RESEÑAS DE LIBROS/BOOK REVIEWS

Michael-Sebastian Noble. *Philosophising the Occult. Avicennan Psychology and 'The Hidden Secret' of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.* Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2021. 309 p. ISBN: 9783110644579. Hardcover: € 104.95

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Contemporary scholars of Islamic thought who have engaged with the corpus of the polymath Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) were able to show the quintessential role this thinker played in contributing to the development of the philosophical and theological traditions and to the dynamic interplay between them in the post-classical period. For instance, Heidrun Eichner, who approached this era from a different perspective, demonstrated how the conceptual framework of *General Matters* (*al-Umūr al-ʿāmma*) (*al-umūr ʿāmma*) that al-Rāzī developed in his *Compendium on Philosophy* (*al- Mulakhkhaṣ fi l-manṭiq wa-l-ḥikma*) and *The Eastern Investigations* (*al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*) gave birth to significant innovations during the transmission of Avicennan (after Avicenna, d. 1037) philosophy in what is called the post-classical period.[1] More recently, Frank Griffel argued that in the aforementioned texts, al-Rāzī not only communicates Avicenna's philosophy, but also caters for two substantial philosophical developments, one in epistemology, the other in ontology.[2]

Eichner and Griffel are just two among many scholars who focus on al-Rāzī's philosophical and theological works. Michael Noble's novel monograph introduces a different inquiry into Rāzian scholarship. It focuses neither on al-Rāzī's philosophical summae nor on his theological works. Rather, this monograph, which is based on Noble's dissertation and comprises twelve chapters, stands as the inaugural overarching exploration of what is arguably considered as one of al-Rāzī's most mysterious and understudied texts from his early career: *The Hidden Secret in the Secrets of the Stars*[3] (*al-Sirr al-maktūm fī asrār al-nujūm*). As Noble tells us in the first chapter, *al-Sirr* was a controversial work already at its time and was subject to criticism among subsequent Islamic scholars who either proclaimed al-Rāzī as an unbeliever (*kāfir*) or excluded *al-Sirr* from his oeuvre (p. 4). The primary reason given for this is that al-Sirr considerably flirts with "magic" (*siḥr*)

[1] Eichner has demonstrated that the structure of *al-umūr al-ʿāmma* offered a new paradigm of inquiry that was appropriated into philosophical and theological works in the post-classical period. See Heidrun Eichner, *The Post-Avicennian Philosophical Tradition and Islamic Orthodoxy:Philosophical and Theological Summae in Context* (Halle: Habilitationsschrift, 2009); Heidrun Eichner, "Dissolving the Unity of Metaphysics: From Faḫr al-Dī al-Rāzī to Mullā Ṣadrā al-Šīrāzī", *Medioevo* 32 (2007): 139-197.

[2] See Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). See also Sultan Saluti, "Review of Frank Griffel. *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*", *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval* 29/2 (2022): 254-257.

[3] The full title is not given by Noble who lists only *The Hidden Secret*. See p. 1.

and "occult sciences" (*al-ʿulūm al-gharība*)[4] which, as Noble rightly observes, "was an important aspect of Islamic intellectual history and the object of profound and open rational engagement" (p. 47). Through careful analysis of the philosophical theory of the science of the talisman formulated by al-Rāzī in *al-Sirr*, Noble succeeds, by my lights, in securing the attribution of this work to al-Rāzī. To corroborate this attribution, Noble analyzes and interprets passages from *al-Sirr*, through cross-referencing to works where al-Rāzī mostly engages with Avicenna's philosophy – mainly to the *Commentary on Pointers and Reminders* (*Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*)[5] and *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* – whereby themes on cognition (*maʿrifa*), prophecy, psychology, and soteriology (*khalāṣ*), or the study of salvation are brought into sharp focus.

