

THE PERFECTION OF THE SOUL
IN
FAKHR AL-DĪN AL-RĀZĪ'S
AL-SIRR AL-MAKTŪM

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I declare that the work presented in this dissertation is my own.

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Abstract

Al-Sirr al-Maktūm is one of the most compelling theoretical and practical accounts of astral magic written in the post-classical period of Islamic thought. Of central concern to its reader is to understand why the great philosopher-theologian, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.606/1210) should have written it. The occult practices described therein are attributed to the Sabians, a historical group who lived in Ḥarrān in Upper Mesopotamia. Representing the last vestiges of Ancient Mesopotamian paganism during the early Islamic period, their religion involved the veneration of the seven planets, which they believed were ensouled celestial beings and the proximate causes of all sublunary change. By means of such astrology they were able, remotely, to change reality in ways which defied the customary pattern of causation in this world. The main focus of al-Rāzī's treatment of their practice is a long ritual during which the aspirant successively brings under his will each of the seven planets. On completion of the ritual, the aspirant would have transcended the limitations of his human existence and his soul would have attained complete perfection.

This thesis will argue that for al-Rāzī, the Sabians constituted a heresiological category, representative of a soteriological system which dispensed with the need for the Islamic institution of prophethood. It relied instead on the individual's ability, by means of spiritual discipline and intellectual rigour, to attain noetic connection with the celestial souls. In so doing, the Sabian adept not only gains occult knowledge and power, but more importantly he realizes the ultimate aim of perfecting his soul. Al-Rāzī constructs this soteriology as a

synthesis of cosmological and psychological doctrines gleaned from Avicenna, and Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī. In this way, al-Rāzī hoped to state as succinctly as possible the intellectual challenges to which any systematic theological defence of the Islamic faith must answer if it is to triumph over rival systems of thought.

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Part One: The Sabian Soteriology

Chapter 1: *al-Sirr al-Maktūm*

1.1 Introduction

Arguably the most mysterious of all the works by the philosopher and theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) was *al-Sirr al-maktūm* ('The Hidden Secret'). Written for an unnamed king, it describes, in remarkable detail, the occult beliefs and rituals of astral magic.¹ For practical purposes, when I refer to 'astral magic' and 'occult science', I shall restrict the meaning of these terms to the descriptive definition of talisman formulated by Rāzī:

...the blending of <dynamically> active heavenly forces with passive elemental forces to make manifest that which runs contrary to the natural course of events or to prevent from occurring what normally would agree with it.²

The masters of this science are identified as the 'Sabians' (*al-ṣābi'a*): I shall refer to their beliefs and practices as 'Sabianism'. For Rāzī, the Sabian was a

¹ Rāzī addresses this royal figure in the concluding section of *al-Sirr* in the following terms: 'O King, aided with all the good of the world, by the affairs of the heavens (*al-mu'ayyad bi-khayrāt al-'ālam bi-umūr al-samāwāt*)', (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164). Establishing who the identity of this king is part of my on-going research. According to Ibn Taymiyya, it was Terken Khātūn (d.630/1232-3), a Qipchaq-Turk princess (Griffel, 'On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life', fn. 71, p. 332). Griffel thinks this unlikely. The early dating of *al-Sirr* (see section 1.3) places it at a time when Rāzī was not enjoying the luxury of royal patronage. That the work could have been a means of currying favour with a potential royal patron might be a way of explaining this. This speculation, needless to say, would require further research. For full titles see the Bibliography below.

² *Al-Sirr*, p.7: *tamzīj al-quwā al-fa'āla al-samāwiyya bi'l-quwā al-munfa'ila al-unṣuriyya li-ajli al-tamakkuni min iżhāri mā yukhālifu al-'āda aw al-man'i min mā yuwāfiqihā*. Compare the close wording from *al-Maṭālib* which states that 'talisman' is an expression for: '...the blending of <dynamically> active heavenly forces with passive earthly forces to bring about that which runs contrary to the natural course of events or prevents from occurring what would normally agree with it.' *Al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 149. In *al-Sirr*, sublunary passive forces are referred to as 'elemental' (*unṣuriyya*) whilst in *al-Maṭālib*, they are referred to as 'earthly' (*arḍiyya*).

practitioner of this science, irrespective of his theological commitments, his race, language, and culture. A practitioner could be a Sabian whether or not he believed in: multiple necessarily existent beings; in God as the only Necessarily Existent Being, and as an agent possessed of volition (*fā'il mukhtār*); or God as the only Necessarily Existent whose creation is by way of non-volitional emanation. Since, theoretically, someone of any theological conviction could learn and practice Sabianism, it was less of a religion and more of an approach to understanding the hidden forces which determined 'generation and corruption' in the sublunary world. To what ends this knowledge was put would determine the extent to which it could foster the soul's perfection, or hasten its debasement into pure idolatry, the pursuit of sublunary gain and immersion in corporeal pleasure.

