimposed attribute that distinguishes it as an individual which is distinct from any other postulated individual entities which might share in its kind of existence. Moreover, following the logic of (2)(i), this superimposed attribute, asserting individual existence, is of course one that entails positive affirmation:

The determinate existence of an entity (*ta'ayyun al-shay'*) is an individuating specificity additional to its quiddity and a matter of positive affirmation (*qayd zā'id 'alā māhiyyatihi wa-huwa amr thubūti*). As for it being an additional individuating specificity (*amma annahu qayd zā'id*)⁸, it is because the meaning of the concept (*mafhūm*) of *ī* is not precluded from conceptualisation equivocally (*lā yamtani' taṣawwur ma'nāhu min al-sharika*), whilst the meaning of “this *ī*” is <indeed> precluded from equivocal conceptualization (*al-mafhūm min hādhā al-alif yumna' taṣawwur ma'nāhu 'an dhālika*).⁹ “This *ī*” includes <the concept of> *ī*. And so we can know that “this *ī*” comprises an additional individuating specificity. As for the fact that it is a positive attribute, it is for the reason that this, since it is existent and its being “this” is a part of its being “this *ī*,” and a part of an <individual> existent cannot be non-existent, then we can know that it is a positive attribute.¹⁰

So, if two individual existents both participate in a third, then that by which those two participating existents are mutually distinguishable must be other than that in which they both participate. This principle forms the substance of (2)(iii): “that in which participation between two things occurs is distinct from that by which two things are distinguishable from each other—this is an illuminating premise indeed (*hādhihi muqaddima jaliyya*).”¹¹

With these three principles established, any speculation about the reality of two necessarily existing existents will be forced to blunder either into an infinite regress, or into an absurd contradiction. Since one necessary existent would be distinct from the other, each would be a composite, characterised both by necessary existence and by that which gives it its own individual existence. Each of these two constitutive parts would then be either necessarily existent or not. If they are both necessary, then again, whilst both would share in necessity, each

⁸ The sequence of words “*qayd zā'id 'alā māhiyyatihi wa-huwa amr thubūti*” and “*amma annahu qayd zā'id*” are missing from the Mirza Muḥammad Shirāzī Cairo lithograph, but are present in Tehran, Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmi Library, MS 6853, f. 22b; and Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, Carullah, MS 1482, f. 20a.

⁹ The sequence “*al-mafhūm min hādhā al-alif yumna' taṣawwur ma'nāhu 'an dhālika*,” is erroneously repeated in the Shirāzī lithograph. No such repetition appears in Majlis 6853 or Süleymaniye Carullah 1482.

¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. For Rāzī's objections to Avicenna's argument that determinate existence is a positive attribute, see Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*, vol. 2, pp. 367–371.

¹¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19.

must nevertheless be distinct in quiddity, and thus composite in of itself. The only way to resist the ensuing infinite regress would be to assert that a constitutive part of one of these hypothetical necessarily existing existents, or indeed of a constitutive part thereof, is merely a possible. But this would only serve to divert the endlessly futile inquiry into the impasse of the absurd contradiction that, since a composite is dependent on its parts, a necessarily existing existent would be dependent on a possible and thus not necessary at all. All existents, therefore, must only be possible except for the One Necessarily Existent.¹²

Whilst the foregoing proof to establish that all besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible relies on an Avicennan argument, to prove that all possibles are also originated in time, Rāzī resorts to one advanced in classical *kalām*.

10.2.2 All Possibles Are Originated in Time

Now since, reasons Rāzī, everything besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible, and exists in a relationship of dependency on that which influences

¹² Rāzī argues:

Were we to postulate two existents, each one of which is necessary by its own essence (*wājib li-dhātihī*), then each would participate in necessity but be distinct (*mutabāyinayn*) in its determinate existence (*al-ta'ayyun*), such that each one of them would be a composite of two parts. Moreover, those two parts <in turn> would either be necessary or not be necessary. If they are necessary, then they too would share in necessity but be distinct in quiddity (*māhiyya*): so each one of them would be a composite of <yet> two other parts, leading to an infinite regress. If they are not necessary, then either or each one of them would be a possible. The composite is dependent on its parts, and that which is dependent on a possible is even more so a possible (*mā yakūn muftaqiran ilā mumkin kāna awlā bi'l-imkān*). And so that composite is a possible—but we have just postulated that it is necessary. This is a contradiction. Thus, with all that we have mentioned, it has been established that all existents are possible except the One (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.19).

Summarising, in his commentary to *al-Ishārāt*, Avicenna's proof that there can only be one Necessarily Existent, Rāzī says:

Were we to postulate two things which are necessarily existent, each would differ from the other in its determinate existence (*fī ta'ayyunihi*) but share with it in the necessity of its existence. That in which they participate is distinct from that by which they differ (*mā bihi al-ishṭirāk muḡhāyiran li-mā bihi al-ikhtilāf*.) And so the essence (*dhāt*) of each one of them is a composite of the necessity in which it shares with the other, and of the determinate existence through which it is distinct from the other (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, vol. 2, p. 363).

to produce the effect of its existence (*mu'aththir*), the question arises as to the nature of that dependency: "Its dependence on that which influences <occurs> either: [(1)] in the state of its continued existence (*ḥāl baqā'ihī*); or [(2)] in the state of its coming-to-be in time (*ḥāl ḥudūthihī*); or [(3)] in the state of its non-existence (*ḥāl 'adamihī*)."¹³

Rāzī eliminates the first of these logical disjuncts on the following ground:

The first <disjunct> is false because a thing, in the state of its continued existence, is existent. So, if, in the state of its continued existence, it depended on that which causes its existence, then the existent would, in the state of its existence, depend on that which makes it existent, and that would <amount to> the bringing about of that which is <already> occurrent (*taḥṣīlan li'l-ḥāṣil*) and that is absurd.¹⁴

To say a possible is dependent on an influencer for its continued existence is an assertion that is empty and redundant. For, its continued existence should be independent, its relationship to that which causes its existence being as that of a building to its builder, once it has been constructed. With this logical disjunct eliminated thusly, the temporal origination of all possibles necessarily follows, the absurdity of the third logical disjunct hardly requiring discussion:

Thus, is it established that it is in need of that which influences either in: [(2)] the state of its coming-to-be in time or [(3)] in the state of its non-existence. <On the basis> of either postulation, the definite conclusion (*al-qat'*) that every possible is originated in time necessarily follows. So is it established that all besides the Existent, the One, is originated in time.¹⁵

The argument presented here establishes one of the primary precepts of classical *kalām* and was deployed most importantly in cosmological proofs for the existence of God as creator *ex nihilo*. Rāzī's critique of the Sabians, therefore, serves simultaneously as a positive proof for God as a choosing agent, the God

¹³ "*fa-iḥtiyājūhu ilā al-mu'aththir immā an yakūn ḥāl baqā'ihī aw ḥāl ḥudūthihī aw ḥāl 'adamihī*," Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. The phrase "*aw ḥāl ḥudūthihī aw ḥāl 'adamihī*" is missing from the Shīrāzī lithograph but is present in all other witnesses.

¹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20.

¹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20. Rāzī claims:

This is a proof which God has uniquely bestowed on us (*hādḥā burhān khaṣṣanā Allāh ta'ālā bihī*) the like of it occurring to no-one before us. For, their proof [i.e., that of the classical theologians] is based on motion and stillness and did not comprise aught but bodies and accidents: that everything besides God is originated in time cannot be established by this proof.

of the Islamic theologians, as well as those Sabians about whom the polemic of this discussion remains conspicuously silent.¹⁶ With the proof that all possibles are originated in time, Rāzī reassures his readers that the polytheist Sabians and their Avicennising cousins have been soundly refuted, and that the central doctrine of the true faith—belief in the volitional Creator God—is made clear: “And so it is established [. . .] that the world is originated in time and that temporally originated phenomena have a beginning. And since that is established, their primary doctrine (*aṣl kalāmihim*) is proven false; and if the primary doctrine is proven false then so too is that which they derive from it. And God is the source of guidance.”¹⁷

Unable to resist the inevitable slide into the polytheism of their idolatrous cousins, the Avicennising Sabians of *al-Sirr* are guilty of the same error as al-

16 For analysis of this proof, see Ayman Shihadeh, *Doubts on Avicenna: A Study and Edition of Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas‘ūdī’s Commentary on the Ishārāt*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 95 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 86–88. It is worth mentioning that Rāzī appends to the main argument a couple of other supplementary proofs that all possibles are temporally originated. The first argues that since the quiddity of motion is the fact of being preceded by something prior, whilst the quiddity of beginning-less time is precisely the opposite, the simultaneous assertion of both attributes would entail an absurd contradiction:

The quiddity of motion (*māhiyyat al-ḥaraka*) entails being preceded by something else (*taqtaḍi al-masbūqiyya bi’l-ghayr*) because it is a term <denoting> movement from one thing to another (*al-intiqāl min amr ilā amr*) and movement is preceded by that from which movement has been made. <But> the quiddity of beginning-less time (*al-azal*) is that it requires the negation of being preceded. So the simultaneous assertion of both motion and beginning-less time (*al-jam‘ bayna al-ḥaraka wa’l-azal*) is the simultaneous assertion of two contraries (*jam‘ bayna al-naqīḍayn*) and that is absurd (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20).

According to the second supplementary proof, a similarly absurd contradiction would arise from the assertion of possibles existing in beginning-less time, from the fact that since: (1) the aggregate of originated phenomena would be preceded by an aggregate of individual non-existences; and (2) those individual non-existences, having no beginning, would be gathered together in beginning-less time, then their coming-to-be must also be held to occur in beginning-less time:

[. . .] each one of these temporally originated phenomena is preceded by non-existence which has no beginning (*masbūq bi-‘adam lā awwala lahu*). So there is an aggregate of non-existences (*majmū‘ ‘adamāt*) which have no beginning and those non-existences, in their totality, come together in beginning-less time (*mujtami‘a fi’l-azal*). And if the non-existence of their entirety occurs in beginning-less time, then it would be impossible for any <individual> one of them to occur in beginning-less time. Otherwise, the simultaneous assertion of two contraries would necessarily follow (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20).

17 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20.

Ghazali's Avicennan opponents in the fourth discussion of his *Tahāfut al-fal-āsifa*.¹⁸

As previously discussed, the erroneous belief that all to which the Necessarily Existent directly gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in beginning-less time is of central importance to the cosmology of Avicennising Sabians. It represents the second premise on which relies their proof, in *al-Sirr* 1:1, for the role of active heavenly forces as the proximate causes of sublunary change. This belief resolves the apparent paradox of the ultimate dependence of sublunary generation and corruption on the changeless simplex that is the Necessarily Existent.¹⁹

As observed earlier, the supposed authors of the proof, when demonstrating this second premise, fail to address and eliminate the logical possibility that all to which the Necessarily Existent gives rise indeed occurs in time, by implication, as the result of the action of the volitional creator God. Thus, an alternative account of talismans—one that is compatible with Islamic theology—is left unexplored. This presumably would be the account of talismans preferred by the third group of Sabians, mentioned in *al-Sirr* 4:1. These of course are the Sabians who believe the heavenly bodies:

[. . .] occur by way of the action of an agent possessed of volition (*fā'il mukhtār*), namely the Most Supreme God, and that that God created these planets, investing each with a special power, delegating them with the authority to govern this world. They say this does not diminish from the majesty of God—exalted is His splendour—for what imperfection is there for a king to possess obedient slaves. Then He delegated to each of them the government of a specific kingdom and rule over a specific clime. In general, despite their differing doctrines, they claimed the spheres and the planets have specific attributes.²⁰

The endeavour to fortify the Islamic theological conception of God against attack also demands that attention is paid to the issue of the volitional creator

18 Al-Ghazali decries what he sees as their contradiction in asserting both the eternity of the world and its dependence on a cause. He argues that, in asserting the eternity of the celestial spheres in beginning-less time, they have no grounds on which to assert their dependence on a cause, and thus no reason to reject the position of the materialist *Dahriyya*, who aver: that matter is eternal and without cause; that only accidents and forms originate in time; and that all chains of temporally originated causes and effects end in the circular motion of the celestial spheres. The Avicennising Sabians of *al-Sirr* stand in the same relation to the polytheist Sabians, who uphold the belief in multiple necessarily existing existents, as do al-Ghazali's Avicennan opponents in relation to the *Dahriyya*. See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-fal-āsifa*, published as *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. & trans. Michael Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), pp. 78–83.

19 Of course the polytheist Sabians who believe in a multiplicity of necessarily existing existents are not confronted by such a dilemma.

20 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

God's *qudra*, or power over all things. This is the concern of the conclusion of *al-Sirr* 4:1 which adopts the following line of reasoning. The critique of the Sabian belief in the planets as proximate gods (*āliha qarība*) deserving of devotion cannot rely on the condemnations uttered by the prophets. For the verification of their claim to prophethood rests on the fact that God makes manifest through them miracles—extraordinary acts of which none other is capable except Him. But an act cannot be recognised as miraculous unless it is proven that only God, and not celestial motion—or the human talismanic harnessing thereof—can be the agent of such prodigies. Unless this is shown, an argument relying purely on the utterances of prophets would be circular and therefore invalid:

Know that this <Sabian> doctrine is false but it cannot be refuted by means of reports from the prophets—upon whom be peace—concerning its falsehood. For the proof of prophethood hinges on (*mutafarri'a*) on the fact that a miracle is an act of God—exalted is He!—and that can only be established if <belief in> the planets as governing the conditions of this world is proved false. So, if we prove this doctrine false by means of the words of the prophets—upon whom be peace—then a circular argument would have been advanced, which is false.²¹

So according to Rāzī in *al-Sirr*, to prove the world is originated in time, is to prove its dependency on God as the only real possessor of agency, whose power to influence must extend to all possibles. This being the case, the notion that the celestial spheres have any real and independent agency—let alone miraculous power—is proven false:

Indeed this doctrine is proved false by our proving that the world has been brought into being in time, and that the producer of influence (*al-mu'aththir*) on <this world> must be able (*qādir*); if He is able, then His power must extend to all possible things (*kull al-mumkināt*); and if His power extends to all possible things, then He must be the creator of all possible things. Given all this, <belief in> the planets as gods which govern this world is proved false.²²

The logical consequence of this reasoning is that nothing occurs unless it is by God's power. So long as this belief is maintained, any apparent causal relationship between celestial configurations and terrestrial phenomena can only be understood as God's norm (*āda*) of acting in this world: it provides no evidence whatsoever of any real agency other than God's. Once this is conceded, then any such apparent relationship in the cosmos between cause and effect

²¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.113.

²² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

that can be drawn from inductive reasoning about the observable cosmos, is a matter of correct or erroneous scientific inquiry, not of true faith or unbelief:

However, when they professed that the <planetary> movements and applications are causes for the temporal coming-to-be of originated phenomena in this world <as they occur> in accordance with the norm (*asbāb li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādith fi hādihā al-‘ālam ‘alā majrā al-‘āda*), then this would neither be unbelief (*kufīr*) nor misguidance (*dalāla*). However, induction becomes necessary, for if we see reality thus [i.e., planetary movements as the causes of events] then we assent to it to that extent; otherwise we declare it untrue whilst <at the same time> averring that that untruth does not amount to unbelief.²³

So, despite their shared belief in the volitional creator God of Islamic belief, even members of the third group of Sabians will be in error so long as they believe that the created heavenly bodies possess any sort of agency outside of God’s power.

10.3 Sabianism and the Islamic Revelation

Now, were the universe simply a complex but inanimate system of interacting bodies in motion, held in place by God’s power, then the matter could perhaps rest there. But all three categories of Sabian believe in the celestial spheres as living, rational beings. So indeed, in *al-Sirr* at least, does Rāzī. He argues that:

Reason and revealed religion are in agreement that placed in authority to govern each separate species of temporally originated phenomenon in this world is a distinct heavenly spirit and these spirits are called, in the language of revealed religion ‘angels’ (*al-‘uqūl wa’l-sharā’i mutaṭābiqa ‘alā anna al-mutawallā li-tadbīr kull naw’ min anwā’ hādihā al-‘ālam rūḥ samāwī ‘alā ḥidda wa-hādhihi al-arwāḥ hiya al-musammāt fi lisān al-shar’ bi’l-malā’ika*).²⁴

So from the perspective of reason (*bi-ḥasab al-‘uqūl*), he argues that since rational proofs (*al-dalā’il al-‘aqliyya*) have established that: (a) the spirits of the higher world govern the lower world (*al-‘ālam al-asfal*); and (b) one single principle cannot act as the source of different effects (*al-mabda’ al-wāḥid lā yakūn maṣḍaran li-āthār mukhtalifa*), it must follow that each one of these effects is dependent on a celestial spirit.²⁵

²³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

²⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 109.

²⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 109. Even if someone were to deny this principle, reason would demand that it should be conceded, at the very least, that one thing cannot be the source of effects which have opposing natures: “as for he who maintains that one <thing> cannot give rise to

This rational conclusion is one which, in Rāzī's opinion, revealed religion (*al-sharā'i*) entirely concurs. He identifies the referents of a number of Qur'ānic oath verses, the subjects of which are mysterious sound feminine plural nouns, with the angels of the celestial spheres. Of particular interest, is his identification of the *nāzi'āt* and the *ṣāffāt* as the angels of the sphere of Saturn; the *zājirāt* as the angels of the sphere of Mars; and the *tāliyāt* as the angels of the sphere of Jupiter.²⁶ Rāzī then moves on to the numerous prophetic traditions which indicate that angels are entrusted with the management of the clouds; thunder; lightning; with the daily sustenance of men; with the care of mountains and the seas; and so on, for all sublunary phenomena.²⁷

And so, in the light of the overwhelming weight of scriptural evidence, this issue thus becomes one of agreement (*mas'alat wifāq*) between the prophets and the sages (*al-ḥukamā'*). So, constructing the logic of the occult practitioner, Rāzī observes that:

[. . .] each <angel> has a specific name. And so, it is not impossible (*lā yamtani'*) that a man, if he calls on their names, seeking their aid, beseeching them, adjuring them by the names of their chiefs and those appointed in authority over them (*wa-yuqsim 'alayhā bi-*

ought but one, this is self-evident. As for he who does not maintain this, then there can be no doubt that he <should> deny that one principle can be the source of contrary acts such as the benefic and the malefic, masculinity and femininity, hot and cold," Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 109.

