

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# The Book of the Philosophic Life

ABŪ BAKR MUḤAMMAD IBN ZAKARIYYĀ AL-RĀZĪ

TRANSLATED BY CHARLES E. BUTTERWORTH

*University of Maryland*

## [I. INTRODUCTION]

1. Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, may God join gladness and repose to his spirit, said: When people of speculation, discernment, and attainment saw that we were engaging with people and becoming involved with the means of making a living, they criticized us and found fault with us claiming that we were turning away from the life of philosophers, especially the life led by our leader, Socrates. Of him it is related that he did not call upon kings but made light of them when they called upon him, did not eat pleasant food, did not wear fine clothing, did not build, did not acquire, did not beget, did not eat flesh, did not drink wine, and did not attend festivities. Instead, he confined himself to eating vegetables, wrapping himself in a ragged garment, and lodging in a cask in the desert. Moreover, he did not practice dissimulation either with the common people or with those in authority. Instead, he confronted them with what was truth according to him in the most explicit and clearest utterances. We, however, are the opposite of that.

2. Then they said, among the evils of this life that our leader Socrates led is that it goes against the course of nature and provision for cultivation and begetting and leads to the ruination of the world and the perdition of people and their destruction.

3. We shall respond to them concerning whatever of that is in us, God willing.

## [II. THE PHILOSOPHIC LIFE]

### [A. *The Reasons for Socrates' Earlier Life*]

4. Thus, we say that they speak the truth in what they relate and mention about Socrates. That was part of him. However, they ignore other things and

This translation is based on al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafīyyah*, in *Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, Rasā'il Falsafīyyah*, ed. Paul Kraus; (reprint; Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1973), pp. 98–111. The paragraphs and textual divisions are mine. The numbers in square brackets within the text refer to the pages of Kraus' edition in *Rasā'il Falsafīyyah*.

refrain from mentioning them so intent are they on forcing a proof against us. That is, these matters they relate about Socrates did pertain to him at the very outset and for a long period of his life. Then he turned away from many of them so that he died having had daughters, fought the enemy, attended sessions of festivities, eaten good things except for flesh, and drunk a little intoxicating beverage. That is known and related among those who are concerned about inquiring into the reports about this man.

5. Indeed, he was the way [100] he was at the very outset because of his great amazement over philosophy, his love for it, his desire to devote to it the time otherwise dedicated to passions and pleasures, his nature being inclined to it rather than to that, and his making light of and looking down on those who did not view philosophy in the way it deserves and who preferred what was baser than it. Without a doubt, at the start of stirring and ardent matters, one prefers turning to them, being excessive in loving them and pursuing them, and hating those opposed to them until, when he penetrates them deeply and the matters become firmly settled in him, the excessiveness about them declines and he returns to moderation. As it is said in the adage: “there is a pleasure to every new thing.” So this was the condition of Socrates during that period of his life. And what was related of him with respect to these matters is more widespread and numerous because they are more curious, astonishing, and remote than the conditions of people. People are enamored about spreading the curious, unusual report and shunning the familiar and habitual.

6. We are not, therefore, opposed to the praiseworthy aspect of Socrates’ life, even though we fall short of him greatly and acknowledge our deficiency in practicing the just life, suppressing desires, loving knowledge, and aspiring to it. Our difference with Socrates, then, is not about quality of life but about quantity. We are not inferior if we acknowledge our failing with respect to him, for that is the truth; and acknowledging the truth is more noble and virtuous. So this is what we say about this topic.

*[B. Austerity Versus Profligacy]*

7. With respect to what they criticize in [the first of] Socrates’ two lives, we say: what is truly blameworthy there also is the quantity, not the quality. For it is clear, as we have explained in our book *On Spiritual Medicine*, that abandoning oneself to passions and preferring them is not most virtuous and most noble. Rather, it is taking each need to the extent that is indispensable or to the extent that does not bring about a pain that surpasses the pleasure thereby obtained.

8. And Socrates did turn back from what was excessive in it, that which is truly blameworthy and leads to the ruination of the world and the perdition of people, for he did come back and beget, war against [101] the enemy, and

attend sessions of festivities. Anyone who does that leaves off rushing into the ruination of this world and perdition of the people. It is not necessary that not to be like that is to be mired in the passions. And we, even if we do not deserve the name of philosophy in comparison to Socrates, surely deserve its name in comparison to nonphilosophic people.