This thesis will be the first study of *al-Sirr*, a highly popular, problematic and unusual work. The number of manuscript witnesses affirms its popularity. The controversy which it provoked amongst subsequent Islamic scholars, some of whom could not believe that Rāzī wrote it, others who did, declaring him infidel as a result, is evidence of its problematic nature.³ And the fact that it was one of the rare attempts, by an Islamic intellectual of Rāzī's calibre, to engage with this occult science, motivated by other than a polemical or destructive aim, is testament to its unusual nature.⁴

³ See the discussion by Fūda on the controversy amongst Islamic scholars concerning Rāzī's *kuf*r as a result of *al-Sirr* in the introduction to his edition of Rāzī's *Nihāyat al-'Uqūl* (pp. 24-25 and pp. 47-85).

⁴ Previous examples include al-Kindī's *De Radiis* (on which see Adamson's 'al-Kindī'); the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity *On Magic*; and Maslama al-Qurṭubī's *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*.

Two key questions will define the scope of this study. Firstly, it will ask why Rāzī wrote *al-Sirr*. This question will prompt an examination into how he pursued that purpose. Secondly, it will ask why much of the material which is treated in *al-Sirr* reappears, albeit in a far more systematized form, in *Fī al-nubuwwāt wa-mā yata‘allaqu bihā*, ('On Prophethood and related matters'), the eighth volume of Rāzī's philosophical summa *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliyya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī* ('The Sublime Goals of the Divine Science'). This will prompt an investigation into the integration of certain doctrines, associated with the Sabians in *al-Sirr*, into Rāzī's formulation of a new prophetology and soteriology in *al-Maṭālib*.

Before I can summarize my argument in answer to these two research questions, I must deal with a number of preliminary matters. Firstly, in 1.2, I shall briefly outline Rāzī's intellectual career. His biography has been treated in detail elsewhere and does not warrant repetition.⁵ But how he developed and matured as a thinker assists in contextualizing what I shall argue is the intimate connection between *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib*.

⁵ For a succinct summary, see Griffel, 'On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life and the Patronage he received'. See also Street, 'Concerning the Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī'. Despite his prolific output, modern scholarly interest in Rāzī is a relatively recent phenomenon. For an overview of his thought generally, not just on his ethical theory, see Ayman Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*. See also Shihadeh's articles: 'From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī'; his 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Response to Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī's Critical Commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*'; 'Theories of Ethical Value in Kalām'; 'Avicenna's Corporeal Form and Proof of Prime Matter'; and 'The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.' For a study of Rāzī's Qur'ān commentary, see Arnaldez, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: commentateur du Coran et philosophe*, and Tariq, *Rāzī: Master of Qur'anic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning*. For Rāzī's treatment of natural philosophy in his Qur'ān commentary, see Morrison, 'The Portrayal of Nature in a Medieval Qur'ān Commentary'. On Rāzī and Aristotelian science, see Ibrahim, 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ibn al-Haytham and Aristotelian Science'. See in addition the following: Eichner, 'Dissolving the Unity of Metaphysics: From Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī to Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrāzī'; Janssens, 'Ibn Sina's impact on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *al-Mabāḥith al-Mashriqiyya*'; Abrahamov, 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on God's Knowledge of the Particulars' and 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Knowability of God's Essence and Attributes'; Setia, 'Atomism Versus Hylomorphism in the *Kalām* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī'.

Following this overview, in **1.3** I mention briefly the questions of the authorship of *al-Sirr* and its dating. Then in **1.4** I provide a brief outline of the Sabians as they emerge in the Islamic historical imagination, in order to provide some context as to why they came to be associated with the astral magic described in *al-Sirr*. Following this, in **1.5**, I present in broad terms the nature of their beliefs and practices as they are depicted in the work. A summary of my argument appears in **1.6**, followed by an explanation of its approach and scope in **1.7**. I hope that by the end of this introduction, the objectives, scope and direction of this study will be clear.

