

BOOK REVIEW

The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī by Ayman Shihadeh

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ABSTRACT

This review summarises and critically engages with Ayman Shihadeh's *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, a significant contribution to the emerging fields of Islamic ethics and al-Rāzī studies. The book traces the development of al-Rāzī's thought, particularly his ethical philosophy, and seeks to establish the teleological nature of his ethics—an intriguing pursuit given his *Ash'arī* theological background. Organised around the book's chapters, the review highlights Shihadeh's account of al-Rāzī's evolving theories of action, ethics and character as well as his later pessimism, especially as expressed in *Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt*. Shihadeh argues that al-Rāzī's metaethics is consequentialist with regard to action and perfectionist with regard to character. The review also reflects on the intellectual richness of al-Rāzī's thought and the book's contribution to understanding the intersections of *kalām*, *falsafa*, and Sufism within Islamic ethical discourse.

Keywords: Al-Rāzī, teleology, Ash'arī, action, ethics, character

Received: 3 August 2024; accepted: 22 September 2024; published: 31 December 2024

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Cite this article as: Abdul Majid, M. (2024). *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* by Ayman Shihadeh. *Astrolabe: A CIS Student Research Journal*, (6).

<https://www.hbku.edu.qa/sites/default/files/FakhralDinalRazi.pdf>

1. INTRODUCTION

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (544/1149–606/1210) is considered an *Ash‘arī* (al-Subkī, n.d., p. 82) and Ash‘arism—at least in its purest form—is considered a theology of absolute determinism. Thus, the title, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, itself gives a glimpse of the intense discussion that is about to unfold. This essay reviews the above-mentioned book published in 2006 by Brill, authored by Ayman Shihadeh,¹ an intellectual historian of the Islamic world with a focus on theology and philosophy. Al-Rāzī was a theologian and a philosopher with diverse influences ranging from the Ash‘arīs and the *falāsifa* (philosophers) to the Šūfis (Nasr, 1963, p. 644), and one, as we shall see, who indulged in debates with all kinds of thinkers. The title of the book indicates its focus on establishing the teleological nature of al-Rāzī’s ethics. The Greek word *telos*, from which teleology is derived, means “final purpose.” Hence, “a teleological ethical theory explains and justifies ethical values by reference to some final purpose or good” (Korsgaard, 1998).² Teleological ethics can further be divided into consequentialist and perfectionist ethics. While the former “assesses the rightness or wrongness of actions in terms of the value of their consequences” (McNaughton & Rawling, 1998), the latter maintains “what is morally right is what most promotes” certain “human ‘excellences’ or ‘perfections’” (Hurka, 1998). Shihadeh argues that the metaethics that al-Rāzī develops is consequentialist in relation to action and perfectionist in relation to character. At the metaethical level, says Shihadeh (for al-Rāzī), “consequentialism and perfectionism are two aspects of the same teleological ethics, rather than separate ethical theories” (p. 2).

2. THE BOOK

The book is derived from the author’s doctoral dissertation and can be considered his most important contribution to his main area of interest, that is, the study of al-Rāzī, which is complemented by many of his shorter works about al-Rāzī in the form of book chapters and journal articles. As the author mentions in the preface, the book makes a “contribution to two main areas of interest in Islamic intellectual history, namely ethical philosophy and the thought of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.”

The book provides a survey of the development of al-Rāzī’s thought (especially his ethical thought, but also his metaphysics and epistemology, which are vital to understanding the former) from his earliest works to the latest. The book is also appended by al-Rāzī’s *Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt*, which is edited and published for the first time. The author draws from a wide range of al-Rāzī’s works, especially *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, *al-Ishārāt*, *al-Maḥṣūl*, *al-Mabāḥith*, *al-Mulakhkhaṣ*, *Kitāb al-Nafs wa al-Rūḥ*, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*, *I’tiqād*, *al-Arba‘īn*, *al-Taṣṣīr al-Kabīr*, *Ma‘ālim*, *Maṭālib*, and *Sharḥ ‘Uyūn al-Ḥikma*.