[C. Principles of the Philosophic Life]

9. Since this has come forth with respect to the issue, let us complete the argument about the philosophic life so that the lovers of knowledge and those who prefer it may profit from it. So we say: we need to support the matter concerning the goal we are intent upon in this treatise on fundamentals whose explanation has been set forth in other books that are to be consulted to make easier what is in this treatise. Among them are our book *On Divine Science*, our book *On Spiritual Medicine*, our book *On Blaming Those Characterized as Philosophers Who Occupy Themselves with What Is Superfluous in Geometry*, and our book characterized as *The Glory of the Art of Alchemy*, but above all our book characterized as *The Spiritual Medicine*. Indeed, it is indispensable for bringing to completion the goal of this treatise and the fundamentals upon which we build the branches of the philosophic life—which we take here and set forth in an abridged form. They are:

i. We will have a praiseworthy or blameworthy state after death according to our life during the time our souls are in our bodies.

ii. The most virtuous matter for which we were created and towards which we are moved is not getting bodily pleasures, but the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of justice; through these two comes about our deliverance from this world of ours to the world in which there is neither death nor pain.

iii. Nature and desire call us to prefer present pleasure, whereas intellect frequently calls us to leave present pleasures aside for matters that are to be preferred.

iv. Our Master, from whom we hope for reward and fear punishment, looking over us and having compassion for us, does not want us to cause pain; detesting injustice and ignorance on our part, He loves for us to be knowledgeable and just; indeed, this [102] Master punishes the one among us who causes pain and who deserves to be pained according to what he deserves.

v. We ought not to endure a pain in the hope of getting a pleasure that the pain itself surpasses in quantity and quality.

vi. The Creator, may He be magnified and glorified, has bestowed upon us the particular things of which we have need, like tilling, weaving, and similar things of which the world and subsistence are constituted.

10. Let them [i.e., these principles] be accorded us, then, so that we may build upon them.

## [D. About Pleasure]

11. So we say: if the pleasures and pains of this world are interrupted when life is interrupted whereas the pleasures of the world in which there is no death are always uninterrupted and unlimited, he is deceived who would purchase a transitory, interrupted, limited pleasure for one that is eternal, lasting, uninterrupted, and unlimited. Since the matter is such, it follows necessarily that we ought not to seek a pleasure which to acquire we will undoubtedly perpetrate something that prevents us from deliverance to the world of the soul or that forces upon us in this world a pain that is greater and more severe in quantity and quality than the pleasure we prefer. Any pleasures apart from that are permitted to us.

12. The philosophic man may, however, leave aside many of these permitted pleasures in order to condition and habituate his soul so that—as we have mentioned in the *Book of the Spiritual Medicine*—it will be more comfortable and easier for him in case of necessity. For habit, as the ancients mention, is second nature making the hard easy and the strange familiar—either with respect to matters of the soul or bodily matters. As we see that couriers are stronger at walking, soldiers bolder at war, and so on, there is no obscurity about habits facilitating matters that were difficult and hard before habituation.

13. Even though this argument—I mean, what we have mentioned about the extent of restricted pleasure—is abbreviated and summary, many particular matters are subsumed under it—as we have explained in the *Book of the Spiritual Medicine*. [103] For if the fundamental we have set down—namely, that the intelligent man ought not to yield to a pleasure when he fears it will entail a pain surpassing the pain he acquires in putting up with forsaking pleasure and stifling passion—is sound and true in itself or is so postulated, then it necessarily follows that: even if we were in such a condition as to possess the whole earth for the length of our life by perpetrating upon people what does not please God, such that we would be prevented by Him from acquiring eternal good and abiding grace, we ought not to do or prefer it. Again, if we were sure or almost sure that by eating something like a plate of fresh dates we would get an ophthalmia for ten days, we ought not to prefer eating them. This is the case with respect to the particular instances falling between the two examples we have mentioned, despite the one being great and the other petty in relation. Each of the particular instances is petty in relation to the greater and big in relation to the more petty. Because of the multitude of particular instances falling under this general rule, it is not possible to make the argument exhaustive.

14. Since what we wanted to explain has been explained with respect to this topic, we are intent upon explaining another one of our goals that follows upon this goal.

[*E. About Pain*]

15. So we say: from the fundamental we have set down to the effect that our Lord and Master is concerned about us, looks over us, and has compassion for us it follows also that He detests pain befalling us. Any pain befalling us that is not by our enterprise or choices but pertains to nature is thus due to a necessity and occurred inevitably. It results therefrom that we ought not to cause pain to any sensible being unless it deserves such pain or unless by means of that pain we spare the creature a more intense one. [104] Under this maxim, as well, there fall many details: all the sorts of wrongs, the pleasure kings take in hunting animals, and the excess to which people go in exerting tame animals when they use them. Now all of that must be according to an intelligent and just intent, rule, method, and doctrine—one that is not exceeded nor deviated from.