1.2 Rāzī's intellectual career

According to Shihadeh, Rāzī's earliest works are characterised by a very classical Ash'arī *kalām* style and content such as *al-Ishāra fī al-kalām* ('The Pointer in *Kalām*'). Later, in his highly influential Ash'arī manual *Nihāyat al-'uqūl* (575-576/1179-1180) ('the Limit of Intellects'), he deploys Aristotelian logic to defend the orthodox creed. Subsequently he begins to write philosophical works, the most notable of which is *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* (574-575/1178-1179) ('the Eastern Inquiries') an exploration of various philosophical doctrines, mainly of Avicenna (d. 429/1037) and Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. 560/1164-1165). A year later (576/1180) he writes *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt* ('Commentary on "the Pointers and Reminders"'), a critical commentary on Avicenna which mentions *al-Sirr*. Towards the end of his career, he begins to write works which attempt to synthesize the approaches of *kalām* and philosophy. The most ambitious of these

attempts is *al-Maṭālib* (603-605/1207-1209).⁶ A key development in his intellectual career is his shift away from the approach of classical Ash‘arī ethical theory of voluntarism which upholds ‘the doctrine that value terms can be defined only in terms of divine command’, to frame ethics, under Sūfī and Falsafī influence, in terms of human perfection, or what Shihadeh has called his ‘teleological ethics’: the perfection of the soul as a simple primary end, sought for its own sake, the pursuit of which engenders its own pleasure.⁷ My analysis of *al-Sirr* is indebted to Shihadeh’s penetrating insights.

1.3 The questions of authorship and the dating *al-Sirr*

The earliest mention of *al-Sirr* as a work of Rāzī’s, in sources other than his own, was by Ibn al-Qiftī (d. 646/1248) in his *Ta’riḫ al-ḥukamā*.⁸ The only existing edition available of *al-Sirr* is an undated lithograph produced in Cairo, produced by Mirza Muhammad Shirāzī, using MS 1482, from the Cârullah Effendi collection of the Sûleymaniye Library, Istanbul. For all subsequent page references to *al-Sirr* I will refer to the Cairo lithograph. Aside from the discrepancy which I will treat in section 2.5 of this thesis, which is easily explicable on the grounds of scribal error, the text to which it bears witness does not differ in any significant respect from the manuscript witnesses I have

⁶ For the dates of all these works, I rely on the most up-to-date and comprehensive study of Rāzī’s oeuvre conducted by Altaş, in his survey ‘Fahredden er-Rāzī’nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi’. See pp. 152-154.

⁷ Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, p. 111. See chapter 3 for Shihadeh’s analysis of Rāzī’s perfectionist theory of virtue. On ethical theories of value in *kalām* in general, see Shihadeh, ‘Theories of Ethical Value in Kalām: a New Interpretation’. For Shihadeh on the development of Rāzī’s thought and the chronology of his works, see *Teleological Ethics*, pp. 5-11.

⁸ Al-Qiftī, *Ta’riḫ al-ḥukamā*, p. 292.

consulted for this study.⁹ The most valuable of these witnesses is Tehran MS 6853 kept in the Majlis Library. It is dated to 616 AH, a mere six years after Rāzī's death.

But here, I wish to mention two further discrepancies between the Cairo lithograph and Tehran MS 6853. In the concluding section (*khātima*), on p. 164, in the Cairo lithograph, the author refers to himself as '*jāmi' al-kitāb al-imām al-muḥaqqiq Fakhr al-dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī*' ('the compiler of the work, the imam and investigator Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī') whilst in the equivalent spot in the text, on line 5, fol. 274a of Tehran MS 6853, we read: '*al-dā'ī ilā Allāh bi'l-ḥaqq ḥujjat al-ḥaqq 'alā al-khalq nāṣir al-sunna raḍiya Allahu 'anhu wa 'an aslāfihī*' ('the caller to God in truth, the Proof of the Truth to the creation, the champion of the Sunna, may God be pleased with him and his predecessors'). Further on in the concluding section, in the Cairo lithograph, on p.164, we read: *qāla al-Imām al-muḥaqqiq Fakhr al-dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī* ('said the imam and investigator Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī')¹⁰ In Tehran MS 6853, fol. 274b, line 2, the equivalent place in the text reads: '*mawlānā al-dā'ī ilā Allāh bi'l-ḥaqq raḍiya Allahu 'anhu wa 'an aslāfihī*' ('our lord, the caller to God with truth, may God be pleased with him and his predecessors'). Tehran MS 6853 omits the author's name and provides no evidence as to his real identity. But the fact that Rāzī did indeed compose a work with the title *al-Sirr al-Maktūm* is indicated by references to it as one of his own in such works as his *al-Mulakhkhaṣ fī'l-ḥikma wa'l-manṭiq*

⁹ These are: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Huntington 544; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Marsh 125; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Marsh 212; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Selden Superius 66; Berlin, Staatsbibliothek- Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS 5886 (Peterman. I 207); Tehran, Majlis Library, MS 6853.

¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164.

(576/1180) his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt* (576/1180) and his *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma* (605/1209).¹¹

As I have already said, much of the material of *al-Sirr* reappears, almost verbatim in parts, in *al-Maṭālib*. Whilst this fact alone does not ensure its safe attribution to Rāzī, its style, content, and method of reasoning display such a high level of consistency with Rāzī's oeuvre, as I hope to demonstrate, that we can be confident that the likelihood of his authorship is indeed very high.¹²

Now, the development of Rāzī's later teleological ethics was facilitated by his formulation and adoption of three key interdependent doctrines: (1) the ontological superiority of the celestial angels over man; (2) the origin of the individual human soul in the *perfect nature* (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*), a celestial spirit (*rūḥ falakī*), the perfection of which determines the upper limit of the human's potential for perfection; (3) human perfection, conceived of as an epistemological ascent through the celestial spheres towards angelomorphosis.¹³ These key doctrines are central to the Sabian belief system he describes in *al-Sirr*.

I hope to show that in the concluding section of *al-Sirr*, Rāzī reveals his own commitment to the Sabian doctrines of the perfect nature and a ritualized ascent towards perfection and angelomorphosis (see sections 1.5 and 2.6). This insight provides the impetus for this study, for it demands a crucial qualification to Shihadeh's narrative that Rāzī's gradual evolution from the standard Ash'arī

¹¹ Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, p. 8.

¹² Although outside the focus of this thesis, a detailed comparison between *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib* 8 would afford great insight into the ways in which Rāzī's thinking about the occult sciences developed and deepened.

¹³ On Rāzī's reception of the doctrine of the perfect nature, see Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics* pp.118-119; on Rāzī's assertion of angelic superiority, see *Teleological Ethics* pp. 114-116.

theologian who authored *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl*, to the philosopher-theologian who wrote *al-Maṭālib* was fostered by an increasing engagement with Sufism and philosophy. I do not of course exclude these influences. Indeed Rāzī himself refers to the completion of occult knowledge described in *al-Sirr* as ‘the perfect philosophy’ (*al-falsafa al-tāmma*).¹⁴ But Shihadeh, as far as I can tell, does not intend to include astral magic in his definition of philosophy when he speaks of Rāzī’s increasing engagement with it in his later career. So accepting Shihadeh’s more narrow definition of philosophy, I hope to show that Rāzī’s shift is just as much attributable, if not even more so, to his deep engagement with astral magic; and that, rather than being of marginal interest to the ‘renewer’ (*mujaddid*) of the Islamic faith at the end of the twelfth century, occult ideas played a crucial role in bringing about the synthesis of theology and philosophy that Shihadeh has so insightfully described.¹⁵ This is the first crucial qualification to his narrative.

The most recent chronology of Rāzī’s oeuvre by Altaş confirms Shihadeh’s impression that *al-Sirr* was an early work, dating it to 575/1179.¹⁶ If I am correct about Rāzī’s expression in *al-Sirr* of personal commitment to key Sabian beliefs, then this would mean that these Sabian ideas were patiently awaiting integration into the grand philosophical-theological systematization of *al-Maṭālib*, for thirty years. Evidently, this process of integration had barely begun when he wrote *al-Sirr*, for around that same time (575-576/1179-1180) he also wrote his influential *kalām* manual *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl* in which he defends standard Ash‘arī positions, with albeit an Aristotelianizing style of argumentation,

¹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164.

¹⁵ It was Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d.771/1370) who bestowed on him this honorific (See Shihadeh, ‘From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī’), p. 141.

¹⁶ Altaş, ‘Fahreddin er-Rāzī’nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi’, p. 151.

despite his private Sabian convictions.¹⁷ This of course would threaten the simple narrative of Rāzī's career as a gradual intellectual evolution from standard Ash'arism to his later more philosophical (in the narrower sense of the word) theology. I believe that the situation was far more complex. For at the same time as he was defending standard Ash'arī positions, he was also counselling in *al-Sirr* his potential royal patron to invoke his perfect nature - his personal celestial spirit - and to perform a Sabian ritual of planetary ascent which would bestow on him supreme occult power and knowledge.