The book was well received and has been widely cited since. Peter Adamson, in an online article, calls it “the best book about this figure” (2023). Ibrahim Kalin, in his review

1 For a profile of the author, see SOAS (n.d.).

2 I have used the same sources used by the author to define teleological ethics.

of the book, calls it “an excellent study detailing the development of his (al-Rāzī’s) ethical thought ... considering his reputation as the chief of Sceptics (*imām al-mushakkikīn*) and (that) he changed his mind on a number of issues” (2007). Toby Mayer calls the book a “strong contribution to the emerging picture of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in current scholarship” (2007).

The author starts with an introduction to give a general background of the ethical debates faced by al-Rāzī, followed by a short biography and a chronological list of his works. The book is well-structured and divided into four chapters. Since no ethics can be developed until we have a working conception of action, the first chapter of the book deals with al-Rāzī’s theory of action. The chapter discusses its historical background, creation, nature, motivation, and ends. After explaining al-Rāzī’s theory of action, Shihadeh proceeds in the second chapter to discuss al-Rāzī’s views on the ethics of action. In this chapter, he again starts with the historical background, followed by discussing moral obligation and ethical value and its relation to God and revelation. The third chapter of the book discusses al-Rāzī’s “perfectionist” theory of virtue. Hence, the book proceeds from “action” to “ethics” to “character.” The fourth chapter is a commentary on the *Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt*, discussing the later pessimism of al-Rāzī and its implications on his conception of pleasure and pain, socio-political systems and epistemology, and the optimism he saw in the “Qur’ānic method.” We shall now proceed to discuss these chapters one by one.

2.1 Al-Rāzī’s Theory of Action

The first chapter, titled *Al-Rāzī’s Theory of Action*, starts with a survey of al-Rāzī’s early *kalām* works. In his *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, Al-Rāzī accepts the theory of action accepted by traditional *Ash‘arī mutakallimūn* (p. 13). This theory divides created existents into atoms and accidents and considers human power (*qudra*) to be an accident subsisting in the atoms of the human body. This power is directly created by God in the atoms and cannot last for longer than a moment. At this stage, al-Rāzī also adheres to the classical *Ash‘arī* doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*) to explain the relationship between responsibility and obligation. As we proceed through the chapter, we find al-Rāzī indulging in debates with the *Mu‘tazila* and *falāsifa*, at the same time refuting them and being influenced by them. As a result, we see al-Rāzī moving from a purely *Ash‘arī* perspective to a highly eclectic stance (p. 17). The author points out two main features of al-Rāzī’s later theory of human action: the concern of cosmogony, or what may be called the problem of “the creation of acts” (*khalq al-af‘āl*), and the concern in psychology (concerned with choice and motivation). The latter is dealt with first.

It must be noted that although al-Rāzī takes an eclectic stance on various issues, he interprets his stance in a way that does not go against the *Ash‘arī* position, or at least that is what he claims. For the later al-Rāzī, power is no more an accident but the fitness of the physical body. This power is only potential power. Active power is the combination of potential power and motivation (p. 18). While potential power remains in the body, active power exists only in the instance of the act. This distinction between the two types of

power allows al-Rāzī to argue that his stance is merely a reinterpretation of the Ash‘arī position and, thus, the accepted Sunni position.

The author gives ample space to al-Rāzī’s doctrine of motivation. Human action requires the combination of power and a preponderator (*murajjih*; p. 20). A preponderator preponderates on the non-existence of an act and brings it into existence. Al-Rāzī, according to the author, argues that to deny the principle of preponderation is to deny the existence of a Creator, although the author does not explain how that can be the case. The preponderator in question is identified as will (*irādah*) or inclination (*mayl*). Al-Rāzī here agrees with Ibn Sīnā that the active cause of the act in question is its final cause (p. 21). He, however, distinguishes between the objective (*gharaḍ*), which is what is sought, and the motive, which is the knowledge of the same. This distinction is vital, as being an Ash‘arī, al-Rāzī does not provide objective value to any act. He identifies motive with the knowledge of the beneficence (*manfa‘a*) or harmfulness (*maḍarra*) of an act. This is very important for his gradual shift from deontological ethics to teleological ethics. Al-Rāzī here establishes personal benefit as the ultimate basis for all human motivation. Thus, all human action aims at seeking pleasure and avoiding pain (p. 24).