26 "*wa'l-nāzi'āt gharqan wa'l-nāshīṭati nashṭan*" (Qur'an 79:1); "*wa'l-ṣāffāt ṣaffan*" (Qur'an 37:1); "*fa'l-tāliyāt dhikran*" (Qur'an 37:3). The *ṣāffāt* are identified as the angels of the sphere of Saturn on account of its "firmness and slow movement" (*li-thibāṭihi wa-buṭuwuw ḥarakatīhi*). The subjects of other mysterious Qur'ānic oaths, identified with angels are: "By the swift scatterers and the burden-bearers" (*wa'l-dhāriyāt dharwan, fa'l-ḥāmilāti wiqrān*) (Qur'an 51:1–2); "and [by] the partitioners" (*fa'l-muqassimāti amran*) (Qur'an 51:4). Amongst other verses interpreted in light of this doctrine, Rāzī adduces the following utterance attributed by the Qur'an to Solomon: "We have been taught the speech of birds" (*'ullimna mantiqa al-ṭayr*) (Qur'an 27:16). In relation to this last verse, Rāzī says the intent is that Solomon's spirit connected with the spirit of Mercury, because Mercury is connected with birds: see Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110. Rāzī then moves on to the numerous prophetic traditions which indicate that angels are entrusted with the management of the clouds; thunder; lightning; with the daily sustenance of men; with the care of mountains and the seas; and so on for all natural phenomena. This harmonisation of the Sabian belief in an entirely ensouled cosmos with the Islamic revelation, using the very same Qur'ānic verses and prophetic sayings, also finds its way into *al-Maṭālib*: see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhi*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 7, p. 20 and pp. 387–388. Of course, Rāzī was not unique in his identification of the subjects of these Qur'ānic oaths with the celestial angels. His contemporary, for instance, the Ṣūfī master Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) makes the same connections during his visionary experiences of the celestial spheres: see Carl Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 77–78.

27 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

asmā'i ru'asā'ihā wa'l-mustawlīn alayhā), that they should respond to him and perform what he desires from them (*an tujīb al-insān wa-taf'al mā yaltamis al-insān minhā*), and that the practitioners of magic were prolix in explaining this kind of magic.²⁸

The belief of the Sabians in an ensouled cosmos thronged by a plenitude of spirits, was confirmed by the Qur'ān and the prophetic wisdom. In pursuing a science which identified the divinely mandated norms of phenomenal reality, by correlating celestial configurations with frequencies of sublunary events, the Sabians were not violating reason. But egregious was their error in inferring from such patterns that anything within that cosmos, at any moment, had any real agency independent of the divine *fiat*. Rāzī never states explicitly that a Sabian science, sanitised by Ash'arī theology, is not inconceivable. But it is an inference which he allows his readers to draw. For, in much the same way that a modern day Ash'arī might concede the efficacy of a solar panel to serve the energy requirements of a mosque, so a twelfth century Ash'arī theologian, for instance, might concede the efficacy of a solar astral ritual, working with the empirical norm evident from the pattern of divine action in this world, to bring him royal patronage. In the domain of pure reason, the Sabian science of talismans could—theoretically—be reconciled with the Ash'arī theological position that God is the only real sufficient cause for any event. Whether this could be reconciled with the *sharī'a*, however, is another issue.

²⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110. Rāzī goes on to say that the prolix explanation of “this kind of magic” is the subject matter of the fourth treatise of *al-Sirr*, namely the description of the long planetary ascent ritual.

Chapter 11

al-Maṭālib 8 and the New Islamic Soteriology

11.1 Introduction

We have seen that in *al-Sirr*, it is the individual's perfect nature which inspires, reveals veridical dreams and leads him in an ascent through the celestial spheres towards perfection and ontological transformation. This chapter will explore how, having engaged with this doctrine so deeply in his early career when he wrote *al-Sirr* in 575/1179, Rāzī finally integrates this notion into the philosophical-theological synthesis of *al-Maṭālib*, which he completes in 606/1209 soon before he dies.

This chapter will show how Rāzī makes the doctrine of the Perfect Nature the cornerstone of his prophetology. In doing so, he rescues the Islamic belief in prophethood from the relativising effect of Avicennism, affirms the unique status of the prophet, whilst at the same time providing the chance for the personal soteriology for a spiritual, intellectual elite who, by means of connection with their individual perfect natures, can complete their own epistemological ascent through the ontological hierarchy of reality, to attain certainty in metaphysical truths and realise the perfection of philosophy. And since the celestial spirits—or angels—which turn the spheres, are ontologically superior to man, the prophet is conceived of as somehow straddling the ranks of humanity and angelhood. He communes with the celestial angels; his visions and occult power are received by way of connection to his perfect nature; and the proof of his prophetic claim is his ability to perfect imperfect human souls (*takmil al-nāqīṣīn*). The significance of the doctrine in *al-Maṭālib* is thus twofold: firstly, it preserves the prophet's essential uniqueness; and secondly, it provides the soteriological means by which the individual might realise his own perfection. Sabian and Islamic soteriologies converge into one.

I shall proceed in the following way. Firstly, I shall show how Rāzī partly achieves his critique of the Avicennan theory of prophethood by adapting material from *al-Sirr* relating to the talismanic science (11.2). I shall then move on to outline Rāzī's conceptualisation of the prophet as a figure which straddles humanity and celestial angelhood (11.3). This will be followed by an examination of how the Perfect Nature determines the upper limit to which the individual human soul can reach perfection. This will reveal the utility of the doctrine in preserving the unique status of the prophet which Rāzī believed the Avicennan naturalistic account of prophethood relativised (11.4). Then I shall turn to

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Rāzī's rational proof for the doctrine (11.5). Now, since its truth, being of a highly metaphysical nature, cannot be rationally demonstrated to the level of certainty, Rāzī asserts that it is only by spiritual discipline and direct visionary experience of the Perfect Nature that its reality can be known. This will be the focus of the following section (11.6). This chapter will conclude with a final word on how the Perfect Nature is implicitly woven into the fabric of the epistemology of *al-Maṭālib* as a guide which leads the initiate in an epistemological ascent through the celestial spheres to attain certain metaphysical truth (11.7).

11.2 The Critique of the Avicennan Theory of Prophethood

In examining Rāzī's critique of the Avicennan theory of prophethood, I shall first consider its assault on Avicenna's treatment of its epistemological-imaginational aspect, included in the conceptual category of theoretical capacity (*al-quwwa al-naẓariyya*). Then I shall examine its deconstruction of the Avicennan account of prophetic occult power, which forms part of practical capacity (*al-quwwa al-'amaliyya*). Understanding this critique will bring into focus the explanatory power and utility of the Perfect Nature doctrine in formulating not only an alternative account of prophethood but also in imagining a new soteriology.

As we have already seen, Avicenna's account of the epistemological-imaginational aspect of prophethood, is grounded in his theory of the internal senses, which explains how the human soul can connect with the celestial souls in order to derive knowledge of the unseen in the form of visions and veridical dreams. Whilst the forms he sees are the creation of his imagination, their cause is extra-mental, deriving from a celestial origin (see chapter 7).

In *al-Maṭālib* 8, Rāzī critiques this theory, unfairly it must be said, by emphasising the subjectivity of the prophetic visionary experience as conceived by the Avicennan account. He represents it as asserting that forms witnessed by prophets cannot have any extra-mental reality, for otherwise, all possessed of sound external senses would experience them: to assume this were not the case would give rise to an extreme form of scepticism concerning the reliability of the senses. Rāzī directs this argument back at the Avicennists, pointing out that were the visual experience of a prophet purely subjective, then the general trust we place in our perception of sensory objects in the extra-mental world would collapse. Rather, he asserts that to affirm the extra-mental reality of the objects of our perception results in a far lesser degree of scepticism: for whilst we could concede that we do not perceive all that is in the extra-mental world, we can at least have confidence in the reality of what we do in fact perceive

therein, rather than constantly struggling with the possibility of their purely imagined, subjective reality.¹

Instead, Rāzī insists that such perceptions are experienced in the rational soul, which is an absolute unity. Concurring with the talisman masters of *al-Sirr* 1:5, Rāzī asserts the extra-mental reality of prophetic visions. So, to account for them, he invokes a doctrine to which all three Sabian groups in *al-Sirr* 4:1 subscribe: the Perfect Nature. He says: “So it is not impossible that that which sometimes gives it [i.e., the human soul] visions during sleep (*yurīhā fi’l-man-āmāt tāratān*), sometimes whilst awake, and which sometimes gives it inspirations (*ilhāmāt*), is that Perfect Nature. Nor is it impossible that that Perfect Nature is capable of taking on different forms, in the shape of a specific body.”²

Curiously, failing to address the issue of why, if the vision is external, others cannot see it, Rāzī chooses not to avail himself of the solution provided by the talisman masters of *al-Sirr* 1:5 which asserts that the object of the vision exists in the higher world: were this solution applied to Rāzī’s account of prophethood, it would explain why the unperfected souls surrounding the prophet cannot themselves share in his numinous experience (see chapter 9).

Now, in *al-Maṭālib* 8.7.3, Rāzī targets the Avicennan account of prophetic occult power, presenting it as follows.³ The human estimative faculty is capable of exerting an influence (*ta’tīr*) on bodies: “and since it is not remote (*lā yab’ud*) that there should be a man whose soul is in perfect possession of such a faculty, so then it follows that he can be capable of acting on the matter of this world (*hayūlā hādihā al-‘ālam*) however he so wishes or desires.”⁴

Such is a soul that can produce miracles and wonders. But, points out Rāzī, just as this account is only possible (*muḥtamal*), so there are other accounts which are equally as plausible in explaining such phenomena, such as the actions of angels and jinn, the celestial applications (*al-itṭiṣālāt al-falakiyya*) and astral magical operations (*a’māl al-kawākib*).⁵ So, if all such explanations are equally plausible, the Avicennists are required to provide a proof which substantiates their conviction in the unique power of the prophetic operative estimative faculty, eliminating competing accounts. Since they have failed in this, their insistence on their naturalistic account of the prophetic miracle is unjustified

1 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 8, pp. 134–135.

2 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 136.

3 The main divisions of *al-Maṭālib* are *juz’* (part), *qism* (division), and *faṣl* (chapter).

4 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 137.

5 Here, I construe “*a’māl*” in the sense of astral magical operations. The alternative is to construe it as meaning “actions of the planets.”

(*tarjīh min ghayr murajjih*). Thus, to demonstrate at least the possibility (*iḥtimāl*) of other means by which such prodigies can be made manifest is to demonstrate the inability of the Avicennan theory to defend the unique nature of prophethood. Moreover, if the accounts of such means can be made even more plausible using Avicennan cosmology and psychology, then the inadequacy of the Avicennan account is rendered all the more apparent.⁶

Rāzī sets about this task with vigour in *fī'l-kalām fī'l-siḥr*, the third and last division of *al-Maṭālib* 8, *Fī'l-nubuwwāt*, where he lists no fewer than ten categories of *siḥr*, ranging from those which use entirely natural means, such as remarkable engineering feats (*handasa*) and the special properties of drugs and potions, to those which invoke the aid of the *jinn* and the celestial souls.⁷ One means by which he attempted to expose the weakness of the Avicennan account was to argue for the possibility that all humans have the potential to develop a strong operative estimative faculty. Thus, when discussing “magic based on the power of the estimative faculty and the purification of the soul” (*al-siḥr al-mabnī ‘alā quwwat al-wahm wa-tasfīyat al-nafs*), he argues that: since rational souls are of the same genus as the celestial spirits, and are generated by them (*al-nufūs al-nāṭiqa min jins al-arwāḥ al-falakiyya wa-muwallada minhā*), it is inevitable that they too possess a certain power and effect. If the rational soul focuses on one aim, shutting out all other distractions, then its power becomes strong, its effect is intensified, and it can cause wondrous events to occur in this world. Moreover, when it is purified and engaged in spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*), then it is drawn towards the celestial soul (*al-rūḥ al-falakī*), which is its perfect nature (*al-ṭibā‘ al-tāmm*), its original father (*abūhā al-aṣlī*) from which issues a power that suffuses the essence (*jawhar*) of the soul.⁸

Although not strictly Avicennan, combining as it does the Avicennan psychological concept of the estimative faculty with the Barakātian doctrine of the Perfect Nature, this account served Rāzī’s immediate aim of providing an account equally as plausible (*muḥtamal*) as the Avicennan, thus exposing its implied relativising of the prophetic prodigy. But it is by the systematic and scientific explanation of talismans, the raw data of which he had already presented in *al-Sirr*, that Rāzī established the inability of the Avicennans to defend the unique status of the prophet. Its theoretical account of talismans, used Avicennan cosmology in order to explain their efficacy. In doing so, its critique

⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 137.

⁷ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 143–146.

⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 144.

of Avicennism, by deploying its own arguments, was rendered all the more effective.

Rāzī understood the prophet's unique ability to know the unseen and to wield occult power as two aspects of the perfected man in every age: the *quṭb*, or *axis mundi*.⁹ In his view the Avicennan naturalistic account of these prophetic abilities reduced them to the level of the internal sense faculties. Since any individual can share, to a greater or lesser degree, in these abilities, there is nothing essentially unique about the prophet. This destabilised the entire institution.

The Perfect Nature doctrine is of particular interest as it was so important to the epistemology and ethical theory advanced in *al-Maṭālib*. In *al-Maṭālib* 8, having critiqued the Avicennan account of imaginational prophethood, Rāzī advances his own: the prophetic vision, contra Avicenna, is a cognitive experience of an extra-mental reality. That reality is the prophet's own perfect nature which takes on various forms. Now, the Perfect Nature doctrine justified Rāzī's later ethical determinism, which held that no human soul can progress beyond the level of perfection of its perfect nature.¹⁰ This being the case, the prophet's perfect nature must derive from a celestial spirit that is the most perfect of all such spirits. His essential uniqueness amongst humanity is thus guaranteed—unlike the Avicennan prophet's.

But the Perfect Nature doctrine also served another purpose: as we shall see, just as it discloses to the prophet his revelation, so it leads the philosophical and spiritual aspirant to the epistemological ascent to certainty in metaphysical truths.

11.3 Prophethood in *al-Maṭālib*

As argued in the introductory chapter of the present work, the development of Rāzī's teleological ethics of *al-Maṭālib* was facilitated by his formulation and adoption of three key interdependent doctrines: (1) the ontological superiority of the celestial angels over man; (2) the origin of the individual human soul in the Perfect Nature; (3) human perfection, conceived of as an epistemological ascent

⁹ In contrast with Avicenna's metaphysical proof from necessity, the proof with which Rāzī substantiates this claim is based on induction (*istiqrā'*). Nevertheless, it is a proof which he subtly adapts from *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*. See Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 64 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 140.

¹⁰ See generally Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, pp. 109–154.

through the celestial spheres towards angelomorphosis. These doctrines deeply inform Rāzī's later formulation of prophethood, which differed from the classical Ash'arī perspective in significant ways.

We need not dwell on the considerable effort which Rāzī exerts in *al-Maṭālib* 7, *Fī'l-arwāḥ al-'āliya wa'l-sāfila* ("On the Higher and Lower Spirits"), to formulate philosophical and scriptural proofs for the first of these doctrines, the superiority of the celestial angels to man.¹¹ It suffices to state that Rāzī presents their superiority in three aspects: their essence; their knowledge; and their power to act on the world of bodies.

Rāzī's assertion of celestial-angelic superiority reflects his shift away from an action-oriented ethical theory for which hardship and effort are the measure of superiority, to one that is framed in terms of "character-oriented perfectionism," for which the intrinsic worth of the agent's essence is the sole index of value.¹² Thus, man is no longer superior by virtue of the hardship he endures in taming his baser soul and obeying God: the celestial angel is superior by virtue of its intrinsic impulse to submit to God's will and magnify His glory. So, it is the impulse towards angelomorphosis that drives man's desire for perfection. Being the apogee of human perfection, the prophet is a liminal figure who mediates the two levels of humanity and celestial-angelhood.

Fī'l-nubuwwāt consists of three main divisions, the first two are relevant to our present discussion. The first examines various positions which deny the institution of prophethood followed by a defence of the classical Ash'arī test to verify a prophetic claim which is established by the occurrence of miracles at the hand of the claimant who, calling to the worship of the one God, publicly declares his prophetic mission. The miracle serves as God's corroboration to the people of the truth of his prophetic claim.¹³

Whilst affirming the soundness of the approach which attempts to verify the truth of a prophetic claim by way of miracles, Rāzī prefers another, advanced in the second division, which reasons as follows: since we know correct belief and correct action, when we encounter a man who, announcing his prophethood,

11 See Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol 7, pp. 409–420 for the scriptural proofs; for the philosophical proofs see pp. 420–429.

12 Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, p.115.

13 On Rāzī's discussion, in his *Muḥassal* and *al-Maṭālib*, of the means by which a prophetic claim is verified, see Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's Concept of Prophecy: the Introduction of Avicennan Psychology into Ash'arite Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 14 (2004): pp. 101–144, in particular pp. 106–13. On Rāzī's theory of prophecy in *al-Maṭālib* 8, see Binyamin Abrahamov, "Religion versus Philosophy—the Case of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Proofs of Prophecy," *Religion versus Science in Islam: A Medieval and Modern Debate*, ed. Carmela Baffioni, *Oriente Moderno* 80/3 (2000): pp. 415–425.

and calling men to the religion of truth, is successful in perfecting deficient human souls, then we can safely conclude that he is a genuine prophet who must be followed. Rather than claiming that this is the sole correct approach, Rāzī modestly asserts it has the soundest reasoning (*aqrab ilā al-'aql*) and is beset by the least doubt.

This preferred second approach rests on four grounds. The first is:

[. . .] that the perfection of man is that he knows truth in its essence and the good (*al-khayr*) such that he acts in accordance with it. What is meant by this is that the state of his perfection is defined by two matters. The first is that his theoretical capacity (*quwwa nazariyya*) becomes perfect such that pure forms are perfectly and completely manifest to it (*tatajallā fihā ṣuwar al-ashyā' wa-ḥaqā'iquhā tajalliyan kāmīlan tāmmān*) free of all mistake and error. The second is that his practical capacity (*quwwa 'amaliyya*) becomes perfect such that he becomes possessed of a capacity which enables him to perform righteous works. By righteous works is meant those states which produce aversion to the pleasures of the body and desire for the next world and spiritual beings (*rūḥāniyyāt*).¹⁴

Developed theoretical capacity inclines his soul towards communion with the celestial spirits. Both the prophets and the divine philosophers (*al-ḥukamā' al-ilāhiyyūn*) concur on this idea of human perfection. The ultimate aim of man therefore is to attain perfection (*kamāl*).¹⁵

This leads us to the second ground on which Rāzī's approach to prophethood rests. Men fall into three broad categories: the masses which fall short of perfection; the saints (*al-awliyā'*) who have reached perfection but are unable to lead others to its attainment; and the prophets, perfected humans who lead men from the depths of imperfection to the summit to perfection.