1.4 Sabians in the historical imagination

It was during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833) that the pagans of the Syrian city of Ḥarrān, which had by the sixth century become a refuge for pagans resistant to Christianization, are reported to have secured official toleration for their religion by adopting the name "Sabian," a Qur'ānic designation for a religious group which the early Muslim community regarded as worthy of the kind of protected status extended to Jews and Christians.¹⁸ Some Ḥarrānian Sabians went on to become accomplished scholars in the court of the caliph, crucial to the translation movement transmitting key philosophical and scientific texts from Greek into Arabic.¹⁹ Of greatest renown was the Sabian Thābit ibn Qurra (d.901) who, migrating from Ḥarrān, settled in Baghdad where, being closely associated with the court of the Caliph al-Mu'taḍid (r. 892-902), he became a mathematician and translator of great

¹⁷ For the date of the *Nihāyat*, see Altaş, 'Fahreddin er-Rāzī'nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi', p. 151.

¹⁸ See Qur'an 2:62; 5:69; 22:17. The issue of who the original referents of the Qur'ānic term were remains a matter of dispute within modern scholarship, a good survey of which is to be found in Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, pp.67-68.

¹⁹ See Gutas *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*; Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*, pp. 19-25.

repute.²⁰ He was also the leader of the Ḥarrānian Sabian community in Baghdad, where he authored works describing Sabian astrolatrous ceremonies and providing instructions on the practical casting of talismans.²¹ Many of his descendants, retaining their astrolatrous religion for at least a century after him, went on to become prominent intellectuals serving the caliphal court. Indeed such pagans appear in the Arabic sources as late as the eleventh century.²²

Van Bladel describes the information contained in the historical sources relating to actual Ḥarrānian Sabian belief and practice as scanty and tendentious. Nevertheless, he observes that the Syriac and Arabic reports are almost unanimous that they involved planet worship and ritual sacrifice.²³ But by the early tenth century:

...any supposed “pagans” or idolaters of any period, such as the ancient Greeks, pre-Christian Romans and Egyptians, and the Buddhists, were also called Sabian. The precise identity of the Sabians whom God sanctioned in the Qur’ān was and is a matter of persistent controversy for Muslim exegetes and heresiographers.²⁴

Nevertheless, the Ḥarrānian Sabian connection remains relevant to *al-Sirr* in the figure of Thābit Ibn Qurra. An anecdote describing his application of occult astral knowledge to thwart a plot hatched against him by an envious courtier at

²⁰ Burnett, ‘Thābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian’. On Thābit Ibn Qurra in general, see ‘Thābit Ibn Qurra’, ed. Rashed.

²¹ Burnett, ‘Thābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian’, p.16.

²² Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p.65. See also Roberts’s ‘Being a Sabian.’

²³ Some modern scholars connect it to Babylonian and Hellenistic religion. For the Babylonian aspect, see Tamara Green’s *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran*, Leiden, Brill 1992; for the Hellenistic background see David Pingree, ‘The Sabians of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition’.

²⁴ Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p.67.

the court of al-Muwaffaq, is adduced in the introduction of *al-Sirr* as an illustration of its invaluable utility.²⁵ The Ḥarrānian Sabian represents the ideal of how this arcane knowledge can be put into practice to serve very real, sublunary concerns. Moreover, Thābit reappears as an important unnamed source for Rāzī's practical instructions for the casting of a talismanic idol in *al-Sirr* 3:1, an account which seemingly combines the talismanic astrolatry of the Ḥarrānian Sabians with that of the 'Indian' Sabians.²⁶

By the ninth century, Ḥarrānian Sabians were claiming Hermes as the founding prophet of their religion.²⁷ In the middle of that same century, Jāhiz reported the claim, subsequently corroborated by Abū Ma'shar, that Hermes was identified with the Qur'ānic Idrīs and the Jewish Enoch, the prophet who ascended the celestial spheres where he received visions and learnt mysteries from angelic teachers. In the century that followed, this heavenly ascent had become the means by which he received angelic instruction in the mysteries of the natural sciences and astrology.²⁸ Intellectuals serving the Ismā'īlī mission in Qayrawān and in northern Iran deployed a form of this narrative to support their argument that all branches of human knowledge were based on principles which were not generated by reason, but received by revelation. Van Bladel observes that a survey of those who used works attributed to Hermes from late antiquity until the time that Rāzī was writing, included members of all religions

²⁵ The anecdote appears in *al-Sirr*, p.4. A full translation appears in Burnett's 'Thābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian'.