However, later in the book, the pleasures of the afterlife are mentioned to be more desirable than those of this world (p. 66). Despite this, al-Rāzī maintains that God is the sole source of all actions and that man, in his capacity, is not capable of anything. He argues that man has no power over the contents of his knowledge (p. 31), and hence, any knowledge or motivation is created in him by God. To reconcile the consequentialism mentioned above and the Ash‘arī determinism, he gives two main proofs: a falsafī proof from preponderance (preponderance cannot go ad infinitum and must culminate in God) and a common *Sunnī* proof for predestination from God’s pre-eternal knowledge of everything. For al-Rāzī, “man is compelled in his choosing” (*muḍṭarr fī ikhtiyārīh*; p. 37). The author also briefly discusses what he calls “some sort of natural causality” (p. 41), which al-Rāzī adopted to solve the problem of the “createdness of acts” as he did away with the doctrine of *kasb* (p. 43). The author does not go into too much detail about it apart from highlighting the influence of Ibn Sīnā here while at the same time showing al-Rāzī’s general attitude of being open to influence but with proper criticism and refining.

2.2 Al-Rāzī on Ethics of Action

In the second chapter, titled *Al-Rāzī on Ethics of Action*, we see a shift in al-Rāzī’s thought from Ash‘arī voluntarism to a sort of emotivism inspired by al-Ghazālī. In the classical language of kalām, this may be called the problem of “judgements of goodness and badness” (*al-taḥsīn wa al-taqbīh*). The background in which al-Rāzī formed his ethics was occupied by the Ash‘arī–Mu‘tazilī debate about mainly two questions: whether moral value terms refer to objective attributes of an act and whether moral judgements may be known by unaided reason (p. 46). The author, therefore, starts by providing a historical background of the problem through a brief survey of the views of the Ash‘aris and the Mu‘tazila. While the Mu‘tazila held that values of human and Divine action were objective and knowable in principle by natural human reason (Hourani, 2007, p. 67), the Ash‘aris

held that nothing was good or evil in itself; rather it was revelation alone that could differentiate between good and evil (Fakhry, 1994, p. 49). The author discusses, with relevance to al-Rāzī, the opinions of many Mu'tazilī thinkers like Ibn al-Malāḥimī (p. 49), Abd al-Jabbār (p. 47), and Abū Qāsim al-Ka'bī (p. 47); and Ash'arī thinkers like al-Ghazālī (p. 51), al-Juwaynī (p. 54), and al-Bāqillanī (p. 66).

Al-Rāzī seems to have inherited his eclecticism from al-Ghazālī, who made room for "subjective considerations of self-interest" in his *Iqtisād* (p. 55). "The Ghazālīan influence," notes Shihadeh, "highlights al-Rāzī's increasingly psychological approach to ethics, action, and the theory of human nature in general" (p. 57). Al-Rāzī distinguishes between "value judgement" and "the nature of value." While the former is self-evident, the knowledge of the latter is not immediate but discursive (p. 60). The objective nature of an act that we perceive is not real; only our judgement of its value, in terms of pain and pleasure—which have been classified in a hierarchy, like the pleasure of hereafter is better than the pleasure of this world, and thus different from crude hedonism (p. 60)—is real. While value judgements can be made by subjective interests, "Revealed Law remains as an objective source of normative judgements" (p. 68). Although al-Rāzī points out that Revealed Law also mostly provides grounds (promise of pleasure or pain) when obligating or prohibiting something, he reconfirms his Ash'arī creed by stating that God is not bound by anything and "no cognitive ethical judgements can be made in relation to God" (p. 96). Although it is theoretically possible that God may mislead men, it is in fact inconceivable (p. 107).