16. Pain occurs when one hopes to push away a greater one by means of it, as when the surgeon lances [an abscess]; cauterizes a gangrenous limb; and makes [the sick person] drink bitter, repugnant medication and forego pleasant food from fear of great, painful sicknesses. Again, tame animals are to be exerted with [considerate] intent and without violence, except in instances when necessity calls for violence and reason and justice requires it—as in spurring a horse in seeking to save oneself from the enemy. For justice then requires spurring and injuring if it is hoped thereby to save a human being, especially if he is a good, learned man or one of great value in a way that confers well-being on most people. For the value of such a man and his remaining in this world is better for his people than the horse remaining. Again, when two men happen to be in a waterless desert and one of the men has enough water that he is able to save himself but not his companion, in such a case the one of the two who confers more well-being to the people is to be preferred. So this is the analogy for these and similar kinds of cases.

17. Hunting, pursuing, exterminating, and annihilating ought to be engaged in with respect to animals that lead a complete life only by means of flesh—such as lions, tigers, wolves, and the like—as well as with those which cause major harm without there being any hope of profiting from them or need to use them—like vipers, scorpions, and so on. So this is the analogy for these kinds of cases.

18. It is permissible to destroy these animals only from two perspectives. One is that when they are not destroyed, they destroy many animals. [105] This is a feature particularly characteristic of these animals, I mean those that live only by flesh. The other [perspective] is that souls are delivered from the bodies of no animals except for the body of human beings. Since this is the case, the delivering of souls like these from their bodies is like a bringing along and facilitating to [ultimate] deliverance.

19. Since both perspectives apply to those that live only by flesh, they must

be exterminated so far as possible. Indeed, that brings about a lessening of animals being pained and a hope that their souls will enter into more suitable bodies. Vipers, scorpions, wasps, and so on have in common that they cause pain to animals and are not suitable to be used by man the way tame animals are used and put to work. Therefore it is permissible to annihilate and exterminate them.

20. Animals that are put to work and that live from grass must not be exterminated and annihilated. Rather, they are to be worked gently as we have mentioned and, as much as possible, used sparingly for food and bred sparingly lest they become so numerous that it is necessary to slaughter them in great numbers. That, however, is to be done with intent and according to need. Were it not that there is no hope of a soul in any but a human body being delivered, the judgment of reason would not give rein to their being slaughtered at all. Now those who engage in philosophy have disagreed about this matter. Some of them are of the opinion that man is to nourish himself by means of flesh, and others are not of that opinion. Socrates was among those who did not permit it.

21. The judgment of intellect and justice being that man is not to cause pain to others, it follows that he is not to cause pain to himself either. Many matters forbidden by the judgment of intellect also come under this maxim, such as what the Hindus do in approaching God by burning their bodies and throwing them upon sharp pieces of iron and such as the Manicheans cutting off their testicles when they desire sexual intercourse, emaciating themselves through hunger and thirst, and soiling themselves by abstaining from water or using urine in place of it. Also entering into this classification, though far inferior, is what Christians do [106] in pursuing monastic life and withdrawing to hermitages as well as many Muslims staying permanently in mosques, renouncing earnings, and restricting themselves to a modicum of repugnant food and to irritating and coarse clothing. Indeed, all of that is an iniquity towards themselves and causes them pain that does not push away a preponderant pain.

22. And Socrates had led a life like this in his early years, but he renounced it in later years as we mentioned before. There is a great diversity among people with respect to this classification not to be gone into here. Yet it is unavoidable that we say something approximating it by way of illustration.

*[F. Upper and Lower Limits]*

23. Thus we say: people differ with respect to their conditions. Some are raised in comfort and others in misery. Desires make a greater demand upon the souls of some—as with those who are enamored of women, wine, love of rule, and matters such as that with respect to which great diversity occurs among people. Thus the pain that befalls them in suppressing their desires differs greatly in accordance with the difference in their conditions. The skin of

one born of kings and brought up in their comfort will not endure coarse clothing nor will his stomach tolerate repugnant food in the way the one born of common people will. Rather, he will be severely pained from that. Similarly, those accustomed to having a certain kind of pleasure will be pained when prevented from having it; and the inconvenience will be multiplied for them and be more extensive and sharper than for one not accustomed to that pleasure.