²⁶ Rāzī's account is to be found in *al-Sirr*, pp. 95-96. As we shall discover in the following chapter, 'Sabian' in Rāzī's use referred to any form of learned astrolatry or paganism.

²⁷ Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p.66. Despite this fact, Van Bladel argues that the evidence for Ḥarrānian Sabian transmission of Hermetic texts remains elusive: '...the evidence for the Ḥarrānian transmission of Hermetica into Arabic faces a major impediment: no one has hitherto been able to show a single surviving Arabic work attributed to Hermes to be definitely Ḥarrānian in origin [...]. The great influence that some historians suppose 'Ḥarrānian Hermeticism' to have had on Arabic culture and on Islam lacks sure evidence at this stage.'

²⁸ On the theme of the heavenly ascent of Hermes, see Van Bladel, *the Arabic Hermes*, pp.164-184.

represented in Islamicate civilization at that time. Due to the late antique Greek chronographic tradition, he was universally understood as an antediluvian sage and thus sufficiently remote in time to be accepted as an authority:

Yet Hermes would not have acquired the specific character of a prophet if it had not been for the Ḥarrānian Sabians, descendants of the ancient pagans, living in a milieu in which every sect required a prophetic founder. Even after the Sabians had entirely disappeared, Hermes was remembered as the prophet of paganism and the founder of the sciences.²⁹

By the time we encounter him as the Sabian prophet in *Kitāb al-Milal wa'l-niḥal* of Rāzī's immediate predecessor Shahrastānī, Hermes had become the great primordial preceptor of astrology whose revealed knowledge establishes the names of the planets, the zodiacal signs, and the principles of astrology.³⁰ In contrast with the revelation of the Abrahamic traditions, it is by means of the revealed knowledge of Hermes, that Man learns the principles of natural science which inform the astral ritual that he uses to obtain noetic connection with the celestial souls. Although Hermes does not appear prominently in *al-Sirr* as an obvious hierophantic figure, the Sabian beliefs and practices described therein are deeply informed by the principles and motifs with which he had come to be closely associated: astrolatrous religion; talismanic technology; the mediation of the celestial spheres between Man and the divine principle; and the notion of a noetic ascent through the spheres whereby the soul can reach perfection.

²⁹ Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p. 237. See *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal*, (ed.) Fā'ūr, pp. 353-354.

³⁰ Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, p. 220.

1.5 Sabianism in *al-Sirr*

Concurring with most of the heresiographers from the time of the early tenth century, Sabianism represented for Rāzī any form of paganism connected with astrolatry. But in *al-Sirr*, it is presented as an alternative soteriology, grounded in the belief in an ensouled geocentric cosmos. All events in its terrestrial centre are generated by the configurations of the planets. The planets and celestial spheres – the orbits in which they move – are animated by a plenitude of spirits. The powers of these spirits can be directed by means of ritual in order to influence change in this world. Each natural phenomenon and product of human artifice has its own special occult correspondence (*munāsaba*, pl. *munāsabāt*) with the specific planet or planets which presided over its coming-to-be (*ḥudūth*). Planetary correspondence thus describes a special kind of ontological relationship in which sublunary effect somehow participates in the nature of its celestial principle: they share in a *congenerity* (*mujānasa*). For the Sabian, the significance of any terrestrial phenomenon derives from its participation in this infinitely complex web of celestial correspondence. Astral ritual gathers together sublunary objects of planetary correspondence and coordinates them with action and words to engender an intended result. Certain planets are effective for certain results: Mars for an aggressive aim; Venus if the aim relates to friendship and love.

For astral ritual to be effective, the practitioner must establish a noetic connection with the celestial spirits appropriate for his aim. To achieve this, he must purify his soul and cease its engrossment in material reality and sensual

pleasure by engaging in rigorous spiritual discipline, fasting, and mental focus on the operative planet. Ritual preparatory diet serves two functions. Firstly, in ceasing engrossment with material reality, he must reduce his consumption of food to the barest minimum required to sustain life. Such privation causes inevitable imbalances in the soul and thus requires a subtle knowledge of medicine (*ṭibb*) to ensure its well-being. Secondly, consumption of ritual foods assists in establishing the desired congenereity with the spirit that is invoked.