In the second chapter, Noble accounts for the central theme of *al-Sirr* – which justifies al-Rāzī's study of the occult science – namely, the Sabian (*al-Ṣābiʾa*) doctrine of soteriology.[6] To vindicate his engagement with this science, al-Rāzī argues that the soteriological enterprise is grounded in occult knowledge, which fleshes out the zenith of all fields of inquiry.[7] That being said, al-Rāzī's ennobling of the occult science to the point of occupying the highest position, deserves further scrutiny. This is primarily because, insofar as we submit to Noble's compelling hypothesis raised in the last chapter – that al-Rāzī sought to compose *al-Sirr* in order to secure patronage –[8] this should then downplay the seriousness we attribute to al-Rāzī's crowning of the occult science with the highest status. This, however, is not made clear by Noble.

In the third chapter Noble analyzes the eight Sabian doctrines[9] and sets out to show that al-Rāzī was influenced by arguments of Avicenna and Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. c. 1165). Importantly, to establish the first doctrine that the spheres possess rational (*nāṭiqa*) souls, Noble argues that al-Rāzī draws primarily on Avicenna's argument in the *Ishārāt*.

[4] Noble restricts the meaning of the terms magic and occult science to the definition of talisman (*ṭilsam*. Pl. *ṭilsamāt*) formulated by al-Rāzī. The *ṭilsam* is the "blending of heavenly active forces with elemental passive forces, for the sake of being empowered to make manifest (*iẓhār*) that which runs contrary to the norm (*al-ʿāda*) or to prevent from occurring that which is consonant with it (*mā yuwāfiquha*)"" (p. 1). Cf. al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm fī asrār al-nujūm* (Cairo: Mīrzā Muḥammad Shīrāzī, lithograph, undated), 7.

[5] Henceforth, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*. The *Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt* will be hereafter referred to as *Ishārāt*.

[6] As Noble observes, the term Sabian understood by al-Rāzī, denotes "the adherents of any form of astrolatrous paganism" (p. 48), who are also identified with the "masters of talismans" (*aṣḥāb al-ṭilsamāt*). For more on these sects see pp. 68-70.

[7] Mastery over occult science, according to al-Rāzī, exposes one to the secrets of the higher and lower worlds, such as the influence generated by the higher spirits upon the generation and corruption of the lower world. Further, perfecting one's knowledge of the higher spiritual beings, qualifies one to connect with these beings and to imitate them. See p. 51. Cf. al-Rāzī, *al-Sirr al-maktūm fī asrār al-nujūmi*, 3.

[8] This as Noble explains follows al-Rāzī's catering to the Khwārazmshāhs' interest in the Sabian occult science (p. 266).

[9] Which al-Rāzī introduces in *al-Sirr* to vindicate the occult astral science, and to explain the "planetary astral ritual" together with its role in the perfection of the human soul.

Further for establishing the fifth doctrine, which is pivotal for the practice of idol worship, he demonstrates how al-Rāzī takes over Abū l-Barakāt's conception of the *Perfect Nature* (*al-ṭibāʿ al-tāmm*) according to which each human soul is affiliated with one of the planet's spirits that causes the existence of the soul (p. 81).

Nevertheless, Noble's contention that in *al-Sirr* al-Rāzī establishes the rationality of the celestial soul – which serves as the groundwork for the subsequent doctrines – by invoking Avicenna's argument of *Ishārāt* merits a closer look. This is because, in his Commentary on the *al-Ishārāt*, which he authored after *al-Sirr*, al-Rāzī *undermines* Avicenna's line of reasoning. However, Noble does not draw sufficient attention to al-Rāzī's criticism and opts instead to mention it in a passing footnote. Noble rightly accounts for the *equivocal* quiddity of the celestial soul – which he portrays as "rational-bodily celestial soul complex"– as the means by which Avicenna endeavors to solve a "paradox of the celestial sphere's motion" (p. 91) which al-Rāzī is unsatisfied with.[10] However, Noble does not make clear that al-Rāzī's dissatisfaction with this solution is meant to *problematize* this "rational-bodily soul complex." Thus, it is unclear how did al-Rāzī incorporate the *Ishārāt's* argument of establishing the rationality of the celestial soul into the *Sirr*. Because inasmuch as al-Rāzī's understanding of this issue in *al-Sirr* is similar to that in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* one could reasonably expect him to discard the *al-Ishārāt*'s argument and opt for another account to set up the celestial soul's rationality. One possible way to surmount this ambiguity, is to argue that in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* al-Rāzī has undergone a development in his thought and became aware of the intricacy of the "rational-bodily souls complex." This point, however, is not illustrated by Noble who seems to treat *al-Sirr* and *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* as subscribing to the same reading of *Ishārāt* which is not the case.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Noble elucidates the concept of celestial causation. He probes al-Rāzī's perspective in *al-Sirr*, highlighting how the circular motion of the spheres determines the process of sublunary generation and corruption (*kawn wa-fasād*). The perpetual circular motion acts as an efficient cause (*ʿila fāʿila*) that brings about the terrestrial phenomena and mediates between them and God. However, Noble's account of the efficient causality here, is inconsistent with his analysis in the tenth chapter, where al-Rāzī is portrayed as championing classical-Ashʿarite occasionalism – the view which asserts that God is the only real agent in the cosmos. This portrayal results from al-Rāzī's rebuttal