The third and fourth grounds develop the idea of human perfection. The third reasons that, although the vast majority of humanity is characterised by imperfection, there exists amongst them a hierarchy of perfected humans: at its apex is the one who is “the most perfect of them” (*akmaluhum*) who exists at the highest level of humanity, being equal to the lowest rank of the celestial angels:

The most perfect of perfected men (*akmal al-kāmīlīn*), the most eminent of eminent and knowledgeable of men, is at the furthest horizon of humanity. And you already know that the last of each species (*ākhar kull naw'*) is connected (*muttaṣil*) to the first member of the species which is nobler. And the kind which is nobler than humankind <comprises> the angels. So the last of humankind is connected with the first member of angel-kind. And since we have made it clear that that man exists at the highest rank of humankind it must

14 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 103–104.

15 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 104.

follow that he is connected with the world of the angels, mixing with them (*mukhtaliṭan bihim*).¹⁶

The fourth ground asserts that given that the rank of this “most perfect” human is that of the angels; and that since the characteristics of the angels include:

[. . .] freedom from bodily constraints, mastery over the world of bodies, and independence from any need of bodily tools in order to act, then so too is this human characterised by that which corresponds to these attributes. Thus seldom is his attention drawn to the world of bodies (*jismāniyyāt*); <but> his action [i.e., in the world of bodies] is powerful; his attraction to the world of spiritual beings (*al-rūḥāniyyāt*) is strong; his theoretical power realises perfection by way of <different> kinds <of> holy splendour and divine gnosis (*quwwatuhu mustakmila bi-anwā‘ al-jalāyā al-qudsiyya wa’l-ma‘ārif al-ilāhiyya*); his practical power exerts influence over the bodies of this world by various means of action. And that is what is meant by miracles. Then having realised these two stations his spiritual power exerts an effect on bringing to perfection the souls of those whose theoretical and practical capacities are deficient.¹⁷

Just like the celestial angels, he can act directly on bodies in the sublunary world with the power of his own soul, without the need of bodily tools. His soul nevertheless is drawn to the celestial realm. The ontological state of the prophetic figure who has reached complete perfection is to be found at the outermost limit of humanity, where he participates in angelhood. He learns directly from the angelic world, and with his practical capacity he can administer the corporeal world:

The noblest amongst the denizens of the lower world is the man who has attained the theoretical power by which he learns from the holy lights of the Angelic World (*yastafid al-anwār al-qudsiyya min ‘ālam al-malā’ika*); and the practical power by which he can govern this corporeal world in the most proper and perfect way (*tadbīr hadhā al-‘ālam al-jismāni ‘alā al-ṭarīq al-aṣḥāḥ wa’l-sabīl al-akmal*).¹⁸

The prophet stands at the apex of a hierarchy of perfected individuals. His miracles serve not as a means of establishing the truth of his prophethood, but as a means of corroborating its truth (*taṣdīq*). Rather, his prophetic claim is established by the evidence of his ability to perfect. The impulse felt by those who would strive towards human perfection and liberation from the world of corporeality is the impulse to emulate the prophet, a man unique in the level of his perfection, by which he participates in both humanity and

16 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 107.

17 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 107.

18 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 107.

celestial angelhood. Thus, the impulse towards perfection is the impulse towards angelomorphosis.

Al-Sirr and *al-Maṭālib* display a large degree of convergence in their respective eschatologies: the *telos* of man is perfection; the pursuit of this perfection demands the rejection of engrossment in material reality; this perfection pertains to his attributes of knowledge and power; perfection of knowledge involves some form of noetic connection with spiritual beings which are coordinated with the spheres of the cosmos; the perfection of power, or the practical capacity, involves the ability to perform prodigies in the sublunary world; and complete perfection entails an angelomorphic transformation.

11.4 Perfect Nature and Qualified Ethical Determinism

Now, the ability of humans to attain such perfection varies. This is because the human soul derives from its perfect nature, a celestial spirit:

Rational souls are many species (*anwāʿ kathīra*) and different groups (*ṭawāʿif mukhtalifa*). Each has its own celestial spirit (*rūḥ falakī*), which is the cause of its existence and is tasked with overseeing its welfare (*iṣlāḥ aḥwālihā*). That celestial spirit is in relation to it like the origin, the mine, the source: we have called it the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭibāʿ al-tāmm*).¹⁹

The Perfect Nature doctrine guaranteed the superiority of the prophet over all other men. Since his celestial spirit was the most superior of all from which men could derive, it could explain his ability, uniquely, to receive divine revelatory experiences, exert occult power in this world, and most importantly, to bring deficient human souls to perfection (*takmīl al-nāqīṣīn*), which is the mark of his prophethood.

Adopting a deterministic view of human nature in the epistemological introduction to *al-Maṭālib*, Rāzī asserts that: “rational human souls differ in their quiddity and substance: whilst some are ennobled, divine and lofty, others are dark, turbid and base.”²⁰

He explains:

Amongst <human> souls, there are those who, in the origin of their substance and quiddity (*fī aṣl al-jawhar waʿl-māhiyya*) is a divine soul which is receptive to the presence of divine sanctity, whose love for it is great, whose gnosis of it is profound; amongst <human souls> are those who share in these states, but they are weak; and amongst them

¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 136.

²⁰ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol.1, p. 55.

are souls which are turbid, dark, devoid of these divine inclinations and spiritual dispositions, drowning in the ocean of desires and the darkness of the world of senses and vain imagination.²¹

Rāzī illustrates the full extent of his ethical determinism with the analogy of mountains as potential sources for minerals, and mines of gold and silver (*ma'ādin min al-dhahab wa'l-fiḍḍa*): the vast majority are barren; of the few which do indeed bear minerals, but a small minority carry precious metals; of those which carry precious metals, the majority require great effort for their extraction and refinement. His language resonates very deliberately with the text of the *ḥadīth* that he cites, in both *al-Sirr* and *al-Matālib*, as the scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Perfect Nature:

People are mines, like mines of silver and gold (*ka-ma'ādin al-fiḍḍa wa'l-dhahab*); the very best of them in the age of ignorance [i.e., the Pre-Islamic era] are the very best in Islam, when they have understanding <of the religion>. Spirits are assembled soldiers: those who have had <a previous> acquaintance have mutual affection; those who have been mutually hostile fall into dispute.²²

Thus, for the vast majority of humans, no amount of spiritual austerity and discipline brings improvement. Of the small minority who do indeed have the potential, their small spiritual gain will only be won after much pain and exertion. But there are a rare few who after but a little effort will be afforded tremendous unveilings (*mukāshafāt*).²³ These are precious exceptions to the overwhelming mediocrity of human spiritual aspirants. The determinism which defines this approach to human nature resonates strongly with the account given in *al-Sirr* that the substances of human souls differ in accordance with the differences between the substances of the celestial spirits from which they derive. The stark reality of this determinism, however, is mitigated by the fact that individual effort can, within the limitations of each soul type, engender improvement in the condition of the soul. Adopting and defending this view, Rāzī says:

Human souls are one genus (*jins*) which comprises a number of species (*anwā'*) which differ in quiddity; within each species are a number of individuals which are equal in their quiddity; each species is as a product (*natīja*) which issues from a specific celestial spirit. Thus, whilst one species might be free, noble and virtuous, possessed of strong intellect

21 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol.1, p. 55.

22 See: *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1991), vol. 4, *Kitāb al-Birr wa'l-ṣila wa'l-ādāb*, *ḥadīth* no. 2638, pp. 2031–2032. For the context of the *ḥadīth* as it is cited in *al-Sirr*, see section 3.4.1 of the present work.

23 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol.1, p. 56.

and beautiful actions, another might be base, evil and dull witted. This celestial spirit is the origin (*mabda'*) of the species and is called, in the terminology of the ancient philosophers “the Perfect Nature,” for the reason that an entity which is caused must be of the same genus as its cause and similar to it (*al-ma'lūl lā budda wa-an yakūn min jins al-'illa wa-shabīhan bihā*). Each attribute by which any given species of human soul is characterised is the result of the influence of the celestial spirit of that species, which possesses that attribute in a way that is more perfect than the way in which it obtains in the human souls that it engenders. For this reason, they have called these principles (*uṣūl*) the Perfect Nature. Thus, human souls are like the children of their celestial spirit, which for them is like a father who shows them love and tenderness. The celestial spirit has a special role in the raising of its human souls. If a celestial spirit is noble, virtuous and intelligent, then so are the human souls <over which it presides>; if it is characterised by the opposite, then so are the human souls <that belong to it>. Moreover, since those souls belong to one species, then of course it follows that they would share a kinship and similarity; and for this reason, an increased love and affection exists between them. For this reason, a boundless love may bind together people from different nations whilst two others may harbour an indefatigable hatred and loathing for the other. It is most manifest that the master of revelation and divine law—peace be upon him—subscribed to this doctrine when said: “In His possession are souls who are like enlisted soldiers: those who have <already> come to know each other are in harmony; those who are ignorant of each other fall into difference.”²⁴

Each human soul shares the same quiddity as its fellow sibling souls which derive from the same celestial spirit.²⁵ The prophet, being the paragon of human perfection, receives revelation from the most perfect of such spirits. His status is thus preserved and unchallenged by the relativising effect of the Avicennan naturalistic account of prophethood.

11.5 Rational Proof for the Perfect Nature

The way in which Rāzī arrives at conclusions which are “the most apt and probable” is part of a method of inquiry which gathers and systematises all relevant views on a particular philosophical issue, and attempts to arrive at the truth

²⁴ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol.7, pp. 142–143. Ḥadīth, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1, 371.

²⁵ The alternative view maintains that the substance of each individual soul is possessed of its own unique quiddity and essence; any similarity that might exist between them relates only to their attributes and not their essences. Rāzī lists this last position more for the sake of completeness rather than as a serious competitor to the doctrine of the Perfect Nature, for which he provides six proofs (see Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol.7, pp. 145–148).

using a process of elimination: the investigator must arrive at a conclusion which can offer certainty, by not only positively proving it as a proposition, but also disproving other competing theories. If he cannot, then the investigation has failed to yield a conclusive result. Often this is impossible, and the most compelling or probable conclusion (*awlā wa-akhlaq*), out of a range of possible alternatives, might prove the only way to avoid simply suspending judgement. Thus, must he content himself with a probable conclusion which falls short of apodictic certainty. Using this approach, Rāzī allows himself to express a view which concurs with what he finds to be the most probable out of a range of competing contradictory positions; he thus affirms, without pronouncing definitively on a given issue, what is *muḥtamal* (“probable”) or *ghayr mumtaniʿ* (“not impossible”), in contrast with competing positions which he has proven to be, at the very least, closer to the impossible. This gives him the flexibility to consider in all seriousness a wide range of unusual views.²⁶ Amongst such views he considered were: that the celestial poles have their own spheres; that the empyrean might be surrounded by innumerable spheres of commensurate might and density; that our universe might be just one of many; and of course that the human soul derives from a celestial spirit, the Perfect Nature.²⁷

Rāzī’s rational proof for the Perfect Nature appears as the answer to an even more fundamental question relating to what it means to be human: what is the cause of the human soul? In the course of establishing the ontological status of rational souls, Rāzī swiftly eliminates the possibilities that they are: (1) possessed of necessary being; or (2) not possessed of necessary being but eternal and pre-eternal (*qadīma azaliyya*). He affirms they are possible in their essence and have been brought into being within time (*mumkin li-dhawātihā muḥdathatan ḥudūthan zamāniyyan*). Being possible, they require an “influencer” which brings them into existence (*mu’aththir wa-mūjjid*). That which brings them into being must be either spatially bound (*mutaḥayyiz*) or subsistent in that which is spatially bound, or neither.²⁸ The first two of these disjuncts is eliminated for the following six reasons:

1. All things which are spatially bound are alike in their quiddity; thus if one were to be a cause of something, then all other spatially bound things would be the causes of similar things—and this is patently false.

²⁶ Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, p. 194.

²⁷ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol 7, p. 384. On speculation, in the Islamic intellectual tradition, on the possibility of a plurality of worlds, see Alessandro Bausani, “Nizami di Ganga e la Pluralità dei mondi,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 46 (1971): pp. 197–215.

²⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol 7, pp. 263–264.

2. The philosophers aver that no one thing can be both a receptive (*qābil*) and an active agent (*fā'il*) at the same time. Therefore since bodies are receptive, they cannot be active agents.
3. That which is spatially bound has a weaker existence than an abstracted substance (*aq'daf wujūdan min jawhar mujarrad*) since the former, in contrast with the latter, requires locus and direction (*makān wa-jiha*). The weaker cannot be the cause of the stronger.
4. The human soul is cognisant of realities, capable of acts whilst a body *qua* body is neither. Souls are thus “nobler” (*ashraf*) than bodies and the noble cannot be caused by that which is in relation to it baser (*akhas*s).
5. The ability of bodies to exert an effect is dependent on their position relative to that which they affect. Thus, a bodily influencer firstly affects that which is closest; then that which is connected (*muttaṣil*) to that; then that which is connected to that. Its effect on that which is closer is more powerful than its effect on that which is further. Were this not the case, then the influence of a bodily influencer on objects both near and far would be equal. The ability of a body to receive influence is contingent on its proximity to the affecting body. Thus, an affecting body cannot exert an influence over something which cannot be characterised by proximity or distance from it. Since a soul is an abstracted substance, uncharacterised by distance or proximity, it cannot therefore be caused by a body.
6. Since souls are abstracted substances, they are not of the same genus as bodies. Thus, the latter cannot be causes of the former.²⁹

Therefore, the rational soul must be caused by a substance abstracted from bodily existence (*jawhar mujarrad 'an al-jismiyya*).³⁰ This abstracted entity must either be itself a soul which, as such, acts by means of a corporeal tool (*āla jismāniyya*) or an intellect which, as such, does not exert its influence by means of a corporeal tool. Rāzī dismisses the first of these two disjuncts as false and asserts that that which brings the human soul into existence must be an intellect.³¹ However, he rejects the position of those who assert that the cause of human souls is the Avicennan Active Intellect.³² He presents their argument as follows: human souls cannot be entities caused by the Necessarily Existent (*ma'lūlāt wājib al-wujūd*) since it is absolutely unique and transcends all

²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, pp. 263–265.

³⁰ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 265.

³¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 265.

³² Compare Rāzī, *Sharḥ ‘Uyūn al-ḥikma*, 2, 281–284, observed by Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, p. 118, fn. 45.

multiplicity (*fard munazzah ‘an jihāt al-kathra*) and thus there cannot issue from it a multiplicity of entities caused by it; therefore the intellects which govern the nine celestial spheres cannot be entities directly caused by the Necessarily Existent—nor indeed can humans be. Thus, they—meaning the Avicennists—reason that that which brings human souls into being is “the last intellect which governs that which lies beneath the sphere of the Moon, namely the Active Intellect.”³³ Rāzī, however, rejects the *ex uno unum* principle—that only one thing can issue from one thing.³⁴ In doing so he opens up the possibility that human souls derive from the celestial spirits: “it is not impossible (*lā yamtani*) that it is the spirits which govern the bodies of the planets and the celestial spheres which bring about the existence of rational souls.”³⁵

Furthermore, he says:

When we say that these human souls belong to different species (*anwā‘ mukhtalifa*), it is not impossible (*lam yamtani*) that some could be the effects (*ma‘lūlāt*) of the sphere of Saturn, whilst others could be effects of the sphere of Jupiter, and so on and so forth. Also, it is not impossible (*lā yamtani*) that one group may <comprise> effects caused by the spirit that governs Sirius (*al-shi‘rā al-yamāniyya*), whilst another group <comprises> effects caused by the spirit which governs one of the other heavenly bodies of the fixed stars.³⁶

Each state of perfection realised by the human soul is the result of the influence of that human soul’s cause, the perfections of which are more complete in their realisation. He says:

Each <state of> perfection realised in that which is caused (*ma‘lūl*) is an effect (*athar*) from <its> cause (*‘illa*). The perfection of a state is realised in the cause and then that which arises (*al-hāṣil*) on account of it in that which is caused (*al-ma‘lūl*) is like a weak effect (*athar ḍa‘if*) in respect of the <original> perfection. And so it is for this reason that the Masters of the Talismans named the spirits, which are the origin (*mabda*) of a certain group of human souls, the “Perfect Nature” (*al-ṭibā‘ al-tāmm*), because, being the principle (*al-aṣl*), <when> an attribute (*ṣifa*) <inheres> in it, it is complete and perfect (*tāmma kāmila*); whilst when it inheres in that which the <Perfect Nature> produces (*al-natā‘ij*), it is weak and deficient (*qalīla nāqiṣa*). The relationship of this substance, which is the cause, to that which it produces is as the relationship of the father to his children, or of the principle to its subsidiary. And just as the inclination (*injidhāb*) of the father to his

33 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 266. Shihadeh observes that Rāzī rejects the entire notion of the Active Intellect (see his *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, p.188, fn. 45).

34 See Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol 4, pp. 381–389 for Rāzī’s refutation of the argument “that only one thing can issue from one thing”.

35 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 266.

36 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 266.

children is greater than to those other than his children, so it is not impossible that the concern of each celestial spirit for human souls, which are for them like children, is more complete than their concern for that which other spirits produce. It is for this reason that the Masters of Talismans say: “my perfect nature informed me of such-and-such and guided me to such-and-such.”³⁷

Rāzī says that this argument for the Perfect Nature merely establishes its possibility but can make no stronger claims on certainty: “Know that the truth is that this kind of argument (*hādihā al-naw‘ min al-kalām*) contains nothing but speech about that which is merely probable (*laysa fihi illā bayān mujarrad al-iḥtimāl*).”³⁸

Having established that the human soul is indeed an abstracted substance,³⁹ and then that its cause is an abstracted substance; and having disproved and dismissed all competing theories along the way, Rāzī’s reader will be forgiven for expecting that he would now produce a proof which establishes, with some degree of certainty, that the Perfect Nature is the cause of the human soul. But, as his epistemological introduction to *al-Maṭālib* observes, in the pursuit of metaphysical understanding, we must content ourselves with conclusions that are at best the most “apt and probable”; and the higher the metaphysical truths we pursue, the more tentative those “probable” conclusions must be. To increase confidence in such conclusions, spiritual unveiling is required: to discover the nature of the self, theology must yield to Ṣūfism. Thus, he says: “If the lords of unveiling and the masters of spiritual witnessing (*arbāb al-mukāshafāt wa-aṣḥāb al-mushāhadāt*) happen to undergo immediate experience (*tajārib*) which strengthens this possibility, then belief (in the reality of the Perfect Nature) is also strengthened.”⁴⁰

So, to be sure of the reality of the Perfect Nature, it must be the object of immediate experience. This can only be achieved by means of a noetic connection established by spiritual exertion, just as the Sabians of *al-Sirr* aver.