Two major categories of Sabian astral ritual can be discerned from Rāzī's account. The first involves the casting of a 'talismān' (sing. *ṭilasm*; pl. *ṭilasmāt*) A talismān is an anthropomorphic idol, cast in a mould at the astrologically appropriate time. Its metal corresponds to the operative planet: silver for the Moon; iron for Mars; gold for the Sun; lead for Saturn. Ritualized actions, mimetic of the intended aim, are then performed on or before this idol: when the practitioner enjoys a strong, stabilized noetic connection with the appropriate planet, then the intended result follows.³¹

The second major category of astral magic in *al-Sirr* involves invocations which address the planets (*da'wat al-kawākib*). It represents the central focus of the *al-Sirr*. I shall refer to it as the planetary ascent ritual.³² A condition which the aspirant must fulfil before undertaking the ritual is to establish, by means of rigorous spiritual discipline, a stabilized noetic connection with his perfect nature, which plays a hierophantic role of initiating him into the long ritual which lasts several years. It comprises seven distinct successive stages,

³¹ For an excellent overview of talismans in the Islamic tradition, see Saif, 'From Ġāyat al-ḥakīm to Šams al-ma'ārif.

³² As will be seen, this is not a literal ascent, but a metaphorical one. An astral magical ritual in *al-Sirr* is usually referred to as an 'amal'.

observing the Ptolemaic order. During each, an astral ritual is performed, and the rational soul of the planet addressed. For some stages, the aspirant is to expect a certain visionary experience. At each, the aspirant receives a sign that the planet has accepted his devotions and is willing to co-operate with his will. Then, he is to ask the planet for knowledge and power over all in the sublunary world which it governs.

Given that all change in the world of generation and corruption falls under the sway of the planets, the aspirant by the end of this long ritual will have attained knowledge of and power over all in the sublunary world: by the power of his own soul, he would – like the celestial souls – be able to command meteorological and geological phenomena such as the rain and earthquakes. He would have transcended his own humanity and realized the ontological rank of the spirits which move the heavenly spheres. By means of their occult practices the Sabians were able to gain mastery and control of the imbalances of their own souls and the vicissitudes of sublunary reality.

1.6 The argument of this thesis

This study will focus primarily on the intellectual project of *al-Sirr*. As has now become apparent, I will argue that when he wrote it, he was already personally committed to key Sabian doctrines. The most significant of these was that of the perfect nature, which in the Sabian belief served as the individual's hierophant inducting him into the mysteries of the cosmos, leading him through successive noetic connection with the celestial spheres, and ultimately to the realization of perfection.

In the introduction to *al-Sirr*, Rāzī frames the pursuit of occult knowledge as a soteriology that was rooted in a teleological ethics, the goal of which was the perfection of the soul as a simple primary end, sought for its own sake, the pursuit of which engenders its own pleasure. Its method was grounded in natural philosophy: cosmology justified Sabian belief in an ensouled cosmos; psychology informed the science of spiritual discipline by which this noetic connection was established; astrology determined the timing and materials used in ritual. As well as occult power, this noetic connection with the celestial spirits divulged to them mysteries of the cosmos hitherto unknown. With the successful completion of a long ritual representing a planetary ascent, the Sabian adept perfected his occult knowledge and power to become like the celestial spirits. As the aspirant's initiator into this ritual, the perfect nature was crucial to this very personal occult soteriology.

I argue that, being committed to a soteriological doctrine so alien to Islamic theology as the perfect nature, Rāzī harboured the 'sublime goal' of its integration into the divine science of Islamic theology. To achieve this, he wanted to construct a rational explanatory model, using the available philosophical ideas of his time, to account for its efficacy as a soteriology. As well as the compilation of astral magical ritual, this philosophical theorizing on Sabianism was a chief concern of *al-Sirr*.