24. Because of that it is not possible to charge everyone in the same way; rather, it is to differ in accordance with the difference in their conditions. Thus, the philosophically minded children of kings are not charged with adhering to the food, drink, and other staples of life that the children of the common people are charged with unless it is done gradually when necessity calls for it.

25. However, the limit it is not possible to go beyond is that they abstain from anything pleasant that can be attained only [107] by perpetrating iniquity and murder and, in general, from everything that antagonizes God and must not be done according to the judgment of intellect and justice. What is apart from that is allowed them. So this is the upper limit, I mean, with respect to giving oneself over to enjoyment.

26. The lower limit—I mean, with respect to being ascetic and restricting oneself—is for a human being to eat what does not harm him or make him sick and not to reach beyond to what excessively pleases him or what he desires so that he becomes intent upon pleasure and desire rather than upon satisfying his hunger. And for him to wear what his skin endures without suffering and not to have a propensity for sumptuous, colorful clothing. And for him to dwell in what shelters him from excessive heat and cold and not to reach beyond to magnificent, splendid, colorfully adorned, and highly decorated dwellings unless he have such an abundance of wealth that it is possible for him to extend it to such matters without iniquity, transgression, or self-exertion in acquisition. Therefore those born of poor fathers and brought up in shabby circumstances excel in this instance. For restricting oneself and being ascetic is easier for those like this, just as it was easier for Socrates than for Plato to restrict himself and be ascetic.

27. What falls between these two limits is allowed. The one who practices that does not go outside of the title of philosopher; rather, it is permissible for him to be so entitled. Nonetheless, it is preferable to have a propensity for the lower limit more than for the higher limit. Virtuous souls, even if they are companions to bodies raised in comfort, gradually bring their bodies towards the lower limit.

28. Yet to go beyond the lower limit is to go outside of philosophy, somewhat in the way we have mentioned with respect to the conditions of the Hindus, Manicheans, monks, and hermits. It is to go outside the just life and to antagonize God, may He be exalted, by causing pain to souls needlessly and warrants [108] being placed outside the title of philosophy. The situation is similar with respect to going beyond the higher limit. We beseech God—the

Endower of intellect, the Dispeller of grief, and the Remover of anxiety—to give us success, direct us, and assist us in doing what is most favorable to Him and in bringing us closest to Him.

[G. *The Philosophic Life in Sum*]

29. In sum, I say: Since the Creator, may He be glorified and magnified, is a knower who is not ignorant and a doer of justice who does no injustice; and since He is unqualified knowledge, justice, and compassion; and since He is a creator and master to us, whereas we are slaves and vassals to Him; and since the slaves most beloved of their owners are those who most adhere to their ways of life and are most in accordance with their traditions; the slaves closest to God, may He be magnified and glorified, are those who are most learned, most just, most compassionate, and most kindly. This whole speech is what is meant by the statement of all philosophers: “Philosophy is making oneself similar to God, may He be glorified and magnified, to the extent possible for a human being.” And this is the sum of the philosophic life. A detailed statement of it is what is in the *Book of the Spiritual Medicine*. For there we have mentioned how to rid the soul of bad moral habits and the extent to which someone aspiring to be philosophic ought to concern himself with gaining a livelihood, acquisition, expenditure, and seeking ranks of rulership.

[III. SELF-JUSTIFICATION]

30. Since we have explained what we wanted to explain with respect to this topic, we will return and explain what pertains to us. And we will mention those who defame us and will mention that even until this day we have not lived a life—due to success granted by God and to His assistance—such that we deserve to be excluded from being designated “philosopher.” That is because the one who deserves to have the title of philosophy stripped from him is the one who falls short in both parts of philosophy—I mean, knowledge and practice—through ignorance of what the philosopher is supposed to know or leading a life the philosopher is not supposed to lead. Yet we—due to God’s praise, grace, granted success, and guidance—are free from any of that.