11.6 The Perfect Nature and Spiritual Discipline

Having established in his introduction to *al-Maṭālib* that the majority of theological and metaphysical investigations will yield nothing more than “apt and probable” conclusions, Rāzī explores a second means by which such knowledge may

37 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, pp. 266–267.

38 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 267.

39 See generally the second treatise of *al-Maṭālib* 7.

40 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 267.

be pursued, namely the method of spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*): by purifying the heart and focusing on nothing but God, divine illumination may lead the aspirant to certainty when the discursive method has failed.⁴¹ Thus where discursive reasoning may eliminate as impossible a number of views on a particular issue leaving but one probable position, divine illumination may provide corroboration for it when “reflection and inference” have failed to provide it with the apodictic demonstrative proof necessary for certainty. Later we shall see how only spiritual unveiling can confirm the Perfect Nature as the correct account of the origin of the human soul. The path of spiritual discipline involves:

Voiding the heart of everything except the remembrance of God, for the substance of the soul insofar as it exists in its original state and innate natural disposition (*al-jibilla al-aṣliyya wa'l-gharīza al-ḥiyya*), is possessed of a passionate love for the presence (*ḥaḍra*) of the Divine Splendour. However, when it becomes attached to the body it becomes preoccupied with corporeal delights and base pleasures; its immersion in their pursuit becomes an obstacle which prevents it from inclining towards the original home (*al-waṭn al-aṣlī*), the essential centre (*al-markaz al-dhātī*). If man exerts his utmost in the elimination of these <corporeal> accidents (*'awāriḍ*) then, whilst the soul retains its original necessary concomitants (*lawāzim aṣliyya*), the veiling dust and obstructing cover will be lifted. Then the light of God's splendour will become apparent.⁴²

Spiritual discipline is therefore a means of attaining divinely inspired knowledge that is complementary to rather than alternative to the method of demonstration and logical proof. Indeed, discursive reasoning plays a role in preserving from error the soul engaged in the way of spiritual discipline, for instance, by disabusing the aspirant of the mistaken belief that a certain truth or spiritual state marks the end of the journey: for, in reality the journey continues without end. In fact, Rāzī cautions against the path of spiritual discipline without the guidance of discursive reason. He says:

If the man who is engaged in spiritual discipline has not also embarked on the path of reflection and inference (*al-naẓar wa'l-istidlāl*) then perhaps in the levels of spiritual discipline he might experience powerful unveilings and overwhelming states and become certain that these states are the ultimate unveilings, the highest levels; this might become an obstacle preventing him from arriving at the goal. If, however, he is practised in the path of reflection and inference, and he distinguishes between a <spiritual> station that is impossible from that which is possible, then he will be secure from this error. So, if a man has reached perfection in the path of reflection and inference, and is then bestowed perfection in the path of purification and spiritual discipline, then his soul will be on the principle of his innate disposition (*kānat nafsuḥi fī mabda' al-ḥiyya*), perfectly suited to

⁴¹ See Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, pp. 199–200.

⁴² Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 1, p. 58.

these spiritual states; such a man would have scaled the gnostic paths of ascent to the furthest limits. It has been related that Aristotle once said: “I used to drink but <my thirst> was never quenched. But when I drank from this ocean it was quenched such that I would never thirst again.” Mere speech cannot explain these spiritual states; they are beyond the reach of words. He who has not tasted does not know. He who has not witnessed cannot affirm their truth. And God knows best the Unseen.⁴³

Detachment from the physical world and sensual stimuli is an essential means of disciplining the soul such that it can become receptive to spiritual illumination which acts as an adjunct to discursive reasoning. It is one of the chief means by which a man may establish connection with his perfect nature. In *al-Sirr*, spiritual discipline, the erasing of physical desire and the magnification of the perfect nature induces its appearance.⁴⁴ So in *al-Maṭālib* 8, concerning the Perfect Nature, Rāzī says: “when in a state of purity and discipline, <the rational soul> is drawn towards the celestial spirit, which is its perfect nature, its original father <then> from that perfect nature the essence of the soul will be imbued with a power by which it will be made great and its effect powerful.”⁴⁵

The Perfect Nature is: “the cause for the coming to be of knowledge and moral character in the substance of the human soul.”⁴⁶ Since knowledge can only be perfected by way of connection with the Perfect Nature from which illumination is received; and since this connection is impossible without the purification of the soul, spiritual discipline becomes necessary to the pursuit of knowledge and the perfection of theoretical capacity.

11.7 The Perfect Nature and the Epistemological Ascent

When we encounter the doctrine of the perfect nature in *al-Maṭālib*, its philosophical implications have been woven seamlessly into Rāzī’s epistemology and theory of soul. It is to the introduction of this work that we now turn our attention. As we shall see, the influence of the concept in its epistemological discussion is subtle but does not elude the scrutiny of the careful reader.

After introducing the “science of the divine” (*‘ilm ilāhī*) as the most noble of all sciences, Rāzī chastens the reader’s intellectual ambition for certainty therein with four robust proofs which assert that it is impossible to attain certainty in theology.

⁴³ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 1, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁴ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mīrẓā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated), p. 114.

⁴⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 144.

⁴⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 267.

Instead Rāzī advocates for the humbler aim of contentment with that which is “most probable and apt” (*al-awlā wa’l-akhlaq*).⁴⁷ The first and fourth of these proofs are particularly illuminating for our understanding of the Perfect Nature.⁴⁸

The first asserts that the most apparent and fundamental knowledge man can possess is that of himself and his own special essence (*dhātuḥu al-makḥṣūṣa*). He who would know a thing must first know himself as one who knows; knowledge of himself as one who knows must be preceded by knowledge of his own special essence. Therefore, knowledge of his special essence is the most fundamental of all knowledge. Rāzī distils the arguments concerning the man’s special essence to four basic positions: (1) it is simply the bodily structure that we perceive (*al-haykal al-mushāhad*); (2) it is a body within this structure; (3) it is an attribute of this structure; (4) it is a substance abstracted from the body. Seeing that the debates between these four positions are interminable and defy resolution, Rāzī concludes that even this most fundamental knowledge is steeped in obscurity.⁴⁹ Man is thus trapped in an epistemological bind: he cannot know anything unless he knows himself as a knower; he cannot know himself as a knower unless he knows his own special essence. Yet he cannot know his own special essence unless he knows its cause. Knowledge of his cause would thus appear to be the key to knowledge. We have already established in *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib* the cause (*‘illa*) of the human soul as the Perfect Nature. It can thus be inferred that connection with this spirit is essential to the attainment of certainty in metaphysical truths.

The fourth proof which Rāzī deploys in his argument in favour of humbler claims to theological knowledge is grounded in the assertion that those who are able to attain such insights are rare indeed. He begins his proof by listing three possible approaches to knowledge: (1) inferring the effect by means of the cause (*istidlāl bi’l-‘illa ‘alā al-ma’lūl*); (2) inferring something by means of that which is equal to it (*istidlāl bi’l-musāwī ‘alā al-musāwī*); (3) inferring the cause by means of the effect (*istidlāl bi’l-ma’lūl ‘alā al-‘illa*). He rejects as redundant, for obvious reasons, the first two approaches as methods for attaining knowledge of God, leaving only the last, inferring the cause by means of the effect. With this last approach to knowledge, the investigator of truth (*al-muḥaqqiq*):

[. . .] ascends from <knowledge of> the effect to <knowledge of> the influencer and from created being to the Creator (*yaṣ‘ud min al-athar ilā al-mu’aththir wa-yantaqil min al-makhl-*

⁴⁷ See Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, pp.189–199 for a thorough treatment of these arguments.

⁴⁸ The first argument is to be found in *al-Maṭālib* 1, pp. 42–46; the fourth on pp. 51–52.

⁴⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 1, p. 42. These four positions are explored in greater detail in *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 35–42.

ūq ilā al-khāliq). The human rational soul occupies the last rank of sanctified abstracted entities (*al-mawjūdāt al-mujarrada al-muqaddasa*) [. . .] Since this is the case, it must ascend (*tatarraqā*) from knowledge of itself to knowledge of its cause, and from knowledge of its cause to knowledge of the cause of its cause. Thus does it ascend, rank by rank until it reaches finally to the presence of the essentially Necessary Being, as God says in the Divine Book: {and that the final end is unto thy Lord};⁵⁰ {and surely unto God all things come home};⁵¹ and as He said: {He is the First and the Last.}⁵² The Real (*al-Ḥaqq*, [i.e., God]) is the first at the <beginning of process of> descent from the Reality to creation and the last at the <process of> the ascent from creation to the Reality. And since the intermediary levels are numerous, their ranks being hidden from the ken of human intellects, the states of those intermediary levels being different, just as the ranks of their lights, their domination (*qahr*) and power are different; and since the power of the rational human soul to ascend these ranks is weak, then it must of course follow that most human souls will remain on one of these intermediary levels. In fact, we say that most of creation remains in the nadir of sensible worlds. Only the rare exception escapes from the sensory world, ascending from the world of sensibles to the world of imagination (*khayālāt*); and, of those who reach the world of imagination, but few move to the world of intelligibles (*ma'qūlāt*). Then in the world of intelligibles, the ranks of the sanctified spirits are many. So of course it follows that when they reach the worlds of the illuminations of the intelligibles, most superior intellects vanish, becoming annihilated and dissolved in the illuminations of these sanctified spirits—with the exception of he who is aided by an overwhelming power and a divine soul (*naḥs ilāhiyya*) which ascends from the ginger of Mars, to the sweet wine (*salsabīl*) of Jupiter, to the camphor (*kāfir*) of Saturn; then, has he risen over all, gained ascendancy over everything, and reached the <divine> presence which has been sanctified of all concomitants of contingency and the mutability of coming to be (*lawāḥiq al-imbān wa-ghiyār al-ḥudūth*) [. . .]; thus does he rejoice in His saying: {and their Lord shall give them to drink a pure draught}⁵³—namely the pure draught that purifies them of all contingency and coming to be. And He reveals to him the threshold of the Essentially Necessary (*al-wujūb bi'l-dhāt*). When you know this, it becomes apparent that few are the human spirits that can rejoice in even an atom of the World of Divine Splendour (*‘ālam al-jalāl*).⁵⁴

Rāzī's description of the journey of theological investigation is striking for its planetary allusions and rhetorical language of ascent, the Islamic paradigm for which is the Prophet's *mi'rāj*—his celestial ascent through the heavens. We would not be straying into fanciful speculation to assume that, when writing it, the Sabian planetary ascent cannot have been far from his mind. It posits a tripartite cosmos: the world of sensibilia; the world of the imagination; and the world of intelligibles, the levels of which are beyond enumeration. The complete theological ascent follows the chain of effect and effector, inferring the latter by

50 Qur'ān 53: 42.

51 Qur'ān 42: 53.

52 Qur'ān 57: 3.

53 Qur'ān 76: 21.

54 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhi*, vol. 1, pp. 51–52.

means of the former, scaling all three worlds, beginning from the world of sensibilia. Just as in *al-Sirr*, the Perfect Nature is identified in *al-Maṭālib* as the cause and producer of the effect of the human soul. Knowledge of the Perfect Nature guarantees knowledge of one's essence, and thus of the self as the knower. In this way, certainty in knowledge becomes possible. Noetic connection with this celestial spirit, established by rigorous spiritual discipline, is the *sine qua non* of embarking on the ascent through the spheres towards metaphysical knowledge, to the uppermost limit of philosophical perfection.

The introduction of *al-Sirr* declares that the aim of occult practice is the attainment of the noblest knowledge and power. If the ultimate aim of the human soul is to attain perfection in both knowledge and power, then the question arises: does the Perfect Nature, the celestial soul from which the human soul derives, pursue an aim in itself? In other words, what is the purpose of the movement of the stars? The answer is to be found in the last treatise of *al-Maṭālib* 7.

It begins with a robust defence of the doctrine that the heavenly bodies and celestial spheres are living rational beings, rejecting the classical *kalām* position which maintained the contrary position.⁵⁵ For this purpose, he deploys the same eight arguments that he uses in *al-Sirr*.⁵⁶ He asserts that celestial souls are substances abstracted from corporeality, possessed of particular as well as universal perception and volition. Moreover, they know their maker and desire by their motion his worship.⁵⁷ Examining the issue of why their motion is circular, he outlines and rejects four separate positions which explain it as natural, concurring with the Avicennans who maintain that circular motion is the most perfect motion, and that their motion is volitional and with purpose (*gharaḍ*).⁵⁸ He argues that the aim of their circular motion is to obtain higher perfections but dismisses the position of Avicenna who argues that, in attempting to actualise by their motion the infinity of potential stellar configurations, the perfections which they seek are corporeal (*jismānī*) in nature.⁵⁹ Rather, Rāzī argues as “probable” (*muḥtamal*) that they seek the perfection of their own souls. There are three aspects to this perfection by way of motion: life; knowledge and intellect. Life, Rāzī observes, is characterised by light, motion, transparency, and subtlety: the perfection of these characteristics is the measure of the perfection

55 For Rāzī's *kalām* refutation (*radd*) of the Sabians in *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl fī dirāya al-uṣūl*, ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Laṭīf Fūda (Beirut: Dār al-Dhakhā'in, 2015), vol. 1, pp. 505–511.

56 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 110–114.

57 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 355.

58 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, pp. 358–359.

59 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 360.

of life.⁶⁰ Knowledge, as acquired by human cogitation involves the movement of pneuma in his brain; knowledge as acquired by the celestial souls involves the perfection of their infinite circular motion.⁶¹ As for intellect, Rāzī adopts what he reports is the position of the astrologers:

There is no doubt that the celestial movements are causes for the order of this world. This being the case, they say: “the perfection of the state of possible beings is the imitation of God to the extent that human potential <allows>.” It is with this meaning <in mind> that the master of the sacred law said: “Adopt the moral traits of God.” And it has been transmitted that the first philosophers have said: “Philosophy is the imitation of God to the extent that human potential [allows].” There can be no doubt that this imitation is indeed a lofty and noble state. And since, in respect of their knowledge, gnosis, and virtue, the condition of the celestial spheres is more perfect than the human, then to the extent of their potential, their realisation of perfection is more fitting. Whilst their motions secure the ordering of the lower world, their principle aim is not care for lower beings; rather it is the imitation of God insofar as He is the principle of order, goodness and mercy.⁶²

Rāzī’s speculation, however, does not halt at the celestial spheres. The essences of celestial souls, as well as their perfections, are merely possible: they too require an influencer (*mu’aththir*) and a cause. And if the cause of the human soul cannot be anything other than an abstracted substance, then so it must be the case for the celestial soul: just as human souls cannot be directly caused by the Necessary Being, which transcends all multiplicity, so too the proximate cause of the celestial soul’s existence cannot be God, but an intellect abstracted from all corporeality. It is from this intellect that it derives all its perfection by way of its eternal motion, driven by a yearning to imitate its cause so that it might imitate God.⁶³

And so, we are now in a more informed position to appreciate the significance of the parting advice with which *al-Sirr* concludes: “as for him who seeks knowledge and the perfect philosophy (*al-falsafa al-tamma*), he should invoke his perfect nature.⁶⁴

60 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, pp. 361–362.

61 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 362.

62 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 363.

63 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 375.

64 Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164.

Chapter 12

Concluding Remarks

12.1 Rāzī, Sabianism and the Perfected Man

In philosophising on the talismanic occult science in *al-Sirr al-maktūm*, Rāzī theorised, in a profound and engaging way on how it was experienced on the cognitive level; on the spiritual discipline that it demanded; on the knowledge it required; and on the mysteries of the ensouled universe that its practice could reveal. He adapted Avicennan psychology to account for how the Sabian, steeped in natural philosophy, astrology and medicine, and combining the epistemological methods of empiricism and inspiration, might expand the horizons of knowledge and condition the state of his soul to perform astral ritual, to draw down the power of the celestial spheres into a talisman—either a metal idol or ring, or the very person of the practitioner—to affect change in the sub-lunary world, in ways that run contrary to the empirical norm.

No product of nature or human artifice was irrelevant to what was simultaneously a spiritual, a scientific, and a philosophical approach to embodied sub-lunary existence, every aspect of which participated in a complex web of celestial significance, the secrets of which were disclosed by the investigator's celestial spirit instructor, his heavenly father—his perfect nature. Its tutelary role in the ritual of planetary ascent was crucial to the aspirant's success which, if realised, yielded the arcana of the celestial spheres and rendered the heavenly bodies subject to this command.

Like the Avicennan prophet, the person of the Sabian aspirant became almost a god. But it was in explaining the Sabian affirmation of the Perfect Nature that Rāzī's theorising on the talismanic science sharply diverged from the Avicennan cosmology and psychology that he was adapting. For, in the Sabian cosmos, it was the outermost sphere—the Absolute Giver (*al-mu'fi al-muṭlaq*)—that was the metaphysical efficient cause of the multiplicity of natural kinds in the sublunary world: not the Avicennan Active Intellect that was co-ordinated with the lunar sphere. Moreover, it was the celestial Perfect Nature that was the origin of a discrete group of human souls; humanity was not the unity in species that Avicenna claimed, but a composite of numerous, essentially distinct groups, each deriving from its own perfect nature. Moreover, it was visions of the Perfect Nature, often in a hypnagogic state, that revealed insights and hidden truths about the cosmos, enabling the individual soul to perfect philosophy and become fully realised.

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In his major philosophical and theological works subsequent to *al-Sirr*, Rāzī set himself the task of deconstructing Avicennan cosmology, epistemology and psychology. His ultimate aim was to replace them, as he did in his final theological-philosophical summa *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-ilm al-ilāhi*, with an alternative theory of science, which could account for the soul’s theoretical perfection. This theory of science integrated analogical reasoning (*qiyās*), empiricism (*tajriba*), and inspiration (*ilhām*), whilst safeguarding the exclusivity of prophethood from the perceived relativising effect of Avicennism. It encompassed the sublime aims of metaphysics and the practical sciences relating to the celestial and sublunary worlds, including astrology and medicine. In analysing the theoretical passages of *al-Sirr al-maktūm*, and surveying Rāzī’s discussion on prophethood in *al-Maṭālib*, we have been afforded key insights into how he erected a soteriology for an intellectual elite that harmonised science with the aims of religion and, as we shall consider presently, affirmed the abiding endurance, throughout each historical cycle (*dawr*), of a spiritual elite over which presided the perfected man.