2.3 Al-Rāzī's Perfectionist Theory of Ethics

The third chapter, titled *Al-Rāzī's Perfectionist Theory of Ethics*, discusses Al-Rāzī's approach to virtue in a perfectionist sense, apart from consequentialist and legal senses. Under falsafī and Ṣūfī influences, he argues in favour of the dualism of a physical body and a separate, rational, and unphysical soul (p. 116), which is our essence and true self. Among other works, this chapter focuses on a minor work of al-Rāzī known as *Risāla fī al-Nafs*. The soul is only connected to the body to attain perfection by way of acquiring knowledge (p. 117). The author further points to the influence of Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī and "talisman specialists" on al-Rāzī, who maintain that human souls vary in their essence and that the souls of moving planets are the causes or sources for human souls (p. 118). He may have found in it a way to maintain a falsafī understanding of the soul while still denying its eternity and the theory of emanation³. Al-Rāzī adopts Ibn Sīnā's division of human psychological faculties into vegetative, animal, and rational faculties, although in contrast to Ibn Sīnā, he classifies the animal faculties not as functions of the body but of the rational soul itself (p. 120). The human good is identified with perfecting the spiritual attribute of knowledge while restraining the soul from its engagement with the physical body and the external world. True happiness only results from knowing God (p. 128).

3 For the theory of emanation, see Stace (1960, p. 374).

This chapter also discusses a shift in al-Rāzī's thought from a theological to a teleological approach to prophecy. Inspired by al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī maintains that a prophet is a perfect man who at the same time perfects others (p. 137). He also provides an inductive proof of prophecy; that is, the hierarchy of beings that we observe in the cosmological order points out that the highest species in the lower division are very similar to the lowest species in the higher division. Therefore, there must be men in the human species very similar to the angels; these are the prophets. Here, we also notice al-Rāzī's shift from giving prophets primacy in his earlier works (p. 114) to putting angels at a higher standard in *Maṭālib* (p. 140). While for al-Rāzī, revelation provides general principles, it is a source for only the initial stages of human theoretical perfection (p. 149). In his *tafsīr* though, under Šūfī influence, he mentions more than one function of revelation, viz., providing the Law (*sharī'a*), purifying the soul (*tarīqa*), realisation of Truth (*ḥaqīqa*)—the stage of theoretical perfection in which the truth manifests in the hearts of spiritual men, and finally prophecy (*nubuwwa*), which is reserved for the elect few and in which the soul becomes absolutely perfect and able to perfect those imperfect (p. 152).

2.4 Al-Rāzī's Later Pessimism: Commentary on *Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt*

The fourth and last chapter, titled *Al-Rāzī's Later Pessimism: Commentary on Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt*, discusses mainly a text he wrote towards the end of his life, an edited version of which is appended to the book and published for the first time. It marks a shift in the philosophy of al-Rāzī from moral and epistemological optimism, as expressed in his main book on practical ethics, *Kitāb al-Nafs wa al-Rūḥ*, to moral and epistemological pessimism (p. 156). The *Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt* is more of rhetorical nature rather than demonstrative. The pessimistic nature of the text is evident throughout; for example, al-Rāzī even considers garments and houses “little more than lesser evils” (p. 156). The text in question consists of three sections relating to three types of pleasure: sensory (*ḥissī*) pleasure, imaginative (*khayālī*) pleasure, and intellectual (*‘aqlī*) pleasure. While the first two forms present “utterly irresolvable moral dilemmas,” the latter “inevitably culminates in stalemate” (p. 156). In the first category, al-Rāzī focuses only on eating and coition, as they are the only ones that seem to produce real pleasures. He mentions the justifications provided by the poets, orators, and falāsifah to condemn these pleasures and focuses mainly on the proposition that “the sensory pleasure thought to be real pleasures are actually not pleasures, but little more than relief from pain” (p. 157). He concludes the section by stating that grief and pain prevail over the world rather than pleasure and good, which are very rare (p. 158). The author continues to provide an overview of the nature of pleasure, pain, and theodicy as discussed by al-Rāzī in his earlier works. Discussing (and refuting) mainly Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and Ibn Sīnā, al-Rāzī concludes that the only solution to the problem of theodicy is to affirm God's free choice and reject moral realism (p. 168).

