The “Kitab al-Shukuk’ala Jālinus” of Muhammad ibn Zachariyā al-Razi

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Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zachariyā al-Razi, known as the “Galen of the Arabs,”1 “the Physician par excellence of the Muslims,”2 and “Learned Master (Allamah) of the Sciences of the Ancients,”3 was one of the most widely-recognized and encyclopaedic philosophers ever to appear in the Islamic world. He read with a number of teachers from Khurāsān, al-Nishaburi,4 Abu Zayd al-Balkhi;5 and Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari.6 He made a thorough study of medical practice in the hospitals of Rayy and Baghdad, finally achieving the rank of “resident surgeon” (“al-tabib al-maristani”).

Al-Razi debated with many outstanding personalities of his time. He discussed metaphysics and the problem of time with Abu al-Qasim al-Ka’bi al-Balkhi;8 the question of the pre-existence of matter with Ahmad ibn al-Hasan al-Masma’i;9 the problem of pleasure with Abu al-Abbas al-Nashi al-Akbar;10 the problem of “bitter taste” with Ahmad ibn Muhammad Abu Tayyib al-Sarakhsi;12 and later with Ahmad ibn Kayyal.13

The esteem in which al-Razi was held is indicated by the Fihrist (bibliography) of his writings compiled by Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, another great learned man of the 5th/11th century.14 Al-Biruni undertook the work despite his strong disagreement with al-Razi on a number of philosophical and religious issues. The Fihrist is divided by subject; some of the various headings include medicine, the natural sciences, logic, mathematics, astronomy, commentaries and summaries by al-Razi of predecessors, works, metaphysics, alchemy, and heresiography.

Among al-Razi’s works on the natural sciences al-Biruni mentions the al-Shukuk ala Jālinus (Doubts concerning Galen).15 Unfortunately only three manuscripts of this valuable work have survived; all three, moreover, seem to be descended from one copy. Nor has the al-Shukuk, despite its importance for the history of medicine, ever been published. It is my aim in this modest essay to bring al-Razi’s critique of Galen to the attention of scholars of the history of medicine.

It is first necessary to point out that the Arabic term “shakk” (Lit: “doubt”) contained in the title is equivalent to the Greek term “aporia” which gives the sense of “difficulty, hardship, confusion.” In philosophical dialectics it indicates a difficulty, problem, or enigma. The addition of the Arabic preposition “alā” (here parallel to the Greek “pros”) further indicates objection and critique.16 Thus al-Razi, brings up certain “doubts” or objections to problematic points in which Galen has apparently entangled himself in his writings.

Galen himself was born several centuries before al-Razi, in the year 130 C.E. in the town of Pergamon (known to the Arabs as “Farghumus” or “Farghamun”) in Asia Minor. He died in Sicily in 200 C.E., leaving behind numerous treatises not only on medicine and philosophy, but on many other subjects as well. He also compiled an autobiographical, called in Arabic “Finaks”17 or “Binaks”,18 from the Greek “pinax” meaning “catalogue”, along with another treatise laying down the proper order in which his books were to be studied.19 After his death his fame only increased. His students had a great following; they travelled to many lands and taught in various schools and centres of religious learning. As time passed the Greek originals of Galen’s works became hidden away in the corners of the academies, where they lay for centuries nearly forgotten. By this time, however, most had been rendered by Muslim translators either into Syriac or Arabic. In the Middle Ages they were subsequently translated from Arabic into Latin,20 and finally in the Renaissance with the renewed influence of Greek thought further into Latin and then into other European languages.

Many translators shared in the Arabization of Galen’s works. Chief among these was Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-‘Abādi, known as “Hunayn the Translator”...
It is worth mentioning here that al-Rāzi sided with Plato rather than Aristotle concerning many of the questions on which Galen himself agreed with Plato. Examples of these are the problem of pain and pleasure, and the three souls. Thus al-Sā’dī al-Andalūsi (d. 462/1069-1070) says concerning al-Rāzi: He strongly disagreed with Aristotle, censuring him for splitting from his teacher Plato and others of the ancient philosophers in the matter of many of their beliefs.28

Thus having read all of Galen’s important works and finding a number of inconsistencies and dubious points, al-Rāzi set about composing his Kitāb al-Shukuk. Al-Biruni calls the book al-Shukuk ala Jalīnus29 while Ibn Abī Usaybi‘ah gives it a longer title: al-Shukuk wa-al-munāqādat alai‘i fi kutub Jalīnus (Doubts and inconsistencies in the Books of Galen).30 The manuscript which I have used (described below) bears a longer title still: Kitāb al-shukuk lil-Rāzi ala kitāb fādil al-attibā Jalīnus fi al-kutub alladhī nusība ilay(hi) (AL-Razi’s Book of Doubts Concerning the Treatise of the Most Eminent of Physicians, Galen, on the WorksAttributed to Him).13