So, to appreciate the distinct topography of this Rāzian soteriology, let us remind ourselves of the Avicennan landscape that Rāzī set out to reshape. For Avicenna, the last of the ten emanated supracelestial intellects—the Active Intellect—played three roles: (1) it was the metaphysical efficient cause both of matter in the terrestrial world and of the forms that constitute the multiplicity of natural kinds that inhere therein; (2) it was the originating principle of the unity that is the human species; and (3) it was the cause of the full actualisation of the human intellect and its theoretical perfection. In his epistemologically dualistic framework, a complex of multiple internal senses, seated in the physical brain, empowered the soul to receive particular sense data. Under the direction of the immaterial intellect, the process of abstraction (*tajrīd*) stripped them of their concomitants, and through cogitation, or a highly developed philosophical intuition (*ḥads*), the human soul might be primed to receive universals from the Active Intellect, the agent of its theoretical perfection.

This theory laid the ground for the Avicennan formulation of prophethood, which accounted for: (1) extraordinary philosophical intuition; (2) the imagery of revelation and veridical dreams as the product of noetic connection—mediated by the human soul’s estimative faculty (*al-wahm*)—with the celestial souls; and (3) thaumaturgy through the estimative faculty’s operative power. Each property could be exhibited to varying degrees by those who fell short of the superlative rank of prophets. And since humans were held to be a unity in species nothing essentially different distinguished prophets from the rest of humanity. All three aspects of prophethood found perfection in the great prophet, a microcosm parallel to the macrocosm: whose occult power, by means of a

prodigious estimative faculty, extends throughout the elemental world; who leads deficient souls to perfection; who alone commands legitimate political authority; who is God's deputy on earth; "who is almost a human god."

To lay the ground for his counter-Avicennan soteriology, Rāzī spent much of his career diligently undermining the foundation of Avicennan epistemology and psychology. Throughout the major theological and philosophical works that spanned his life, such as *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, *al-Mulakḥḥaṣ fī'l-ḥikma*, and *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma*, Rāzī attacked key aspects of the Avicennan construct, including: internal sense theory; intellection; *ḥads*; perception; the unity of humanity as a single species; and the Active Intellect.

When he dismantled the Active Intellect in *al-Maṭālib*, Rāzī distributed its cosmological and anthropological functions between two different celestial entities. Concurring with the talisman masters (*aṣḥāb al-ṭilasmāt*), he assigned its cosmological role to the outermost sphere: this he equates with the divine throne, which is governed by "the Universal Soul."¹ Thus, in *al-Maṭālib* 7, having treated of the highest rank of angels, which are cognate with the separated intellects (*al-'uqūl*) of Avicennan cosmology, he discusses those angels which act on the world of celestial bodies, the greatest of which is the divine throne:

Since the mightiest body is the throne, it follows that the mightiest of spirits that are connected to the world of bodies is the spirit that operates on the throne. It is not remote that what is called "the mightiest spirit" is this very spirit. It is also called the Universal Soul in the terminology of the philosophers, because the body of that soul is the divine throne. And all that occurs within the throne is as one of its parts, one of its branches. Similarly, the souls that govern those bodies are branches of that soul.²

This Sabian insight is one that is confirmed both by prophetic revelation, and the insights of the masters of spiritual unveiling (*aṣḥāb al-mukāshafāt*).³

The anthropological function of the Active Intellect he assigned to the celestial Perfect Nature. Since the Perfect Nature was an astral spirit that was the

¹ Reporting on their doctrine, he observes: "they affirmed that the throne has a spirit, namely the Universal Soul (*al-naḥs al-kullīyya*) the influence of which pervades all bodies that exist within this sphere: it is called the Most Mighty Spirit (*al-rūḥ al-a'zam*)," Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, 1987), vol. 7, p. 387. It is noteworthy that Rāzī refers not to the Sabians but to the "talisman masters," who co-ordinate their doctrines with Qur'anic verses, as though they were contemporary Muslim legatees of the Sabian science.

² Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 19. Note Rāzī's phrase "it is not remote," an indication that whilst he finds this theory plausible and likely, for him it falls short of apodicticity.

³ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, pp. 20–21.

origin and efficient cause of an entire class of human souls, there were as many such astral spirits as there were human classes. And just as the efficient cause of each class was unique, so the differences exhibited by different classes of human soul were essential, and the prophetic class remained distinct from the rest of humanity. This was an alternative account for: the exclusivity of prophethood in both its epistemological and thaumaturgical aspects; the veridical dreams and waking visions which lesser humans could receive; and the prodigies which they could perform. The Perfect Nature complemented, with directly revealed insights, the scientist's application of rational deduction, observation, and analogical reasoning, to facilitate his acquisition of the universal sciences and the application of the practical sciences.

Rāzī does not, however, explicitly state either the identity of the celestial spirit that is the ontological source of the prophet's soul; nor does he state the celestial body that it governs. But is it possible to infer from the data available who and what they might be?

When he came to write *al-Maṭālib* towards the end of his life, he had fully integrated into his philosophical-theological synthesis key doctrines which he attributed to the Sabians in *al-Sirr al-maktūm*. Though they fall short of apodictic certainty, as presented in *al-Maṭālib*, seven philosophical positions remain consistent: (1) the celestial souls as movers of the spheres, (2) the outermost sphere as the metaphysical efficient cause of encosmic change; (3) the validity of the talismanic craft as a natural science; (4) a teleological approach to ethics that enshrined the human soul's angelomorphic perfection; (5) an anthropology that viewed humanity not as a single unified species but as a multiplicity of distinct groups; (6) belief in the Perfect Nature as the origin of the human soul, and its spiritual and philosophical guide; and (7) an epistemological celestial ascent in the pursuit of this perfection. Doctrines (2), (5) and (6) are distinctly un-Avicennan.

But in importing these philosophical positions, Rāzī subordinated them all, just as he did in *al-Sirr* (see chapter 10), to two adamantine theological imperatives: asserting God as a volitional agent (*fā'il mukhtār*); and God as all-powerful (*qādir*), whose power (*qudra*) extends to the existentialization of, and change in, all possible existents. He indeed deploys, throughout *al-Maṭālib*, that constellation of words usually associated with the language of Avicennan secondary causality, including *ta'thīr*, *'illa*, and *sabab*, to acknowledge the "influence" of the outermost sphere, mediated by heavenly bodies, on sublunary phenomena—for, who could deny the correlation between solar motion and the seasons, between lunar motion and tides? More importantly, without preserving at least a notional structure of quasi-causal chains, the cosmological argument for God's existence is rendered impotent.

Nevertheless, he appears to minimise—if not entirely strip them of—their causal necessity, and they become signs that encode the patterning of divine action in the world, God being the only real cause *sensu stricto*. But the matter is yet further complicated by the fact that Rāzī's is not an inanimate cosmos: the heavenly bodies are driven by celestial souls—or spirits in the language of theology—possessed of volition; of desire for circular motion mimetic of their supracelestial counterparts; and of knowledge of the sublunary events that their motions occasion. We are thus presented with a matrix of seeming oppositions: divine determinism *versus* celestial and human free will; divine omnipotence *versus* apparent secondary causes. Sadly, beyond the scope of this study, only a detailed analysis of Rāzī's use in *al-Maṭālib* of what, *prima facie*, appears to be the language of secondary causality can yield an accurate evaluation of Rāzī's success in achieving a *coincidentia oppositorum*.⁴

It is the concern with celestial secondary causality that motivates Rāzī's disavowal, in the introduction to *al-Sirr*, of “all that is opposed to the faith and the peace of certainty,” and his exhortation to the reader, in the conclusion, to be “firm in his resolve in the religious law (*sharī'a*) and sound in belief concerning it” (see section 1.6). For, *al-Sirr* reveals to the reader the occult pattern of quasi-causal chains that forms the matrix of reality in the celestial and sublunary worlds. Are we to read this advice as an earnest and sincere exhortation, or as a subterfuge that conceals Rāzī's crypto-Sabianism?

We will conclude our exploration of Rāzī's philosophising of the occult by addressing the four salient questions that we have just raised: (1) why should we treat at face value his exhortation to the reader to be steadfast in his observance of the *sharī'a*? (2) How does his deep engagement with the Sabian science serve his grand soteriological project? (3) Can we infer from Rāzī's writings the identity of the prophet's celestial perfect nature and the heavenly body that it governs? (4) What was the political context in which Rāzī formulated his construct of the perfected man?

⁴ For such an analysis, we will have to await the fruits of John Moffatt's doctoral research, entitled “Secondary Causality in the Mature Writings of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” supervised by Ayman Shihadeh, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. On Rāzī's theory of human action, see Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 64 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 13–44. We shall explore Rāzī's position on the celestial souls shortly.

12.2 Rāzī, the Crypto-Sabian?

Let us address our mind to the first question. To identify a more explicit prohibition on the invocation of the heavenly bodies, we turn to another early work by Rāzī: his encyclopaedic Persian *Jāmi' al-'ulūm*, written for the Khwārazm-Shāh Tekish sometime between 571/1175 and 574/1179—the same period during which Rāzī composed *al-Sirr*, when he was endeavouring to secure stable patronage⁵ Referring to the ancient Persian kings (*mulūk-i 'ajam*), and their practice of addressing the Sun for the fulfilment of a particular need, Rāzī comments, in his chapter on talismans: “as for our religion, faith and sacred law, this is forbidden (*ḥarām*); indeed if someone were to perform these practices, he would become an infidel and would be considered an apostate.” Indeed, he cautions: “though a worldly objective may be fulfilled, it is nevertheless corrupting to the religion—and we seek refuge in God from selling the afterlife for this world.”⁶

On this curious passage, two observations might be made. Firstly, Rāzī makes an implicit concession, arising from his conviction that the talismanic craft is in fact a science, to the claim that addressing the Sun in such a ritualised manner might indeed be efficacious for securing a worldly need. And secondly, his condemnation of the practice is expressed using the language of the law. One might have expected him to anathematise the practice as the most egregious of all enormities—*shirk* (associating partners with God). Although he avers that, from the perspective of *shari'a*, such an act would render the one who performs it an infidel, he refrains from providing an argument based on pure reason as to why this must be the case: if it be due to the fact that such an act would entail the belief, on the part of the suppliant, in the Sun as a secondary cause that acts independently of the Creator's will and power, then the matter is clear.⁷

Less clear would be the status of the one who addresses the Sun to achieve a particular end, in the belief that the Sun does not act independently of divine will and power, but rather in conformity with the empirical norm (*'āda*) that describes the pattern of divine action in the world. It is even less clear as to why it might be licit for a suppliant maintaining this very belief to petition, for

5 For this date range, see Eşref Altaş, “Fahreddin er-Rāzī'nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi,” in *İslâm düşüncesinin dönüşüm çağında Fahreddin er-Rāzī*, eds. Ömer Türker and Osman Demir (İstanbul: İSAM Yayınları, 2013): pp. 104–105.

6 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm (Sittīnī)*, ed. Sayyid Āl-i Dāvūd (Tehran: 2003), p. 331.

7 It is for this reason that, in *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, in the heresiological section entitled “those who fall beyond the pale of Islam,” Rāzī includes his refutation of the Sabians immediately after his refutation of the Avicennans. See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl fī dirāyat al-uşūl*, ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Laṭīf Fūda (Beirut: Dār al-Dhakhā'ir, 2015), vol. 1, pp. 505–510.

instance, the Khwārazm-Shāh, for patronage, and yet illicit for the same suppliant to call on the Sun to render the *shāh* favourably disposed towards answering his need.

Such an argument based upon pure reason, however, is not forthcoming in *al-Sirr*. Nor does Rāzī's refutation of astrolatry in *al-Maṭālib* assist us. In *al-Maṭālib* 7, Rāzī reasons that the existence of God is an apodictic certainty, established by the demonstrative cosmological argument that reasons from possible existents to the Necessarily Existent; since the *ex uno unum* principle is demonstrably false, it is not impossible that the Necessarily Existent is the originating principle for all possible existents. Thus, knowledge that the Necessarily Existent must be worshipped is beyond dispute. By way of contrast, the proof that establishes the existence of the celestial spirits is uncertain; and even if it were demonstrable apodictically, their influence on this world is not. To worship the celestial spirits is thus to abjure what is known with all certainty in favour of that which is unknown—an affront to reason.⁸ He follows this with a second argument: assuming their existence, and their causal efficacy in the aversion of affliction and procurement of benefit, since they are nevertheless dependent on the Necessarily Existent, it is more “apt” (*awlā*) to direct worship to the latter whose power is far stronger.⁹

Is Rāzī, in offering this second argument, merely striving to be exhaustive in making his point—or might he be anticipating a potentially devastating rejoinder to the first? For, in response to the first argument, a hypothetical interlocutor might respond that its force would be entirely neutralised were it possible to prove, to the level of apodictic certainty, the existence of the celestial spirits and their influence on this world. The objection is indeed well-founded. For, having considered the various arguments in relation to the celestial souls and their causal efficacy, Rāzī explicitly declares his own position thusly:

The position that I adopt (*al-mukhtār 'indī*): is that the celestial soul is a substance abstracted from corporeality and its relations. Moreover, it is characterised by universal and particular perception: it has cognisance of its Lord, and intends by its movements the worship of its Lord, Creator and Governor. With this assertion, all doubts and confusions vanish. From what we state, a <number of consequences> follow which are: that that which is called the Universal Soul is the soul of the greatest sphere; and that is because the other spheres exist inside the greatest sphere, being like parts of the greatest sphere, their souls being like powers that branch off from the soul of the greatest sphere, just as the powers that branch off from the rational soul, that exist in each of the specific organs

⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, pp. 391–392.

⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 392.

are like the products, effects, and branches of the substance of the rational soul. Thus, with what we state, is established that God's governance of the world of bodies only begins from the greatest sphere, which is the throne. This beginning only occurs by the mediation of this soul (*bi-wāsiṭat tilka al-nafs*), which is the celestial soul. As for the other celestial—and elemental—souls, they are its products, effects and progeny.¹⁰

In adopting this kind of “fractal cosmology,” that harmonises so closely with that of the talisman masters, Rāzī makes himself vulnerable to the very rejoinder of our hypothetical interlocutor presently under consideration. To understand why, we must remind ourselves of his proof for the Perfect Nature, as viewed in light of the general epistemological introduction to *al-Maṭālib*. We will recall that his method of inquiry exhaustively gathers and systematises all possible solutions for any given philosophical issue, and relies on a process of elimination to arrive at the correct solution. Sometimes, all potential solutions bar one can be eliminated; and yet, if the sole survivor of this rigorous process cannot be proven to the level of apodicticity, it must remain on the lower epistemic level of “the probable” (*muḥtamal*). When considering the question of the “cause” (*illa*) of the human soul, Rāzī eliminates a number of potential rival solutions, leaving but one: the Perfect Nature. Reason, however, can only go so far as to assert its reality as probable: to raise the epistemic level of this conclusion to that of certainty requires rigorous austerities and spiritual practice—much like those of the Sabians of *al-Sirr*—to induce an immediate visionary experience of the entity.

Our hypothetical interlocutor might therefore object to Rāzī's first refutation of astrolatry and argument in favour of worship of God alone, by observing: the method that is applicable to the process of discovering the truth of the Perfect Nature has equal applicability to the celestial spirits in general. And since Rāzī's reasoning relies on the premise that it is folly to abjure the worship of that which is known apodictically in favour of worshipping that which can only be known to a lesser epistemic degree, his argument becomes unstitched. It is for this reason that Rāzī requires a second ancillary argument to refute the soundness of astrolatry: worship of God is more “apt” than worship of the celestial spirits which are dependent on Him.

This is hardly the most resounding, purely reason-based argument in favour of uncompromising Islamic monotheism for which one might hope from the “renewer of the faith” in the twelfth century. So, in prohibiting the address-

10 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 355.

ing of the spirit of the Sun, Rāzī invokes the *sharī'a* to debar the believer from ever availing himself of precisely those means by which he can attain certainty in the existence of the celestial spirits and their influence on this world. Thus, Rāzī must be taken at face value when he declares as *ḥarām* this practice of the ancient Persian kings. It is imperative that he does so. For, someone bent on securing worldly advantage, occult power, or even just a numinous experience, might not be so easily deterred by Rāzī's purely reason-based argument, from succumbing to the seduction of astrology.

12.3 The Sabian Science and Rāzī's Soteriology

So, if Rāzī was not a crypto-Sabian, how did his deep engagement with the Sabian science serve his grand soteriological project? The close co-ordination in the respective angelologies of *al-Sirr*, *al-Maṭālib* and *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* provide compelling evidence that the Sabian science played an important role in configuring Rāzī's cosmological understanding. Earlier, we remarked on the remarkable congruity between Rāzī's depiction of the Sabian cosmology, the basic notion of the Sabian ascent ritual, the description of the epistemological ascent in the introduction to *al-Maṭālib*, and the *mi'rāj* of the Prophet (see section 11.7). A final consideration of this congruity will enrich our understanding of the significance of the Sabian science for his soteriological enterprise.

We will recall that in *al-Sirr* 3:4 Rāzī observes a close correspondence between the Sabian cosmology and that of the Islamic revelation, both of which perceive a plenitude of spirits governing the celestial spheres, as well as sublunary phenomena, including the clouds, the thunder and lightning, the daily sustenance of men, and the stewardship of the mountains and the seas. In his presentation of the cosmology of the talisman masters in *al-Maṭālib*, the list of sublunary phenomena is extended to include: deserts; areas of human habitation; plants; birds; insects; animals that graze; and beasts of prey.¹¹

In *al-Tafsīr*, this same vision deeply informs his mystical hermeneutic of the Islamic ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) through which the gnostic (*'arif*) re-enacts the Prophet's celestial ascent.¹² Like the Sabians of *al-Sirr*, Rāzī asserts, in *al-Tafsīr*,

¹¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliyah min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, p. 388.