31. Now with respect to the classification of knowledge, if we had only the power to compose a book like this, that would prevent us from having the title of philosophy stripped away. In addition, there are our books<sup>1</sup> like *On Demonstration*, *On Divine Science*, [109] *On Spiritual Medicine*, and our book *On an Introduction to Physical Science*, which is designated as *Lecture on Nature*. And there are our treatises<sup>2</sup> like *On Time, Place, Matter, Eternity, and Vacuum*, *On the Form of the World*, *On the Reason for the Earth Arising in the Middle of the [Heavenly] Sphere*, *On the Reason the [Heavenly] Sphere Has*

*Circular Movement*, and our treatises<sup>3</sup> *On Composition* and *On Body Having Its Own Motion and This Motion Being Known*. And there are our books pertaining to the soul, our books pertaining to matter, and our books about medicine like *The Maṅṣūrī Book*, our *Book to Those Whom the Physician Does not Visit*, our *Book about Existing Drugs*, the one designated as *Royal Medicine*, and the book designated as *The Summary*. With respect to the latter, none of the people of the kingdom has surpassed me nor has anyone yet followed along in my steps or copied me. And there are our books about the art of wisdom, which is alchemy according to the common people. In sum, up to the moment of my doing this treatise, nearly two hundred books, treatises, and pamphlets have issued forth from me in the physical and metaphysical branches of philosophy.

32. With respect to mathematics, I acknowledge that I have looked into them only to the extent that was indispensable for me. That I have not consumed my time in trying to master them is deliberate on my part and not due to an incapacity for them. For those who so wish, I have set forth my excuses to the effect that what I have done is correct and not what those designated as philosophers do who consume their lives busying themselves with the details of geometry.

33. If what I have reached with respect to knowledge is not what is reached by the one deserving to be called a philosopher, then I would like to know who such a one would be in this epoch of ours.

34. Now with respect to the practical part, I have not in my life—due to God's assistance and granting of success—reached beyond the two limits that I defined. Nor has there appeared anything from my actions such that it deserves to be said that my life is not a philosophic life. For I have not kept company with the ruler as a bearer of arms or as one entrusted with his affairs. Rather, I have kept company with him as one engaged in medicine and a convive having free rein over two matters: when he was sick, to cure him [110] and to improve the condition of his body; and when his body was healthy, to entertain him and to advise him—God knows that of me—about everything I hoped would be of sound benefit for him and for his flock.

35. It has not appeared that I have an avidity for amassing money and spending it nor for disputing with people, quarreling with them, or being iniquitous to them. Rather it is known that I am the opposite of all that and have an aversion to claiming many of my rights.

36. With respect to the way I eat, drink, and engage in festivities, those who have frequently observed me in such activities surely know that I do not reach any point of excess. It is the same with the rest of what can be observed of my conduct with respect to clothing, mounts, and male and female servants.

37. With respect to my love of knowledge, my avid desire for it, and my striving for it, it is known among those who have been my companions and have observed me that from the time of my youth until this moment I have never ceased being eagerly devoted to it. It is such that should I chance upon a book I have not read or a man I have not sounded out, I do not pay attention to

any concern whatever—even if that is of major harm to me—until I have gone through the book and learned what the man is about. My patience and striving are such that in a single year I have written, in a script like that used on amulets, more than twenty thousand pages. In working on the large *Summary*, I spent fifteen years working night and day so weakening my eyesight and ruining the muscles in my hand that at this moment I am prevented from reading and writing. Though my situation is thus, I exert myself as much as I can not to abandon them and always have recourse to someone to read and write for me.

## [IV. CONCLUSION]

38. Thus if according to these people the extent of my practice with respect to these matters brings me down from the rank of philosophy and the goal of following the philosophic life according to them is other than what we have described, then let them set it before us either in clear speech or in writing. Thus we may accept it from them, if they bring forth a superior knowledge; or we may refute them if we establish that there is a mistake or deficiency in it.

39. Let me, out of indulgence towards them, grant that I fall short with respect to the practical part. Still, what can they possibly say with respect to the theoretical part? If they have [111] found me to be deficient with respect to it, let them tell me what they have to say about that so that we may look into it and afterwards concede that they are right or refute their error. And if they have not found me to be deficient with respect to the theoretical part, the most appropriate thing is for them to take advantage of my knowledge and not to pay attention to my life. Then they will be doing something like what the poet says:

Put into practice my learning,  
For if I fall short in my doing,  
To your advantage is my learning,  
And of no harm my short falling.

40. This is what I wanted to set down in this treatise. To the Endower of intellect, praises without end—as He deserves and merits. And may God bless His chosen male servants and His good female servants.

41. *The Book of the Philosophic Life* is completed. To God, may He be exalted, praise in every circumstance, always, perpetually, and eternally.

## NOTES

1. The text has the singular: *mīthl kūtābinā*.
2. The text has the singular: *wa <mīthl> maqālatinā*.
3. See preceding note.