The second part of *Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt*, maintaining the rhetoric nature of the text, provides a glimpse into al-Rāzī's socio-political thought. Al-Rāzī asserts that the acquisition of the pleasures of “rule and high status (*ri'āsa wa-jāh*)” come only with hardships and pains and are in themselves “vile and unworthy” (p. 170). He maintains that

human beings seek it because being dominant over others is an attribute of perfection, and perfection is what all seek (pp. 170–171). He describes human nature as being highly motivated by power. Everyone strives to have power over others. Those who do not have power wish to bring down those who have, and those who have power wish to gain more and more (p. 172). “The original nature of man is evil” (p. 173; quoted from *Tafsīr*, 16, 182–183). However, man is political in nature (*madaniyy bi al-ṭabʿ*), and Shihadeh deduces that for al-Rāzī, “good and just government is virtually impossible” (p. 174). Shihadeh pleads to not jump to judge his socio-political account as crude, rather to see it as a view of basic human social nature and a foundation that may be developed into a full-fledged socio-political theory (p. 176). He proceeds to append the examination of the notion of human nature in *Risālat Dhamm al-Ladhdhāt* by al-Rāzī’s views about the topic in his other works. Here, the author talks about a “Hobbesian Social Contract”⁴ where people acknowledge that for the greater good (having already discussed al-Rāzī’s accommodation of the notion of greater good in earlier chapters; p. 60), they must have an *imām*. While it is possible that a political leader may become evil, nonetheless, it is lesser than the evil of anarchy. As it guarantees the prevention of harm, installing an *imām* is obligatory (*wājib*; p. 177).

The third part of the *Risāla* concerns intellectual pleasure, which al-Rāzī associates with human good (p. 181). “Yet the pessimism he expresses here in relation to intellectual activity,” the author says, “is downright surprising” (p. 182). This surprise is because of an image of al-Rāzī, which is otherwise of a confident rationalist, as maintained in almost all his works (p. 182). Al-Rāzī associates intellectual pleasure with the rational (*ʿaqlī*) sciences. The rational sciences which have their own ends are of four types, each concerning knowing God, knowing spiritual entities (*rūḥāniyyāt*), knowing the higher world, and knowing the lower world, respectively. Although praising the highest of these sciences, viz., theology, al-Rāzī’s scepticism becomes evident when he mentions (along with praise) its yield as presumptions (*ẓann*) and conjectures (*ḥisbān*) and their culmination as estimations (*wahm*) and imaginations (*khayāl*, p. 182). The author then discusses various proofs given by al-Rāzī for this contention. The main argument is the non-demonstrative nature of the so-called demonstrations. Al-Rāzī mentions the arguments of various schools of thought and highlights the general problems in their dialectic; at the same time, to not sink into agnosticism, he keeps referring the reader to his earlier works like the *Maṭālīb* for proper understanding of the issues cited (p. 186). He further maintains that certainty may be very rare, but it is still attainable. This cautious reaffirmation of certainty is followed by what the author calls the “most explicitly pessimistic statement to be found anywhere in al-Rāzī’s writings and among the most extreme expressions of pessimism that can be found in medieval Arabic prose” (p. 188): “If you recognise these conditions, sensory pleasures will become vile, and imaginative pleasures will become abject” (p. 187). Nonetheless, al-Rāzī’s pessimism towards philosophy and theology ends in an optimism found in the “most correct and advantageous” method of the Holy Qurʾān

4 For social contract, see Wolff, 2006, p. 39.

(*ṭarīqat al-Qur'ān*). The discussion in the chapter is followed by a study of skepticism in al-Rāzī's *Maṭālib*, where he provides some room for theological reasoning by saying: "when the mind is unable to attain apodictic knowledge in relation to a given theological problem, it may have reason to affirm, tentatively, the most probable, plausible, or apt belief, that it can attain while recognizing its fallibility" (p. 194). While al-Rāzī maintains that discursive, philosophical, and theological approaches to sacred knowledge are always indirect, he claims the method of spiritual discipline to allow direct and supra-mundane knowledge of God (p. 199). This does not contradict his later emphasis on the Qur'an, which, for him, is spiritually transformative.