¹² See Kaoru Aoyagi, "Spiritual Beings in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Cosmology with Special Reference to his Interpretation of the Mi'rāj," *Orient*, 41 (2006): 145–161.

the ontological superiority of the spiritual world (*'ālam al-rūḥāniyyāt*), of which the world of bodies is a mere shadow:

The near world (*'ālam al-dunyā*) is the world of impurity, whilst the world beyond (*'ālam al-ākhirā*) is the world of purity. The relation of the world beyond to the near world is as the root in relation to the branch, and the body in relation to the shadow. So, everything in the near world must have a root in the world beyond, for otherwise it would be a false mirage, a void phantasm. Everything in the world beyond must have its counterpart (*mithāl*) in the near world, for otherwise, it would be like the tree without fruit, the signified without the sign. So, the spiritual world (*'ālam al-rūḥāniyyāt*) is the world of lustre, light, resplendence, joy, rapture, and bliss.¹³

Rāzī's esoteric understanding of the ritual prayer performed by the *'arif* is as a mystical *mimesis* of the prophetic heavenly ascent, a flight from the corporeal world of sense perception, to the unseen world—the world of spirits (*'ālam al-arwāḥ*), the lowest level of which comprises the human.¹⁴ The human spirit is thus an isthmus between the corporeal and spiritual worlds. Addressing the spiritual aspirant who desires to be of the ranks of those “desirous of the divine countenance,” Rāzī provides the following guided meditation, advising him to:

[. . .] summon to your soul the presence of all creations of God the Exalted <that belong> to the world of bodies and of spirits, so that you embark from your own soul, summoning to your intellect the presence of your organs—both simple and composite—and all your natural, animal and human powers. Then, summon to your intellect the totality of all that is in this world, all species of minerals, plants and animals—human and non-human. Then include the seas, the mountains, hills and deserts, and the totality of all therein—of wondrous plants, animals, and the tiniest motes of dust. Then, ascend from them to the nearest heaven and its vast expanse. Continue ascending from heaven to heaven until you reach the Lote Tree of the Nethermost Boundary (*sidrat al-muntahā*), the Cushion, the Tablet, the Pen, the Garden, the Fire, the Footstool and the Mighty Throne. Then transition from the world of bodies to the world of spirits and summon to your intellect all lowly earthly spirits—both human and non-human; and summon <to your intellect> all the spirits connected with the mountains and the seas—just as the Messenger, upon whom be peace, spoke of the angel of the mountains and the angel of the seas. Then summon the angels of the nearest heaven,

13 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-mushtahar bi'l-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-Mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), vol. 1, p. 267. Compare the assertion of the masters of talismans in *al-Sirr*: “each form in this world has its archetype in the starless sphere (*kull šūra fi ḥādhā al-'ālam fa-lahā mithāl fi'l-falak*) and that earthly forms are subject to heavenly forms (*al-šumar al-suflīyya muṭī'a li'l-šumar al-'alawīyya*): serpents to Draco; scorpions to Scorpio; predatory animals to Leo and so on.” See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm* (Cairo: Mīrẓā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated), p. 18.

14 Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, pp. 278–279.

and the angels of all the seven heavens, as he, upon whom be blessings and peace, said: “in the heavens there is not even the space of a hand’s width in which an angel is not standing or sitting.”¹⁵ Summon <to your intellect> the thronging angels encircling the throne,¹⁶ and all the bearers of the throne and the footstool. Then, transition from them to that which lies beyond this world as He, the Exalted said: {and none knows the hosts of thy Lord but He}¹⁷ So when you summon <to your intellect> all these divisions of spiritual and corporeal beings, say: “God is greater (*Allāh akbar!*)”¹⁸

The corporeal world—the world of the senses—is a bridge to the world of the spirits. Autognosis being the point of departure in this journey, knowledge and experience of embodied existence, and the ontological connections between the lower and higher worlds, constitute the aspirant’s ladder to the latter. This entire elaborate meditation, which harmonises so closely with the spiritual cosmology we have encountered in *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib* is a preparatory exercise that precedes the very ritual formula by which the formal prayer (*al-ṣalāt*), as performed by the ‘*arif* as he raises his hands, is initiated. As Rāzī avers, “it is the intended meaning of his saying, at the beginning of the *ṣalāt*, ‘God is greater!’”¹⁹

The Sabian talismanic science discloses the intricate web of congeneric connections that link the corporeal to the spiritual world, and how the spirits of the latter mediate the influence, transmitted from the outermost sphere, on generation and corruption in the former. Brought into the preparatory cosmological meditation that is the very threshold of the ‘*arif*’s *ṣalāt*, it assists the aspirant in constructing the epistemological ladder by which he might traverse the boundary between the corporeal and spiritual worlds. Stripped bare of its astrolatry, Sabianism has now been restored to the purity of its original monotheism, and summoned by the Islamic philosopher-theologian to assist the ‘*arif* in his cosmological ascent to mystical knowledge of God.

12.4 The Prophet’s Perfect Nature

The ‘*arif*, in contemplating the bodies of the corporeal world, and the spirits of the higher world, might be prompted to reflect on the identity of the celestial

¹⁵ Rāzī uses a similarly worded *ḥadīth* to corroborate the Sabian belief in the plenitude of spirits that throng the heavens in *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

¹⁶ Qur’ān 39:75. Rāzī uses of the same Qur’ānic reference in his description of the talisman masters’ cosmology—see Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 7, pp. 387–388.

¹⁷ Qur’ān 74:31.

¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, pp. 283–284.

¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 284.

angelic perfect nature of the Prophet—and to ask which is the heavenly body that it governs?

Though falling short of the epistemic level of apodicticity, in *al-Tafsīr*, Rāzī affirms the doctrine of the Perfect Nature, which he attributes to the talisman masters. His challenge to anyone who might argue that it is incompatible with the *sharī'a* is robust. In case there were any doubt that Rāzī sees absolutely no conflict between what he, in *al-Sirr*, originally identified as a Sabian cosmological anthropological theory, and the Islamic revelation, the passage is here quoted in full:

The masters of the talismans are well-known for advocating this doctrine. It is for this reason that we observe them saying: “my perfect nature informed me (*akhbaranī ṭibā'ī al-tāmm*).” What they mean by the Perfect Nature is that for every human there is a celestial spirit which oversees the welfare of his endeavours, repelling from him afflictions and misfortunes. And since the ancient philosophers and the astrologers concur on this, how can it be deemed remote <from the perspective of> the *sharī'a*? Full investigation into the matter <concludes> that human spirits are different in substance and nature: some are good and some are evil; some have honour and others are vile; some are mighty in power and authority whilst others are weak and simple-minded. Just as this is the case with human spirits, so it is the case with celestial spirits. There is no doubt that, in every aspect and attribute, celestial spirits are stronger than human spirits. <In> every group of human spirits, each <member> shares in the same specific nature and special characterisation. And since each receives the tutelage of a celestial spirit which is similar in nature and specificity, then it is as though human spirits are the progeny of that celestial spirit. Since this is the case, the celestial spirit is a supporter for them in their endeavours, a guide to their welfare, a protector from all manner of misfortune. The philosophers who have undertaken thorough investigation advocate this doctrine. Since this is the case, we know that what is conveyed in the *sharī'a* is accepted by all. So how can one repudiate it <from the perspective> of the *sharī'a*?²⁰

Now, from a passage we have previously examined in *al-Maṭālib*, we know that the prophet is the divinely mandated legislator, whose: “[. . .] practical power exerts influence over the bodies of this world by various means of action. And that is what is meant by miracles.”²¹ Mirroring the hierarchical cosmologising language of *al-Maṭālib*, *al-Tafsīr* informs us that, being “obeyed” (*muṭā'a*) in the corporeal world, the prophet is the counterpart (*mithāl*) of “the obeyed” in the spiritual world:

Everything in the world beyond must have its counterpart (*mithāl*) in the near world, for otherwise, it would be like the tree without fruit, the signified without the sign. [. . .]

²⁰ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol.19, p. 21.

²¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 107.

There is no doubt that spirits vary in perfection and deficiency, and there must be one who is the most noble, lofty, perfect and resplendent. All others besides in this world are subject to his authority, command and prohibition, as He said {having power, with the Lord of the Throne, secure; obeyed (*muṭā*'), moreover trusty}.²² Furthermore, there must be in the near world one individual who is the noblest individual in this world—the most perfect, lofty and resplendent. All those besides him in this world are subject to his authority and command. So, the first one that is obeyed is the one who is obeyed in the spiritual world; the second one that is obeyed is the one who is obeyed in the corporeal world: the former is the one who is obeyed in the higher world; the latter is the one who is obeyed in the lower world. And since we have mentioned that the corporeal world is like the shadow of the spiritual world, and like its trace (*athar*), between these two figures that command obedience, there is <a relationship of> affinity, conjunction, and congenereity (*mulāqāt wa-muqārana wa-mujānasa*). The one who is obeyed in the world of spirits is the source, and the one who is obeyed in the world of bodies is the locus of <its> manifestation (*al-maẓhar*). The source is the angelic messenger; the manifestation is the human messenger—by their means is felicity in the world beyond and the near world made complete.²³

Here, Rāzī's language resonates strongly with that which he employs to describe the Perfect Nature in passages we have already encountered in *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib*. In equating “the obeyed” in the spiritual world with the referent of *Qur'ān* 81:19–20, which he elsewhere identifies with Gabriel²⁴—the angel of revelation—Rāzī's close reader is led to infer that the prophet's perfect nature is none other than Gabriel himself. And since he is associated with the Throne, we can only conclude that Gabriel is indeed “the mightiest spirit” that governs the outermost sphere.

12.5 Politics and the Perfected Man

Though *al-Sirr* was never explicitly dedicated to the Khwārazm-Shāh 'Alā' al-Dīn Tekish (see section 1.7), we can be sure that, at the very least, had he known of it, he surely would not have treated its theory of occult power—certainly worthy of the attention of any aspiring philosopher-king—with indifference.

Just as much as the Avicennan prophetological construct, Rāzī's theory, in *al-Maṭālib*, of the man perfected in both his theoretical and practical capacities, who derives his origin from a celestial spirit, whose practical power extends throughout the corporeal world, who leads a hierarchy of souls to perfection,

²² *Qur'ān* 81: 19–20.

²³ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 267.

²⁴ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, vol. 31, p. 74.

and who, moreover, implements the sacred law, had profound political implications, which would not have been lost on the rival dynasties of the eastern half of Īrānshahr—the Khwārazm-Shāhs and the Ghūrīds.²⁵ Rāzī's hierarchical anthropology in *al-Maṭālib* pressed ethnology into service of a pro-Īrānshahr political ideology:

Humanity comprises many types (*aṣnāf*), such as the Africans, the Indians, the Arabs, the Byzantines, the Franks and the Turks. The most superior of these and the closest to perfection are the inhabitants of the middle of the inhabitable clime: they are the inhabitants of the place known as Īrānshahr. This type, moreover, differs with respect to perfection and deficiency. There is no doubt that amongst them is an individual who is the most eminent and most perfect.²⁶

As we explored earlier (see section 11.3), this singular man straddles human-kind and angel-kind; mixes with the celestial angels from whom he learns; and can extend his practical capacity to exert influence over the entire world of bodies. Rāzī—the Sunnī theologian—co-ordinates this perfected individual with the Ṣūfī *quṭb* and the Shi'ī hidden *imām*, whose existence is the very objective of the world's existence:

There must be in every cycle (*dawr*) one individual who, in his theoretical and practical capacities, is the most eminent and the most perfect of mankind. The Ṣūfis call him the axis of the world. In this, they have spoken the truth insofar as he is the noblest being amongst the human inhabitants of the lower world; possessed of the theoretical capacity to acquire knowledge from the sanctified lights of the angelic world; possessed of the practical capacity to administer the corporeal world in the most beneficial manner. Moreover, that singular man is the most perfect individual to exist in that cycle (*dawr*): the principle objective (*al-maqṣūd al-aṣlī*) of this elemental world is the existence of that individual [. . .]. The Imāmi Shi'a call him the infallible *imām*, and perhaps the "lord of the age"²⁷ (*ṣāhib al-zamān*).

25 Frank Griffel speculates that the title of *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya* is in fact an allusion to the Khwārazm-Shāh 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad. He observes: "Given the fact that all parts of Fakhr al-Dīn's *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya* were completed under the reign of 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad one might, in fact, conjecture that this title is an allusion to him. Certainly Fakhr al-Dīn did not dedicate it openly to 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad. In the book he mentions the Ghūrīd Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad as a deceased 'great king', with whom he discussed subjects treated in *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya*, and he praises his virtue and generosity towards scholars." See Frank Griffel, "On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life and the Patronage He Received," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 18:3 (2007): pp. 313–344, at pp. 333–334.

26 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 105.

27 Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, pp. 106–107.

Appropriating language strikingly reminiscent of Nizārī Ismā‘īlī thought, Rāzī imagines the human past as hierohistory: a series of temporal cycles (*adwār*, sing., *dawr*) over each of which presides a perfected man, at whose hand a hierarchy of deficient souls strives towards perfection. He asserts:

Amidst the successive cycles (*al-adwār al-mutalāḥiqā*), there must occur one in which appears one man who is superior to the masters of every other cycle, each of whom is unique in his own time. The cycle that comprises this superior individual occurs but once in approximately every millennium. This individual is the greatest messenger, the honoured prophet, the bringer of the sacred law (*wāḍī‘ al-sharā‘i‘*), and the guide to the inner realities (*ḥaqā‘iq*). His relation to the other cyclical masters is as the relation of the Sun to the planets. Furthermore, there must occur for the masters of the cycles, one man who is the closest in virtue to the master of the cycle: the relation of the former to the latter is as the relation of the Moon to the Sun. He is the *imām* who occupies his station (*al-imām al-qā‘im maqāmahu*) who implements his sacred law.

Constellated in this intriguing passage is a number of quintessentially Nizārī Ismā‘īlī ideas: the notion of time comprising both minor cycles and major millennial cycles; the prophet as a figure who presides over each minor cycle; his deputy as the one who implements his law; the dichotomy between *sharā‘i‘* and *ḥaqā‘iq*.²⁸ However, just as he is careful to avoid the charge of crypto-astrology in *al-Sirr*, so is Rāzī careful to dispel any suspicion of crypto-Ismā‘īlism, by distinguishing his construct of the man of perfection from its older Nizārī Ismā‘īlī cognate. For, unlike the Ismā‘īlī imam, Rāzī’s man of perfection may not necessarily be aware of his status as the pinnacle of human perfection, and thus bears more affinity to the Ṣūfī *axis mundi*.²⁹

The encyclopaedia of the sciences, *Jāmi‘ al-‘ulūm*, written in the same period as *al-Sirr*, was Rāzī’s first work to contain chapters dedicated to, amongst other subjects, the occult sciences and political theory. Following al-Ghazālī, Rāzī presents what by then had become a standard argument on the need for centralised power: human society requires nourishment, clothes and shelter; the conflict that arises from the necessary interaction between those who serve these different needs must be avoided by means of governance; the survival of human society thus requires a king-emperor (*padshāh*) who must organise society into distinct strata, comprising: those who employ judgement; those who exercise agricultural and artisanal skills; and those who protect and guard the state. He advocated close co-operation between the *shāh* and the scholars of

²⁸ See Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 128–136.

²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, vol. 8, p. 106. Presumably, this limited kind of unawareness would not characterise the prophet.

religion, the former exercising his practical capacity to ensure the observance of law and order, the latter exercising their theoretical capacity to safeguard knowledge. These two domains are combined in the ruler that is the ideal representative of the Prophet: in the absence of such a figure, a morally imperfect caliph must serve to discharge the first of these two functions.³⁰

By way of contrast, the kind of power exercised by the perfected man in *al-Sirr*, is gained through spiritual discipline and mastery of Sabian natural philosophy, culminating in the subjugation of the heavenly bodies which yield to his command: it is a third domain of authority which, distinct from the exoteric domains of public order and religious knowledge, is exercised in a manner that is occult. The perfected man in *al-Maṭālib*, however, serves the esoteric role of bringing deficient human souls to perfection—a fourth domain of authority that is distinctly moral and spiritual, and articulated in Šūfi language. And since, in addition, he is possessed of a perfect theoretical capacity; implements the sacred law; and can act miraculously throughout the corporeal world, he unites the two domains of exoteric authority with the two domains of the esoteric.

What was the political backdrop to Rāzī's deep engagement with the Sabian talismanic science, his formulation of a counter-Avicennan propheticology, and the development of his ideas on power and authority? He lived in turbulent times, and he pursued patronage from centres of power that were by no means politically secure. As we have discussed, it was to the Khwārazm-Shāhs that he dedicated both *Jāmi' al-'ulūm* and his work on electional astrology *al-Ikhtiyārāt al-'Alā'iyya*. Their recourse to an aggressive use of the talismanic science against the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Nāṣir, through the services of the magician Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī (see section 1.7), is best understood in the context of "the sheer terror that the Mongol invasions had inspired in the inhabitants of eastern Islam."³¹

Militarily, the Khwārazm-Shāh 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad, the son of Tekish, was heavily reliant on unruly Kīpchak warriors, Central Asian nomads with a reputation for violent savagery and contempt for the settled Khwārazmian Muslim population they were tasked with defending against Mongol incursion. The Kīpchak warriors were also pagan—which was no doubt a propaganda gift to the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Nāṣir, a chief antagonist of the Khwārazm-Shāhs, whose expansion west threatened his project of reasserting caliphal power through a complex web of alliances

30 Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 129.

31 Isabel Miller "Occult Science and the Fall of the Khwārazm-Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn," *Iran* 39 (2001): pp. 249–256, at p. 249.

with local rulers. His claim to authority, that was on a par with that of a Shī'ī *imām*, was fortified not only by a sophisticated espionage apparatus, but also by his alliance with the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs who, purporting at the time to be Sunnīs, had established a strong reputation for dissimulation, for assassinations, and—most importantly for our consideration—for occult knowledge.³² 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad's fear of Nizārī Ismā'īlī assassination, commissioned by al-Nāṣir, was corroborated at one point by captured caliphal correspondence. Unable to rely on Sunnī assistance on account of his hostility towards the caliph of Baghdād, he adopted a pro-Shī'ī policy, availing himself of loyal religious scholars to issue a *fatwā* declaring al-Nāṣir to be an illegitimate ruler who had usurped the right of the house of 'Alī.³³

Given their preparedness to use a talisman weapon against the 'Abbāsīd caliph, it appears not unlikely that Rāzī would have discerned the Khwārazm-shāhs' interest in the Sabian science and seen the composition of *al-Sirr* as an astute means of securing their patronage. And considering their willingness to change sectarian affiliation for political expediency, they would have seemed a very receptive audience to Rāzī's construction of the perfected man in *al-Maṭālib* which, borrowing as it does from Ṣūfī, Shī'ī Imāmi, and specifically Nizārī Ismā'īlī ideas, displayed an adaptability well-suited for Khwārazmian statecraft.

