The “Kitab al-Shukuk’alas Jalinus” of Muhammad ibn Zachariyā al-Razi

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Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zachariyā al-Rāzī, 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-Rāzī 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 aI-Abbas al-Nashi al-Akbar;10 the problem of bitter taste with Ahmad ibn Muhammad Abu Tayyib al-Sarakhsi;12 and the imamate with Ahmad ibn Kayyal.13

The esteem in which al-Rāzī was held in 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-Rāzī 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-Rāzī of predecessors, works, metaphysics, alchemy, and heresiography.

Among al-Rāzī’s works on the natural sciences Al-Biruni mentions the al-Shukuk ala Jalinus (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-Rāzī’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 “pro”) further indicates objection and critique.16 Thus al-Rāzī, 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-Rāzī, in the year 130 C.E. in the town of Pergamon (known to the Arabs as “Farghamus” 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 autobiography, 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 Ishāq al-‘Abādī, known as “Hunayn the Translator”
Hunayn's translations of Galen are listed in one of his own treatises, and it was through these that Galen became known in the Islamic world. His name finally became synonymous in the Islamic literatures with perfection in the art of medicine. The well-known Arabic poet al-Mutanabbi says:

When I found the cure for my illness with my beloved;

Even Galen seemed to me little in comparison.

Although many Islamic scholars studied Galen and used his writings, al-Razi was probably the most learned among them. He even makes mention of several of Galen’s works listed neither in Hunayn ibn Ishāq’s bibliography nor that of Galen himself. His admiration for Galen is obvious: he followed the Greek physician not only in his medicine, but also in his philosophy and ethics. It is no wonder then that he begins the Kitāb al-shukuk with the following declaration:

[In writing this book] I am faced with opposing one who is in my eyes the greatest of men, and who has benefitted me more than any person. It was through him that I was guided; I trod in his footsteps, and drank of his knowledge as if from an ocean! I am faced with this knowing that the slave must not oppose his master, nor the student his teacher, nor he who receives grace the one who granted it.

We also see that the titles of several of al-Razi’s works coincide with those of Galen’s, for example “al-Burhān” (The Demonstration); “Fi-mā ya’taqidu-hu ra’ y(an)” (On the Beliefs Held by Galen); and “Fi manāfi-a’dā” (On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body). Al-Razi also summarizes a number of Galen’s important works: thus his “Summary of the Most Eminent of Physicians, Galen, on the Works Attributed to Him.” He then proceeds to confess his own errors.

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

The Ismā’īli philosopher Muhammad ibn Surkh al-Nishāburi (fl. A.H. 4th or 5th C./A.D. 10th or 11th C.) also mentions al-Razi’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 Zakarīya.” It is reported that when al-Razi 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. The story may be apocryphal. It is certain, however, that Ibn Abī Usaybi‘ah and Abu al-Ālā ibn Zuhr each wrote a book called “Solution to al-Razi’s Doubts Concerning the Works of Galen” (Hall shukuk al-Razi ala kutub Jālinus). Ibn Maynum al-Qurtubi (“Maimonides”, d. 601/1204-1205) also mentions Ibn Rūdaw’s and Ibn Zuhr’s refutations of al-Razi’s Book of Aphorisms Kitāb al-fusūl). Ibn Abī Usaybi‘ah actually had Ibn Rūdaw’s treatise in his possession, but it is unfortunately lost to us. Ibn Zuhr’s work, however, is extant, in the form of a manuscript in the library of the Madrasat Nawwāb in Mashhad. The title reads al-Bayān wa-al-tadiyn fi al-intisār li-Jālinus (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-Rāzi, or that al-Rāzi 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.\textsuperscript{41}

Al-Rāzi himself begins the \textit{al-Shukuk} with the following comment “I know that many people will think me ignorant for writing this book…”\textsuperscript{42} He then goes on to defend himself: “The practice of science and medicine does not allow that one surrender, as it were, 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.\textsuperscript{43}