It should be recalled here that Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl.early 3rd C./A.D.) also opposed certain of Galen’s beliefs,32 before al-Rāzi; thus Yahyā al-Nahawī al-Iskandarānī (John Philoponus, fl.c.A.D. 490 -c.570) also wrote a work which he called “Doubts”, in which he clarified what he believed to be Galen’s errors.33

The Ismā‘ili philosopher Muhammad ibn Surkh al-Nishābūrī (fl. A.H. 4th or 5th C./A.D. 10th or 11th C.) also mentions al-Rāzi’s Shukuk in a book which he wrote as a commentary on the qasidah of his contemporary Abu al-Haytham al-Jurjānī-going on to note that another man living at the time wrote a book which he called “Doubts Concerning Muhammad ibn Zakariya.” It is reported that when al-Rāzi saw the latter book he said, “It seems that he holds me in the same high regard as I do Galen himself” he then proceeded to confess his own errors.34 The story may be apocryphal.

It is certain, however, that Ibn Abī Usaybi‘ah and Abu al-Alla ibn Zuhr35 each wrote a book called “Solution to al-Rāzi’s Doubts Concerning the Works of Galen” (Hall shukuk al-Rāzi ala kutub Jalīnus). Ibn Maymun al-Qurtubi (“Maimonides”, d. 601/1204-1205) also mentions Ibn Ridwān’s and Ibn Zuhr’s refutations of al-Rāzi’s Book of Aphorisms (Kitāb al-fusūl).38 Ibn Abī Usaybi‘ah actually had Ibn Ridwān’s treatise in his possession, but it is unfortunately lost to us. Ibn Zuhr’s work, however, is existant, in the form of a manuscript in the library of the Madrasat Nawwāb in Mashhad.39 The title reads al-Bayān wa-al-tadyin fi al-intīṣār li-Jalīnus (Explanation and Elucidation in support of Galen). Ibn Zuhr thinks that either one of the Islamic “sceptics” (al-Sufasta ‘iyah) contrived the work and then fathered it.
on al-Rāżī, or that al-Rāżī wrote it either when he was still young and had not yet properly understood Galen, or at the end of his life when he was preoccupied with alchemy and had been overcome by the fumes of arsenic and sulfur. 41

Al-Rāżī himself begins the al-Shukuk with the following comment “I know that many people will think me ignorant for writing this book...”42 He then goes on to defend himself: “The practice of science and medicine does not allow that one surrender, as it were, to its pre-eminent practitioners, or simply accept what they say. One should not defer to them and refrain from questions-nor does the [true] philosopher approve of such an attitude on the part of his students”. He then replies to those who reproach him as follows:

As for those who censure me and call me ignorant for having produced this Book of Doubts - I do not consider them philosophers. They have turned their backs on the way of the philosophers. They have taken up the ways of ignorant upstarts, blindly imitating (q-l-d) authority and refraining from raising any objection against it. Aristotle says: Plato and the Truth are at odds, and both are friend to me - but the Truth is a friend dearer still than Plato. 43

Al-Rāżī continues:

Asked why modern scholars should attach [such critiques] to [the works of] the ancients, I cite several reasons. Among these is that error is inherent in human beings; and that sometimes passion overwhelms reason. For passion may perhaps affect the steady gaze of reason in the case of a certain man concerning some matter or other, to the extent that he may pronounce an error in regard to it, whether he be aware of that error or not. Thus it may be that when another man free from prejudice carefully examines the statement of such a person he may not come to the same conclusion, and the passion which motivated the first man will not lead him [to that error]. Another reason I cite for such critiques is that the sciences continually grow and are refined as time passes... If it then be said that this is tantamount to claiming that modern scholars are better than the ancients, I reply: that I do not see that this statement is valid except on condition that the moderns improve on that which has been laid down by the ancients. 44

Al-Rāżī brings up “doubts” relating both to Galen’s medicine and philosophy. Maimonides objects in his Book of Aphorisms that he has devoted all his efforts to philosophy, and consequently neglected medicine. 45

Maimonides’s observation, however, must be rejected, for Galen himself also enquired in his medical works into questions of philosophy such as createdness and pre-existence, generation and corruption, time and place, matter, and plenum and void. The ancients believed that medicine and philosophy complemented each other. Some even said that medicine was “the philosophy of the body” and philosophy “the medicine of the soul.” 46 Galen himself wrote a book with the title: “That the Good Physician must be a Philosopher.”47 The Islamic physicians took the same view: they discussed philosophical questions in their medical works on the principle that they affected the medicine of the body and the soul. We see this approach in the Firdaws al-hikhmah (“Paradise of Wisdom”) of Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari (d. after 895/1489-1490), and also in the Kitab al-mu'aliyyat al-Bugratiyah (“Book of Hippocratic Treatments”) of Abu al-Hasan al-Tabari.