When he wrote *al-Sirr*, in which he explored the notion of the man perfected in occult power, who undergoes an angelomorphosis; who dispatches rain, thunder, lightning, and summons earthquakes; who commands the celestial spheres; who realises the most complete attainment in his theoretical and practical capacities, had Rāzī already conceived of an ambition to embody the old Iranian tradition of the philosopher-vizier, and to formulate his own doctrine of the perfected man that we find in *al-Maṭālib*? He was certainly not unique in his time for nurturing such an ambition, which was also harboured by his younger contemporary, the Master of Illumination (*shaykh al-ishrāq*) Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Ibn Amīrak Abū'l-Futūḥ al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191).

Suhrawardī was born in 549/1154 in Suhraward in North West Iran, around five years after Rāzī's birth in Rayy. Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī reports that the young Suhrawardī began his study of philosophy in the city of Marāghah, south west of Tabriz, under the tutelage of Majd al-Dīn al-Jilī, who had previously

³² Miller, "Occult Science and the Fall of the Khwārazm-Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn," pp. 250–252.

³³ Charles E. Bosworth, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, ed. John A. Boyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 184.

been teaching in Rāzī's native city. Amongst his students in Rayy was the young Rāzī, who accompanied his teacher when he accepted the invitation to the *Mujāhidiyya* school in Marāghah. There, it is reported, both Rāzī and Suhrawardī met and studied the philosophical tradition that Jīlī was transmitting.³⁴

The precocious Suhrawardī lost little time in establishing himself as a philosopher-vizier when, soon after his arrival in Aleppo in 1183—a few years after Rāzī had written *al-Sirr* in 1179—, he swiftly gained the confidence of the city's governor, al-Malik al-Zāhir al-Ghāzī, son of the Ayyūbid Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. In 1191, the Master of Illumination was executed on the order of al-Malik al-Zāhir's father. The charge brought against him accused him of activity defiant of the sacred law, thus imperilling the state. Contributing to his infamy was his reputation for possessing “magical powers” which he had himself discussed in relation to royal authority.³⁵ He composed orisons to the heavenly bodies, the lengthiest of which was to “the great heavenly Sun, Hūrakhsh,” whose terrestrial counterpart was the earthly king.³⁶ Hossein Ziai argues that the charge against Suhrawardī was motivated by the belief that he was “engaged in a political conspiracy aimed at establishing the young Ayyūbid prince as ruler of the age, divinely aided and guided by the divine philosopher—namely al-Suhrawardī—who possessed manifest signs of divine inspiration.”³⁷ Just as Rāzī in *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib*, Suhrawardī drew on the penultimate and final sections of Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt* to

34 Nasrollah Pourjavady, “Introduction” to *Majmū'ah-yi falsafī-yi Marāghah/ A Philosophical Anthology from Marāghah Containing Works by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Ḥamadānī, Ibn Sīnā, 'Umar Ibn Sahlān Sāvī, Majduddīn Jīlī and others: Facsimile edition with introductions in Persian and English by Nasrollah Pourjavady* (Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānīshgāh: 2002), p. iii. Pourjavady argues that the Marāghah codex, which was copied in the *Mujāhidiyya* by, most likely, one of Jīlī's students soon after his death, constitutes an anthology representative of the philosophical tradition that Jīlī was teaching. In the anthology, works on spiritual psychology, the nature of the soul—or spirit—in its states before and after death, predominate. Furthermore, he argues that Jīlī's philosophy: “was not simply peripatetic, but was on the one hand adapted to accommodate Ash'arī theology, and on the other inspired by mysticism (*taṣawwuf*). In fact, these two trends can be observed, in different ways, in the philosophical thinking of the two most famous students of the school of Marāghah, namely Fakhrudīn Rāzī and Shihābuddīn Suhrawardī.” See pp. iv and xi-xii.

35 Hossein Ziai, “The Source and Nature of Authority: A Study of al-Suhrawardī's Illuminationist Political Doctrine” in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi*, ed. Charles E. Butterworth, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs 27 (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press: 1992): pp. 304–344, at p. 339.

36 Ziai, “The Source and Nature of Authority,” p. 320. See also John Walbridge, “The Devotional and Occult Works of Suhrawardī the Illuminationist,” *Ishrāq* 2 (2011): pp. 80–97.

37 Ziai, “The Source and Nature of Authority,” p. 343.

formulate his construct of the perfected man possessed of occult power.³⁸ Ziai identifies the following elements as constitutive of Suhrawardī's occult "illuminationist political doctrine":

The Islamic theory of prophethood and of the manifest miraculous powers of prophets (*anbiyā'*) and saints (*awliyā'*); the Iranian tradition of a special manifest "glory" or "royal light" (*kharrā-yi kiyāni*) given to kings who thus possess healing and "occult" (*nayranj*) powers; the Iranian tradition of divine glory (*khvarnah*), as retold by al-Suhrawardī in a way that allows for any person who obtains wisdom (*ḥikma*) to gain the divine glory that will come to radiate openly in that person as a divine light (*farra-yī īzādī*); the widespread Islamic tradition of awe-inspiring occult powers exercised by saints and mystics; and the Iranian tradition of high court dignitaries—in the person of wise viziers—whose knowledge and occult powers are placed at the disposal of the ruler, which, however, usually leads to their tragic martyrdom and demise.³⁹

The parallels between the Rāzian and Suhrawardian constructs of the perfected man are striking: the use of Avicennan prophetology, cosmology and celestial noetics; the emphasis on spiritual discipline and inspiration to complement the practice of philosophy; the appeal to the old Iranian tradition of kingship; and the exercise of occult power. But Rāzī was too prudent to write anything that could give rise to the kind of charge that led to the untimely death of his erstwhile fellow student of philosophy. Whilst Suhrawardī's occult political thought was perceived as a threat to the Ayyūbid sultan, Rāzī's theory posed no danger to the Central Asian powers on whose patronage he sought to rely. Nowhere in Rāzī's occult writings do we find an explicit endorsement of the planetary orisons that he records in *al-Sirr*: indeed, he relied on a firm affirmation of the *sharī'a* to prohibit the very descent into astrolatry to which a serious practical engagement with the Sabian science might potentially lead. But rather than discarding the science, he extracted those powerful cosmological and anthropological insights that could contribute to the perfection of the theoretical and practical capacities of the one who aspires to join the intellectual and spiritual elite. In grounding his prophetology in the doctrine of the Perfect Nature, he was able to construct a viable alternative to the Avicennan model. And it was in philosophising on the occult in *al-Sirr* that Rāzī realised a key component of his counter-Avicennan soteriology.

³⁸ Ziai, "The Source and Nature of Authority," pp. 317–318.

³⁹ Ziai, "The Source and Nature of Authority," pp. 307–308.

Appendix

Translation of *al-Sirr al-maktūm* 4:2—The Ritual of Planetary Ascent

The following translation of al-Sirr al-maktūm 4:2 is based on the Cairo lithograph edition (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī lithograph, undated): pp. 114–120 (henceforth abbreviated as “C”), whilst closely comparing Tehran, Majlis-i Shūrā-yi Islāmī Library, MS 6853, ff. 141b–150b, (henceforth abbreviated as “T”). {} indicate a phrase or sentence, present in T but absent in C, the context of which militates in favour of its inclusion. To reflect the fact that the planets invoked in the ritual described are sentient and rational, gendered pronouns in reference them have been used throughout the translation. Furthermore, the translation of the passage reflects the abrupt changes between the second and third person in the Arabic original. The vast majority of the text purports to be directly quoted from an unidentified work attributed to Abū Ma‘shar al-Balkhī.

Know that the best <description> that I have seen regarding this matter is an epistle attributed to Abū Ma‘shar al-Balkhī (may God have mercy on him). Here I shall provide a summary of this epistle. He said:

“Every matter has its beginning and its end. So if you want to reach its end before its beginning then you have attempted an impossible thing. He who desires this noble knowledge, then let him begin with the Moon. If from him he attains his goal, then he should seek his mediation in subjugating Mercury; and then with the mediation of these two, he should proceed to Venus; then with the mediation of these three, he should proceed to the Sun, especially at a time when Mercury is close to the Sun; then, with the exception of Venus, since she is hostile to <Mars>, just as Jupiter is hostile to Saturn, he should proceed to Mars by means of their mediation. Then he should proceed to Jupiter by means of their mediation, especially that of Mars, since Mars is under Jupiter; thus Jupiter cannot be subjugated until the subjugation of Mars is complete. Then with the mediation of all six he should proceed to Saturn, for that is the ultimate goal, by which all desires are attained.

“He who would pursue this knowledge must be appropriately qualified. Such qualification is partly acquired, and partly in-born (*ghayr muktasaba*). As for the kind of qualification that can be acquired, he must be knowledgeable of the stars, such that no astrological elections (*ikhtiyārāt*) would lie beyond his knowledge should he so need them. As for those qualifications which are in born, his ascendant (*ṭālī‘uhu*) should be appropriately well disposed for this affair. Such is the case when Mars is the lord of his ascendant (*ṣāhib ṭālī‘ihi*), in exaltation or in his

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sign. If Mars is not the lord of his ascendant, then he [i.e., Mars] must be in a strong condition in relation to the ascendant such that good can be hoped from him, especially if he is in Capricorn. If the ascendant is in such a position, and <the aspirant> desires this matter, then he will achieve this goal, if God, may He be exalted, wills it. If his ascendant is not characterised by such a condition, then let him seek out an ascendant whereby Mars is in Capricorn, for Mars's placement in Capricorn is the correct electional timing (*ikhtiyār*) for this matter and on its account he will reach his intended goal, Almighty God willing.”

The first statement (*qawl*): on the subjugation (*taskhīr*) of the Moon

This comprises a number of sections (*fuṣūl*).

The first section

Know that this is the foundation stone. He should begin in the hour of Venus, ensuring that the ascendant sign is one of the signs of straight ascension and that Mars is strong and he should ensure he is in the cardine, received, not aspecting Mercury; nor should he be square with or in opposition to the Sun; nor should he be aspecting Saturn. He should ensure that he [i.e., Mars] is in trine or sextile aspect with Jupiter and that the ascendant is in benefic aspect with Jupiter and Venus; the seventh should be preserved from aspecting malefics, whilst its lord, and that of the fourth should be in strong positions. He [i.e., Mars] should not be retrograde but if that happens, then nothing should be aspecting the ascendant, the fourth and the tenth except Mars. Ensure [Mars] is in the tenth if he is in his house or in exaltation; if he is not in his house or in exaltation, then ensure he is in the eleventh. Jupiter and Venus must be in the degree of the ascendant, and the fourth and the seventh should be strong and received. You must ensure that between Mars and Mercury there is no aspect or application, either received or not received. Ensure the Moon is cadent from the cardines and malefic. Ensure the Sun is in the ninth or the fifth, or the eleventh if Mars is not in the eleventh. Ensure Saturn is in the sixth or the twelfth, the sixth being more appropriate lest it be in a place of its rejoicing. Ensure Mercury is in the second or in the third. There must not be in the degree of the ascendant any shadow or fixed star of a malefic temperament; the degree should be feminine and the election of the ascendant should be one of the mutable signs and the original ascendant should be in a year in which Mars is strong. Know that, when beginning the procedure, the Moon should be free of all benefics, characterised by malefics. The Moon must not be in Cancer or

Taurus; rather the Moon should be moving towards conjunction with the Sun such that there exists between the two less than twelve minutes; or <the Moon> should be besieged on both sides by two malefics; or there should be between him and the Tail of the Dragon less than twelve degrees; all such base conditions must be strictly observed for the Moon as far as possible. This is the statement concerning the election of the ascendant at the beginning of the procedure.

The second section

He must bring together all that is related to the Moon, pertaining to dwelling place, geographical area, food, clothes, shape, as previously discussed.”

Said Abū Ma‘shar:

“Experience teaches that white clothes should be worn at the beginning, and red clothes worn at the end. A fast should be observed for three days before the beginning of the operation. He should begin gradually reducing his food such that purity becomes manifest, and the balance of his constitution does not change. He should eat meat of the breast and the forelegs and each organ that has correspondence with the Moon, distributing them also in charity as far as he is able. He should not look upon a dead corpse, nor upon anyone slain. He should not kill a single animal, harmful or not. He should avoid committing harm, as far as he can and he should observe complete cleanliness, ensuring no ritually impure substance reaches his limbs. He should protect his left eye from gazing at foul things. He should shave his head every three days and his diet should comprise hot moist things.”

Thus spoke Abū Ma‘shar. I [i.e., Rāzī] say that it would have been more fitting for him to have prescribed a diet consisting of things ascribed to the Moon—so let <the aspirant> reflect on the matter himself.

Said <Abū Ma‘shar>:

“He should devote much thought to the higher sciences and keep the company of kings—but if that does not prove easy, then of tribal nobles and scholars. His abode must be on agricultural land and by running water. His incense should be camphor and amber which he should mix. He should observe these conditions during the day more than during the night. He should wear around his neck a sword-belt, half red, half white and have with him the greatest names of God.” [. . .]¹ And I [i.e., Rāzī] say it would have been more apt for him

¹ At this point, T includes the following words, omitted in C: *qāla mawlānā al-dā‘ī ilā Allāh bi’l-ḥaqq ḥujjat Allāh ‘alā al-khalq jāmi’ ‘ulūm al-awwalīn wa’l-ākhirīn muḥīr kalimat Allāh*

to have instructed that the sword-belt be made of silver for it is of the Moon's substance (*jawhar*).

<Abū Ma'shar> said:

“He should begin the subjugation of the Moon at night. These are all the necessary conditions.

The third section

“If these conditions are satisfied, he should stand before the Moon for an entire hour without saying anything, or looking towards him, or raising his head. He is to stand facing the Moon obliquely, his left side on, such that he does not look at him with his right eye, but he is to look at him thrice with his left eye and on the third occasion say:

‘O Most Mighty Luminary! O Light of the World! Due to you, the trees grow and the fruits ripen. You are the greatest felicity, the most radiant planet. From you are the light of the earth and the lustre of the sky. From you derives the felicity of the felicitous; you repel affliction and loosen that which the malefics bind; you repel the evil from the one afflicted by the malefics. Your felicity diminishes naught in splendour [. . .] no ornament can increase your beauty. Neither does your eclipse harm you, nor your besiegement by malefics, nor applications to the Dragons, nor the terms of Mars or Saturn, nor their twelves: your passage is not slow; nor your declination in the north or the south. Your detriment for you is a domicile and declination for you is honour. You are the king, the planets your army! You are the commander, the fixed stars your steeds! By God who created you and created me; who honoured you but abased me; I love you and I love those who love you! I am your servant and the servant of those who serve you! By your Creator, I adjure you to accept me in your service and love; for aggrieved am I by your loss. I am filled with passion for you; my food, my clothes, my gaze, my standing, my praise, my aromatics are all sympathetically aligned with you; all bear witness to the sincerity of my love for you.’

<Abū Ma'shar> said:

“These words are to be repeated three times and then left. Then in the first month, he continues to seek out the positions of the Moon's weakness, addressing him intimately with these words, performing obeisance to him with these words. Then in the second month, he is to seek out the Moon's middling states. Then in the third month he is to seek out the Moon's positions of honour, his

al-'ulyā fakhr al-dīn bin 'umar al-rāzī raḍīya Allāh 'anhu (said our master the caller to God in truth, God's proof for his creation, who reconciles the sciences of the ancients and the moderns, who makes manifest the most lofty word of God, Fakhr al-Dīn Ibn 'Umar al-Rāzī—may God be pleased with him!).

received applications and his positions of exaltation, by which I mean Taurus and the terms of Venus, for they represent power for the Moon, just like his exaltation—indeed, even more so. If he performs these actions in this way for three months, then love will arise between them. And the signs of that love will become manifest in the fourth, fifth and sixth months and the man becomes like the Moon’s lover such that if he does not see him for an hour, he is stricken by grief and he weeps. For most of this period of time, he will <enjoy> bodily health and a balanced constitution and he will hear much gladdening and beneficial news. In the seventh month his shadow will be longer than it was before, and in the eighth month it will increase even more.”

Abū Ma’shar said:

“I saw my shadow <extend> to the length of a thousand cubits. The longer it becomes, the stronger the indication that <the Moon’s> acceptance and love has grown. During the ninth and tenth months, the light of the Moon in his eye exceeds the luminosity of the Sun, such that <the aspirant> will be unable to gaze on him.”

Then he said:

“Beware not to look at the Moon during the ninth and tenth months more than once each night, even though this may be hard for you to endure, for gazing any more at him will cause blindness. Then in the eleventh month, he will for sure see each night in his sleep the starless sphere, the Sun, the Moon and the planets, and the Moon will display before him all matters. In the twelfth month his heart will rejoice and be joyful; all matters will become easy for him; he will receive honours from kings and princes, even though he may be undeserving of them; and he will hear accurate reports between sleep and wakefulness; every speech that circulates in his thought will be correct; he will hear accurate news of every event that occurs that day, even if in a distant land; he will see them in his sleep as though he is gazing on them. When the solar year is complete, and he sees these signs, then he will know that his goal has been attained and he has subjugated the Moon.