[10] This paradox results from the fact that the celestial motion of the sphere is eternal, and thus the object of this motion must be universal. However, this eternal motion gives rise to particular configurations – i.e., particular places and positions (*ayūn wa-awḍāʿ*) covered by the sphere throughout its motion. Now the possessor of a universal intention (*qaṣd kullī*) which are subject to universal perception (*idrāk kullī*), and which must be abstracted (*mujarrad*) from matter is the rational (*nāṭiqa*) soul of the sphere.[10] And since from a universal intention a particular action cannot procced, the mover of the sphere must possess particular intentions, and as a result, it must be bodily. Thus, the mover of the sphere is corporeal (*jismāniyya*). Accordingly, the celestial soul is both corporeal and incorporeal. This, al-Rāzī argues in his commentary on the *Ishārāt*, is absurd. See al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt,* 2 vols., edited by ʿA. Najafzāde (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āthār wa Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005).

of the Sabians' belief that the planets are the proximate gods (*āliha qarība*) deserving of worship. Noble argues that al-Rāzī's refutation is grounded in his reckoning that God is the only real agent and that "any apparent causal relationship between celestial configurations and terrestrial phenomena can only be understood as God's norm (*ʿāda*) of acting in this world: it provides no evidence whatsoever of any real agency other than God's" (p. 225). Having said this, Noble's analysis of efficient causality versus what he calls "real agency" is somewhat perplexing. This is because it is unclear how one could reconcile between efficient causality attributed to the circular motion and between assigning no "real" agency to beings other than God.

Noble's study, despite the above criticisms, is a bold exploration of a somewhat *unorthodox* and enigmatic work of al-Rāzī. It is elegantly written, albeit containing a few shortcomings in the Arabic translation.[11] The monograph is very well structured, with clear progress evident in its multiple chapters and subsections that make up a coherent thesis. Noble's analysis widens our understanding of major philosophical themes in al-Rāzī's cosmology and occult science. His analysis further exemplifies the tendency in the postclassical period to integrate philosophical doctrines and themes in various fields of inquiry. Noble remarkably demonstrates the transmission of Avicenna's psychology, theory of perception, and prophetology – showing how al-Rāzī deviates from Avicenna's naturalistic account of prophethood in the task of safeguarding the exclusive status of the prophet. No less significant is the reception of Abū l-Barakāt's doctrine of the *Perfect Nature*, which al-Rāzī adopts in his construction of the Sabian occult science. One might question, however, whether al-Rāzī's sympathy with the Sabian doctrines, upon which he sought to establish their occult science, and which was motivated by his pursuit of patronage, does truly mirror his own thought in this rather early work.

[11] For instance, Noble translates *fikr* as "meditation" (p. 35). At other times he translates *fikr* as thinking (p. 21). Further is his use of intentions to translate, *maʿānī* which he also utilizes to translate *qaṣd*, pl. *maqāṣid* (e.g., p. 89). Another example is Noble's translation of *Muḥaqqiq* as "Investigator of truth" (p. 246). Although this translation coveys, to some extent, the meaning of *Muḥaqqiq*, it however leaves out a fundamental aspect of *taḥqīq* (the Arabic root of *Muḥaqqiq*) which designates a "critical inquiry." Accordingly, *Muḥaqqiq* might be better translated as a "Critical Inquirer of the Truth."