Al-Rāzi 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 considering 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.\textsuperscript{44}

Al-Rāzi brings up “doubts” relating both to Galen’s medicine and philosophy. Maimonides objects in his \textit{Book of Aphorisms} that he has devoted all his efforts to philosophy, and consequently neglected medicine.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{46} Galen himself wrote a book with the title: “That the Good Physician must be a Philosopher.”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Firdaws al-hikhmah} (“Paradise of Wisdom”) of Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari (d. after 895/1489-1490), and also in the \textit{Kitab al-mu'alijat al-Bugratiyay} (“Book of Hippocratic Treatments”) of Abu al-Hasan al-Tabari.

It is interesting that on one occasion in the \textit{Shukuk} al-Rāzi 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-Rāzi 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 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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{49}

Al-Razi 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 the names of Hunayn ibn Ishaq and Muhammad ibn Musa, he also mentions, without giving his name, a prominent man and noble friend who used to read the works of Galen with him. In the course of his discussion of Galen, al-Razi 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-Kayyan, evidently from its title an essay on the oral teaching of the natural sciences: “I have devoted a chapter of the Sam al-Kayyan 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.” Other titles of lost works of al-Razi are:

"Refutation of al-Sarakhsi on the Matter of Bitter Taste" (Fi al-radd ala al-Sarakhsi fi amr al-tam al-murr). In the course of a discussion of the treatise that the efficacy of a medicine may be determined through its taste al-Razi writes: “I have discussed these matters in a work in which I have devoted refutation of Ali Ahmad ibn-Tayyib al-Sarakhsi (d.286-899) concerning bitter taste”.53 Other titles of lost works of al-Razi are:

On the Climate of Underground Passages (Fi jaww al-asrāb). Al-Razi writes: I have explained in a separate treatise that the warmth which we feel in the winter in the water which comes from springs and from the air in deep places does not result because it is of itself warmer at that time than in summer. Rather we feel it so because of the cold of our bodies - just as well feel tepid water to be cold after being in the bath because of the heat of our bodies. If you should wish to inform yourself of all I have stated concerning this matter, then read [the appropriate] treatise.57

Greater Book of the Soul (al-Nafs al-Kabir). Al-Razi writes: Many doubts may be raised against 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 Ethica.58

Thus al-Razi’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 Zakariya al-Razi, The Physician of the Arabs. I would recommend to those interested in the works of Galen and al-Razi 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

6- al-Qifti, Akhbār al-hukamā, p. 231.
7- Ibn Juljul, Tabaqāt al-atibā’ wa-al-hukamā ed. Fuād al-Sayyid (Cairo, 1955), 77. Māristān is an abbreviation of Bimaristān, that is hospital in Persian.
12- Yaqut al-Hamawi, Irshād al-arib, ed. Margoliouth(Cairo, 1924), vol.1, p.158.
14- First published by Paul Kraus as Risālat Abī Rayhān al-Fihrist kutub al-Rāzī (Paris: 1936); more recently by Mehdi Mohaghegh, under the title of Fihrist Kitāb-hā-yi Rāzī va-Bīrūnī.
15- al-Biruni, al-Risālah, no.88 (in both editions).
19- This was known in Arabic as Fīmūratib gīrā at kutub (῾ihī), and in Latin as De Ordine Librorum.
25- Ibn Abī Usaybi’ah, Uyun al-anbā, nos. 2, 190 & 191 of the works cited of al-Rāzī. See also Hunayn ibn Iṣḥāq, al-Risālah, nos. 49, 113 & 115 of the works cited of Galen.
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-Baghdādi: I am much astonished to see that Yāhūṣ al-Nahāwi has written a book which he calls al-Shukuk in which he clarifies what he asserts to be the errors (ughlutāt) of Galen (Khams rasā’il Ibn Butlān wa-῾Ibn Ridwān, ed. J. Schacht & M. Meyerhof [Cairo: 1937], p. 75).