The fourth section

When the thirteenth month arrives he should request, to the furthest extent that is possible, all that is in the power of the Moon <to bestow>, to the greatest limit of <the Moon’s> felicity and to the utmost of what is possible. Let him beware lest the Moon applies to a planet that is leaving a cardine, or is cadent or approaching the Sun. He should ensure the Moon is in a term of Venus and in trine with Jupiter. If this so happens during the night and <the Moon> is above the Earth

then this is even better. Then, with his right eye he is to gaze at Jupiter, and with the left at the Moon. And if it so happens that the Moon is not within the ken of the left eye, then he should gaze in this way at Venus, or at Mars if he is in Capricorn, or at Saturn if he is in Capricorn or Aquarius. However, if Mars is in Capricorn, the attainment of the goal will be expedited, for <Capricorn> is the exaltation of Mars. Beware lest the Moon applies to Mercury for that will render the entire operation void. Mercury must not be in retrograde, nor should he be approaching the Sun. Rather, he should be in a strong position but not applying to the Moon. If the like of these electional conditions are in place, and <the Moon> is applying to Saturn then the half of his garment that is facing Saturn should be made of black or green brocade, and on the <wrist> which is on Saturn's side he should wear a metal bracelet and carry a bone in his hand. If the application is to Jupiter he should wear a garment that shades into red, marked with pure gold. In that hand he should hold a rosary and hold on his person some of the names of God Almighty. If the application is to Mars then he should wear on that side a garment the colour of blood. He should make the bracelet and ring brass and copper, and in that hand should he <brandish> a naked sword, its blade being of the finest, most dazzling metal. If the application is to Venus, then on that side should he wear a garment, a portion of which is white, another red, and a third yellow. The white portion should be in the middle and the garment should be inlaid with silver and pearls. He should wear a bracelet and rings of pure silver. Each ring should have a pearl and the bracelet should have ten. The side of his garment that faces the Moon should be pure white as we have mentioned. If he does this and then looks at the Moon through his left eye with an open, steady gaze, whilst stealing glances at the other planet with his right eye, then he should request from <the Moon> felicity in all affairs, access to kings and nobles, felicity in living, understanding of religion and <knowledge of> the higher sciences, arithmetic, geometry, geography, agriculture, pedagogy, how to repel the mischief of slanderers and calumniators, how to avert the affliction of bad memory and cowardice. He should seek unimpeachable reason, popularity, the prevention of illness, the enslavement of his enemies though they be kings; and that his friends should be made kings though they be slaves. And <he should request> that <the Moon> enables him to convey felicity to whomsoever he wills and to prevent felicity from reaching whomsoever he wills.

The fifth section

If he desires to inflict whomsoever he wills with harm, then for this he needs to seek the aid of the fixed stars and ensure that the Moon is applying to the

felicitous fixed stars so that his own felicity is increased. He should pay heed to <the Moon's> application to the malefic stars so that the evil that is to be inflicted on his enemies is augmented. As for <the Moon's> application to the wandering planets, it is effective for the infliction of illness. If <the Moon> applies to them, then if he is <also> applying to Saturn, then he will be able to inflict illness in the right ear, the right side of the body, the spleen, and everything hidden inside the body. If <the Moon> is applying to Jupiter, then the illness will <afflict> the thighs, the shins and bring about impotence and the corruption of the liver and the left ear. If <the Moon> is applying to Mars <he will afflict> the posterior and the liver; if to the Sun then the right ear, the heart, the brain, and the left foot; if to Venus, then the penis, and the throat; and if to Mercury then the hands, the fingers, the uvula and the tongue. If the Moon is applying to these wandering planets, without applying to any other star, then he will produce an effect in the left eye, the stomach and the lungs. If <the Moon> is applying to the Dragon (*jawzahr*), then <harm will be inflicted> on the intestines. Know that the illnesses <inflicted by> Jupiter and Venus are reliable in their effect on account of the fact that they are benefic. And all knowledge belongs to God.

The sixth section

If he wants to destroy his enemy, this can only be achieved <with> the eighth house and its lord. The lord of the eighth should be afflicted by malefics, the malefic being inside, square, or in opposition. For, if the lords of those two positions are not afflicted by malefics, retrograde, or combust, and the eighth is safe from the presence of one of the two malefic planets inside it, square, or in opposition, then this will indicate that the enemy will be free of harm and <the aspirant> will not achieve his aim. If the <planet> which presides over this sign is afflicted by malefics, or is retrograde, or approaching the Sun, or in <his or her> descent, then this will be indicative of <the enemy's> ill fate. Know that each planet indicates a certain <kind of death> that is shared by no other. So, if it is dominated by the Moon, in a state afflicted by malefics, then this will indicate a death consistent with the malefics which afflict it. If the Moon is with the Tail of the Dragon, then this will indicate a death by way of poison and purgative potions. If that which dominates is Mercury, whilst being in a state afflicted by malefics, then this will indicate his death as a result of intellectual rivalry, debate and hostile writing, intestinal pain and jaundice. If Mercury is in the eighth with the Tail of the Dragon, then his death will be by way of trickery against him and <hostile> magic. If Venus, afflicted by malefics, dominates, then this will indicate death due to relatives and the Sultan, or by pain in the

heart or stomach, in undignified places such as the bathroom. If Mars is dominant <in the eighth>, whilst being free of affliction by malefics, then this indicates a death by hot pain in the blood, and a sudden death; if Mars is afflicted by malefics, then this indicates death by steel or fire in war. If Jupiter is dominant, but free from malefics, then this indicates death at the hands of kings or sultans. If Saturn is dominant, by way of his rays or governance and is free from malefics, then this indicates death by chronic pain arising from cold and moisture; if it is afflicted by malefics, then this indicates death by snow or by drowning. So, elect the timing always in this way, and you will attain your goal.

The seventh section

If you want to prolong life, then this objective cannot be achieved except by means of the Moon, Jupiter and those fixed stars whose temperament is felicitous—especially <those of> the temperament of Jupiter. Let it be after you have reached the point of subjugating Jupiter and have elected a time when the eighth house is ascendant, and felicitously blessed by the Moon, and the fixed stars that share the temperament of Jupiter, are in a minute of the eighth house; then he should make his request to the Moon and Jupiter, for he will be given most generously by each the utmost of what is desirable, including longevity, physical health and a balanced temperament.

The second statement: on the subjugation of Mercury

When you have completed the subjugation (*taskhīr*) of the Moon and you want to subjugate Mercury, then you must fast for three days whilst Mercury is either in Gemini or Virgo.” Abū Ma’shar said:

“It is more fitting that its subjugation is begun when he is in Gemini. He is to make his request when he is in the degree of his exaltation lest it be too protracted for him. Then he should leave the Moon when he engages in the process of subjugating Mercury. His way of doing so is by requesting from the Moon that which cannot be attained except through Mercury such as: intellect; speech; discourse; writing; knowledge of the stars; philosophy; divination; mathematics; geometry; the occult sciences; the aversion of mutually unjust behaviour; the sewing of misinformation in whomsoever he wills; being apprised of hidden things; beneficial trade; the innovative crafts. Also, he should request the water of springs and rivers. When he has petitioned the Moon for these

things, which will be impossible for him to grant, he is to return diffidently three times to make these requests. Then he is to say: 'O Supreme Luminary, all good that has come to me is from you. And the aversion of all evil from me is due to you. But now I need something which only Mercury can grant, and I want to realize it by means of him and that you grant me leave to lodge with him my petition.'

And it is necessary that he should ensure Mercury is in trine with the Moon, and either in Gemini or sextile with it. And <the side of> his garment that <faces> Mercury must be verdigris <in colour> or dark blue, and in that hand he is to wear a bracelet of lead, and in that hand he is to hold a sceptre of gold and his food during the period of the fast is to consist of the forelegs and tongues of sheep. He is to distribute these parts in charity as much as possible. Then, when he reaches the degree of his exaltation he should praise him and mention his need and he will grant it. On the first occasion he is not to petition for his other needs. In fact, he should not exceed three requests for three things, in times when he is blessed by benefics or applying to a benefic, so long as he is in Gemini. Then, leave him until he reaches his exaltation, <at which point>, petition him for the rest of his needs which fall under his sway, for they will be granted with the permission of God Almighty.

The third statement: on the subjugation of Venus

<Leave to perform this> is sought from the Moon and Mercury when the Moon is applying to be conjunct with Mercury, before they meet in the same minute, there being between them less than twelve degrees, which is the size of the Moon. It is even better that they are separated by less than seven degrees so that each one is in the power of the other. <At this point> direct your devotion to them, seeking from them three times that which has occult correspondence with Venus. Those are: women; mothers; children; siblings; singing; dalliance; gladdening of the heart; ornamentation; luxurious finery; the procurement of every singer, male and female; gold and silver; skill at backgammon and chess; taking pleasure in lovers, intoxicating drinks; drunkenness; good sex; clarified butter; sweet speech; and skill in magic. Whosoever wants any of these things from the Moon and Mercury, then let him seek leave from them, and make his request to Venus. The way to do this is to make the petition at a time when the Moon is applying to Venus, after he has left Mercury. He is to don a green garment, beautify himself, and adorn himself with pearls and jewels as far as he is able. He is to perfume himself with scent, musk, rose water, 'ūd, and fine amber. He is to prepare, as far as he is able, a drinking symposium, gathering beardless servant boys, male

singers, servant girls and singing girls. The session is to be held in a parlour opposite the point where Venus rises. He is to recline on a green cushion, and all of the drinking vessels, the carpets and rugs, and all the clothes of the people in the symposium are to be green. Their food must be meat from the heart, the forelegs and the rump. He should be positioned such that when Venus rises, he sees her. This symposium should be held, in accordance with this description, for three days. He should engage in no other activity but wine drinking, and homosexual sex {during the day}, and heterosexual sex during each night.² Then, on the third night, when Venus rises, he is to stand and make obeisance. When he has finished from having sex with the servant girl, declares his passion for her, bemoans what he has suffered out of love for her, quoting Persian and Arabic poetry which are mentioned in the *Chapter on Love and Love Poetry*, and he makes his obeisance most humbly, then he will be accepted. And the sign for that will be that the reasons for delight will be abundant, and beardless boys and women will incline to him and approach him unbidden. Then on the second round, he is to set up the aforementioned conditions, and then after three days make his request to Venus for those things that correspond with her, for she will grant it right away.

The fourth statement: on the subjugation of the Sun, the most supreme luminary

He should watch for the Sun to be in the minute of his exaltation, for that is necessary. If it so occurs that the planets are strong in this sign then the goal is easier to achieve. The ascendant sign should be Leo; Saturn should be in Aquarius, in the seventh house, the intended house. If this does not occur, then <the Sun> should be in a strong position and received. So long as he can ensure that either the ascendant sign or the seventh house is free of malefics and malefic aspects and that the benefics are in the ascendant and the seventh house and in beneficial aspect, then this is the goal, though it is permitted that <the astrological conditions> are other than this. This operation should be performed in a place, in a country that has a sympathetic connection with the Sun. It is best performed in the land of the Turks, Sind, Nishāpūr, Tūs, or Abīward and if this is impossible, then in Fars province, or Azerbaijan. Then in this country (*bilād*)³, he is to seek out the dwellings of kings and gilded palaces.

² C: [. . .] *siwā shurb al-khamr wa'l-lawāṭa wa'l-zinā fī kull layla*"; T: "[. . .] *siwā shurb al-khamar wa'l-lawāṭa fī kull yawm wa'l-zinā fī kull layla*." The latter is the preferable reading.

³ C: *bāb*; T: *bilād*.

Then he is to wear a silk garment the colour of gold, and to adorn himself with raised rubies. On his head he should wear a crown of gold, studded with rubies. And he should wear two hollow bracelets of pure gold, and gold rings with red ruby jewels. So, when the Sun enters the first minute of Aries, and you have fasted, reducing your food which should be the heart, the flank and the back of lamb, generously distributing these cuts in charity, feeding them to predatory animals that have occult correspondence with the Sun, such as the lion, the tiger and the panther, overseeing their feeding, especially at this time—once these conditions have been fulfilled, and the Sun reaches the degree of his exaltation, at the time of the forenoon when he is at his highest point, then that will be the most propitious time. He faces him, making obeisance ten times, and then stands before him, just as he would make obeisance before a great king.⁴ He extolls and praises him to the utmost of his ability, especially <by reference> to the fact that he bestows sovereignty to sultans, and transmits light to the Moon and the other planets. As for when the Sun reaches the degree of his exaltation in the night, or after the high point of his elevation: if it is in the night, then he is to stand when <the Sun> reaches the degree of its exaltation, and remain standing until the Sun reaches the high point of his elevation; if it is after the forenoon then, from the moment of the forenoon, he is to stand and remain standing until the point that <the Sun> reaches the degree of his exaltation. So, when he has finished that, he must continue to fast during the day and pray during the night, giving charity each day whatever is possible and, each day, when <the Sun> reaches the high point of his elevation, stand before him facing him, in fear and hope,⁵ doubtful that he will attain his objective. If he persists in this for six months, then the signs of acceptance will become manifest: his animal capacity and intellect will increase; he will be held in high esteem by kings; and the people will hold him in awe.⁶ Let him pay heed not to be remiss in that⁷ before the completion of a year, for the result will be undesirable: his avarice for gold will become so intense that he will not allow himself to spend any.

When the year is complete and the Sun reaches the degree of his exaltation, and <the aspirant> has fulfilled all the aforementioned conditions, then let him adorn himself with that which has already <been described> and let him supplicate <the Sun> and request that which has occult correspondence with him, such as: the animal soul; the intellect; light and radiance; sovereignty if he is

4 C: *ka-mā yaqūm fī khidmatihī al-salāṭīn*; T: *ka-mā yaqūm fī khidmat al-malik al-kabīr*.

5 C: *khā'ifan 'anhu rājiyan li-dhātihī*; T: *khā'ifan 'anhu rājiyan ladayhī*.

6 C: *wa-nihāyat al-nās*; T: *wa-yahābuhu al-nās*.

7 C: *wa-li-yaḥdhar kaylā bi-ghayrihī bi-dhālika*; T: *wa-li-yaḥdhar kaylā yafqid bi-dhālika*.

worthy of it; leadership; nobility; victory;⁸ power; gold so abundant it cannot be counted; treasure and buried hoards of wealth. Then, he is neither to abandon making obeisance to the Sun, nor continuously to perform it—but rather every year, four times with the change of season, he is to stand making this obeisance, and to continue doing it, as a gift to the Sun. And the greatest benefit in it is that he should request the repulsion of the malefic effects of the malefic planets, for the Sun loosens that which the two malefics bind. And God knows best.”

The fifth statement: on the subjugation of Mars

Abū Ma‘shar said:

“The ignorant hold him in awe on account of his violent power. But in fact he is easy and pliable. The best time to begin the process of his subjugation is when he is in Capricorn or one of his domiciles. If the other planets which have already been subjugated are in quartile aspect, then this will not harm the process; nor will their opposition in any way; nor will their weak positioning, except to this extent: if one of the planets is in a weak position, he <or she> will be unable to bestow any good as he <or she> would were he <or she> in a strong position. Rather, in the beginning it is necessary to ensure that Mars is not afflicted by a malefic aspect by Saturn who has not yet been subjugated; and to seek the Sun’s aid in the subjugation of Mars. Let <the aspirant> be wary that Venus is not applying to Mars in any way lest he be moved to anger: for, Venus is the enemy of Mars, censorious of his actions, whilst the one engaging in the process of subjugation is seeking his pleasure. He must therefore avoid any Venusian aspect lest he be moved to anger. When these conditions are fulfilled and he engages in the invocation of Mars, safe from his harm, he is to wear red wool and a *qalansuwa* its colour, the colour of blood.⁹ Take a naked sword and adorn yourself with rings and bracelets wrought of brass and copper. Take in your left hand a severed head. On the sword should be the blood of that severed head—a human head is best, though on the condition that it is not <the head of> a Turk. He is to make his food from the head, and he is to distribute it to Turks and blonde men. He is to stand before Mars, silently, saying naught. Know that Mars will show that man tremendous things but he should not take fright from them. Thus will it be for ten days until his turmoil diminishes. Then after that he

⁸ C: *al-‘ilya*; T: *al-ghalaba*.

⁹ A *qalansuwa* is a tall truncated conical hat.

is to stand before him and make obeisance to him, placing his face in the dust for the same number of days that his turmoil lasted: if it was for ten days, then for ten; if for five, then five. Then after that he is to raise his head and stand before him, extolling him with vigour and valour. But he should neither be prolix, nor feel secure from him, though the days be long. Rather, what the seeker must do is that, each time he desires something from Mars, he should first ask the Sun to repel the harm of Mars from him lest he burns him. When he attains his objective, then he should ask for: sovereignty and power, if he is right for it—otherwise, then should he request close access¹⁰ such that the king does his bidding and is needful of him. Similarly, he should ask him to destroy countries, castles and cities and the repulsion of every enemy and the destruction of his house. Know that his gifts in causing harm are more successful. When Mars becomes subjugated, there will be nothing left for the <the aspirant> to seek, for all has been attained except that which pertains to religious knowledge¹¹ and power. {These must be sought from Jupiter, if God wills.}¹²

The sixth statement: on the subjugation of Jupiter

He should begin this at a time when Jupiter is in one of his signs or in exaltation; if this is not possible, then in one of his shares. Care must be taken lest Jupiter is afflicted by the malefic effect of Saturn which has not yet been subjugated. He is to seek the aid of Mars in <Jupiter's> subjugation.” Abū Ma‘shar said:

“He who has been able to subjugate Mars must then subjugate Jupiter lest the land be devastated by the power of Mars. If he wants that, then he is to wear garments which are of the colour of Jupiter, the colour of which corresponds to him. And he is to adorn himself with a bracelet and rings wrought of gold. In his hand he is to hold a rosary and he should have on him a Qur’ān, supplications, and the names of God—glorious and exalted is He! He is to fast and pray, reducing his food intake and he will attain his goal in less than one month. When he begins the process of subjugation, on no account is he to commit any sinful or immoral act. He is to ask him to give abundant wealth, generosity, a balanced temperament, justice, leadership, sincere love, truthfulness to one’s word, love of good and hatred of evil. And God knows best.

¹⁰ C: *wa-illā ṭalaba al-quwwa*; T: *wa-illā ṭalaba al-qurba*.

¹¹ C: *bi'l-‘ilm wa’l-dīn*; T: *bi’l-‘ilm fī’l-dīn*.

¹² T: *fa-yajib ṭalabuhā min al-mushtarī in shā’a Allāh*; missing in C.

The seventh *qawl*: on the subjugation of Saturn

Saturn must be in one of his signs, Capricorn being better, or in exaltation. The more planets which are aspecting <Saturn>, the better, whatever that aspect may be, there being no distinction between trine and square aspects for the one who has reached the stage of subjugating Saturn. He must wear a garment of fine black silk, and a *qalansuwa* of fine green silk and his bracelet and rings must be of iron. He is to brandish a bone and distribute in charity the meat of the right side, entrails and guts which people throw away. He is to seek the aid of Mercury in <Saturn's> subjugation and to persevere in making obeisance to him for two and a half years, for he will bestow on him sovereignty though the seeker may be of the most lowly-born. Know that in <this subjugation> are many benefits which he will know once he realises them. {This concludes the discussion on how to perform these subjugations}.¹³ Know that these planets have moods by which they change from friendliness to hostility and revolt, especially towards the one who would subjugate them all. Similarly, each planet harbours anger towards his fellow so it is necessary to apprehend the causes of this anger and how to repel it—and success is through God—may He be exalted!”

13 T: *fa-hādhā tamām al-kalām fī kayfiyyat hādhihi al-taskhīrāt*; missing in C.

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