3. CONCLUSION

As made evident in the review, the book accomplishes the daunting task of tracing the everchanging thought of al-Rāzī. The author demonstrates how al-Rāzī develops consequentialist ethics while still maintaining his allegiance to the Ash'arī creed. Despite al-Rāzī's insistence that he is just reinterpreting Ash'arism, Shihadeh maintains that al-Rāzī's teleological ethics is a new theory altogether. Apart from the ethics, a very significant aspect of the book is the demonstration of the very broad intellectual landscape that al-Rāzī dwelled in. He quotes the *falāsifa*, sometimes agrees with them (p. 88) and sometimes refutes them (p. 163), uses medical evidence (p. 160), draws from the *Ṣūfīs* (p. 199), and even quotes extensively from the all-time Ash'ari-rivals, the *Mu'tazila* (p. 199). The most commonly used phrase by al-Rāzī, *bahāthnā wa ta'ammalnā* (translated as "I reflected and meditated" but can also be translated as "I searched and meditated," which adds to the meaning) also demonstrates the intellectual rigor al-Rāzī put into his works. The author successfully pins down the various stages of al-Rāzī's ethical thought and portrays them in a manner convenient for the reader. However, the vast amount of literature and different stances of al-Rāzī sometimes make it harder for the author to be very coherent, who at certain places seems to be unable to conclude and thus, when he seems to be reaching a conclusion, keeps jumping back into the discussion. The author also tends to explain classical ideas in modern terms like the Hobbesian social contract, state of nature, hedonism, and teleology itself, which may be good for explaining an idea but at the same time carries the risk of appropriation.

In addition, the author does not make clear the difference between scepticism and pessimism. While the latter is evident in al-Rāzī (pp. 165, 173, 174, 175) and is not very problematic, the former could imply something like disbelief or even atheism (Kalin, 2007, p. 249). The third chapter of the book ends on an ethical note, but the last chapter, although adding to the initial chapters, ends more on an epistemological note, taking focus off ethics. The author also does not explain what to make of al-Rāzī's pessimism: whether al-Rāzī's pessimism is an outright condemnation of rational reflection in theology or there is a scope for an alternate interpretation as argued by later *kalām* scholars like al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490) and al-Bājūrī (d. 1860; Spevack, 2020, p. 231). Nonetheless, the book proves to be a very significant contribution to the study of al-Rāzī. The author hopes that it induces interest in scholars to further study the works of al-Rāzī, much of which remain

unpublished.

Substantial work has since been done on different aspects of al-Rāzī's thought, mainly his falsafī and kalāmī contributions and the problem of putting him in one of the two categories. Also, his relationship with the Avicennian tradition and Sūfī traditions has been much discussed. "The scholarship on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī during the past 20 years has more than doubled the output of the previous period" (Janos & Attar, 2023, p. 21). The likes of Ayman Shihadeh, Frank Griffel, Sa'īd Fouda, Eşref Altaş, and Robert Wisnovsky, among others, have significantly enriched the field. Besides English and Arabic, Turkish and Persian scholarship on al-Rāzī has also significantly increased. After Shihadeh's book, many scholars have paid special attention to al-Rāzī's ethics (Janos & Attar, 2023, p. 154). These include works discussing comparative ethics, felicity, virtue, soul, goodness and evil, political theology, amongst other debates. For a detailed view of modern scholarship on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, see *A Comprehensive, Annotated, and Indexed Bibliography of the Modern Scholarship on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (544/1150—606/1210)* by Janos and Attar, published by Brill (2023).

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