It is interesting that on one occasion in the Shukuk al-Rāżī makes an objection to a doctrine of Galen concerning language, thus stepping outside the realm of both medicine and philosophy. He reports Galen’s statement that, “The language of the Greeks is the sweetest, while those of some other peoples resemble the squealing of pigs and the croaking of frogs.” Al-Rāżī replies: This is a statement such as a common person would make! For the pronunciation of words of any language become light and sweet through habituation. The Arabic language seems to the Arabs as does Greek to the Greeks; and the language of the Byzantines seems gross to the Arabs just as that of the Arabs seems gross to the Byzantines. 48 Ibn Hazm has this to say in reply to Galen: “This is extreme ignorance; anyone who becomes aware of a language not his own which he does not understand will see it in the way Galen describes, and no differently.” 49

Al-Rāzi mentions the views on nature and philosophy of Greek thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Theophrastus, Chrysippus, Empedocles, Diocles, Thales, Asclepiades, Dioscorides, and Erasistratos. Among Islamic scholars he names Hunayn ibn Ishaq and Muhammad ibn Musā28, he also mentions, without giving his name, a prominent man and noble friend who used to read the works of Galen with him.51 In the course of his discussion of Galen, al-Rāzi also records the names of a number of his own works no longer existant. These names allow us to at least determine the subject-matter of the lost treatises. In one passage, for instance, he mentions the *Sam al-Kayyān*, evidently from its title an essay on the oral teaching of the natural sciences: “I have devoted a chapter of the *Sam al-Kayyān* to the opinion of those who assert that changes are either hidden or apparent. Whoever reads it will become convinced that this doctrine has shortcomings”.52 Other titles of lost works of al-Rāzi are:

“Refutation of al-Sarakhshi on the Matter of Bitter Taste” (*Fi al-radd al-aʿlā al-Sarakhshi fi amr al-tam al-murr*). In the course of a discussion of proof that the efficacy of a medicine may be determined through its taste al-Rāzi writes: “I have discussed these matters in a treatise in which I have devoted to refutation of Ali Ahmad ibn-Tayyib al-Sarakhshi (d.286-899) concerning bitter taste”.53 That the Source of Cold is the Center of the Earth (*Fi anna markaz al-ard yanbugh aI-bard*). Galen, says al-Rāzi, held that the source of cold was at the centre of the earth. This, however, would necessitate that the earth be absolutely cold-and there is nothing colder than absolute cold. Thus it would be colder than ice, which is contrary to the sense [of touch]. Much discussion would be needed to solve this problem, to which I have devoted a whole treatise.54

*On the Mechanism of Sight* (*Fi kayfiyat al-absār*). Al-Rāzi says in the *Shukuk*: I have devoted a very large treatise to this matter. It is evident that sight results through the projection of shapes onto the eye. Galen is extremely partisan in what he has to say concerning this discussion at hand.55

*On Seasons and Climates* (*Fi al-azmina wa-al-jaww al-asrab*). In setting out Galen’s view that some natures are better in summer al-Rāzi comments: The doubts which may be raised as to Galen’s refutation of Chrysippus concerning the accidents of the soul. It is not necessary to prolong discussion of them here, since I intend to write a book which will treat the subject thoroughly, God willing, and in which I will also discuss the objections which may be made to Galen’s Ethics.56

Thus al-Rāzi’s Kitāb al-Shukuk allows us to gain knowledge of the contents of some of his works which are no longer existant - even if, in many cases, he does not specifically mention the titles of such works.

I have only been able here to give a glimpse of this important treatise of Muhammad ibn Zakariyā al-Rāzi, The Physician of the Arabs. I would recommend to those interested in the works of Galen and al-Rāzi and their medical and philosophical thought to pay particular attention to this work. For my part, I hope to eventually edit and publish the Kitāb al-Shukuk; it should be of great use for the history of Islamic science.

**Endnotes**

14- First published by Paul Kraus as *Risālat Abī Rayḥān al-Fīhrīst kutub al-Rāzi* (Paris: 1936); more recently by Mehdi Mohaghegh, under the title of *Fīhrīst kitābāt-hā-yi rāzi va-Bīrūnī*. 

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15- al-Biruni, al-Risālah, no. 88 (in both editions).


19- This was known in Arabic as Fāmārīt gīrāt at kutub (īḥī), and in Latin as De Ordine Librorum.


27- al-Rāzī, Kitāb al-shukuk, p. 16.


29- al-Biruni, al-Risālah, no. 88.


33- Ali ibn Ridwān al-Misrī writes in a letter to Ibn Butlān al-Baghdādir: I am much astonished to see that Yahyā al-Nahawī has written a book which he calls al-Shukuk in which he clarifies what he asserts to be the errors (ughlītāt) of Galen (Khamās raṣālīt Ibn Butlān wa-Ibn Ridwān, ed. J. Schacht & M. Meyerhof (Cairo: 1937), p. 75).