In pursuit of this purpose, Rāzī presented Sabian doctrines and practices using the sources on astral magic available to him. But more importantly, he hypothesized on the most plausible philosophical justifications for Sabian

doctrines, and ruminated on the most rationally convincing explanations for the efficacy of their practices. For the philosophical theorization which we encounter in *al-Sirr* can only make sense if we assume the author's belief in their doctrines, and thus his requirement for an explanatory model and his need to reconcile them with his own theological commitments. The philosophical sources which he used for his model, he found in the works of Avicenna and Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī. This thesis will be primarily concerned with this theoretical project. Rāzī's theory on the astral magic worked by the Sabians in *al-Sirr* is best approached from the perspective of his commentary on Avicenna's *tanbīh* (reminder) on preternatural events (*umūr gharība*) in the tenth *namaṭ* of his *Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*.³³ Avicenna says:

Preternatural events proceed to the realm of nature (*tanba'ith fi 'ālam al-tabī'a*) due to three principles. The first is the above-mentioned psychological dispositions (*al-hay'a al-nafsāniyya*). The second is the occult properties (*khawwāṣ*) of elemental bodies (*al-ajsām al-'unṣuriyya*), such as the attraction, <by> the magnet, of iron by means of an <occult> force special to the magnet. And the third is the special <occult> correspondence (*munāsaba*) <that exists> between heavenly forces and combinations of earthly bodies in special arrangements (*amzija ajsām arḍiyya makḥṣūṣa bi-hay'āt waḍ'iyya*); or <between heavenly forces> and the forces of earthly souls specifically <affected> by celestial states, either deliberately or otherwise (*quwā nufūs arḍiyya makḥṣūṣa bi-aḥwāl falakiyya fi'liyyatan aw infī'āliyyatan*), as a result of which preternatural effects occur. Magic

³³ For the text of Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, I rely on the version as it appears in Najafzadeh's edition of Rāzī's *Sharḥ*.

(*siḥr*) is the first category (*qism*) – indeed so are <Prophetic> miracles and <saintly> prodigies (*al-muʿjizāt waʿl-karāmāt*); *nīranjāt* are of the second category. And talismans are of the third category.³⁴

For Avicenna, magic (*siḥr*) is confined to the power of the human soul to exert an effect directly on sublunary reality. Indeed, this power of the soul also provides the explanation for the prophetic or saintly miracle. Spirits, angels, jinn and God play no role: this is a purely naturalistic account. The second – the *nīranj* is just as naturalistic. The third, the talisman, which concerns Rāzī, is more ambiguous, as it involves in some way the participation of earthly souls, acting either ‘actively’ or ‘passively’.³⁵ What does Avicenna mean? Rāzī explains it as follows:

Know that celestial forces do not bring about preternatural events without the bringing together (*inḍimam*) of passive receptive elemental forces (*al-quwā al-ʿunṣuriyya al-qābila*) with active earthly psychic forces (*al-quwā al-nafsāniya al-arḍiyya al-fāʿiliyya*) and this is the talisman. This is what he [i.e. Avicenna] is relating here, and thus have we explained it. If you desire an in-depth investigation (*taḥqīq*) then you should consult *al-Sirr al-Maktūm*.³⁶

So in this thesis, I take up Rāzī’s suggestion. Here, he adapts his description of the talisman from *al-Sirr*, but renders explicit the crucial role of human agency

³⁴ Avicenna, *Ishārāt waʿl-tanbihāt*, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 663. Since I shall it only discuss it in light of Rāzī’s commentary, for the text of Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*, I rely on the version as it appears in Najafzadeh’s edition of Rāzī’s *Sharḥ*. Although I rely on Inati’s translations of Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*, in many passages, especially this, my reading radically differs (see Inati, *Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions*, pp.106-7)

³⁵ For the best introduction to talismans, see Burnett ‘*Tābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian*’; and on *nīranj*, see Burnett, ‘*Nīranj: a Category of Magic*’.

³⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 664.

in the talismanic process: active earthly psychic forces. So the talisman is a liminal category of occult action, occupying the space between the raw psychic force of the magician or prophet, and the humbler power of the magnet attracting iron. In making a talisman, the human soul must somehow interact with celestial forces. *Al-Sirr* can be read as an attempt to theorize on that interaction, which can be used either for transitive sublunary ends, or for a subjective, soteriological goal.

Rāzī attempts his theory of astral magic by engineering Avicenna's theory on prophethood, which is grounded in his theory of the internal senses.³⁷ So before I can explain his engineering of the former, I must explain briefly the general shape of the latter. Avicenna accounts for human cognition by positing five internal senses: the common sense (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*), which orders external sense data into an integrated experience of extra-mental reality; the imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*), which also functions as the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*); the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*) which perceives non-material intentions such as the hostility of the enemy or the goodwill of a friend; and two separate storage faculties which record material and non-material experiences (*al-khayāl* and *al-dhikr* respectively). Each of these faculties inheres in a material substrate in the brain.

Now, Avicenna's theory on imaginal prophethood explains veridical dreams and visions as the result of the human soul receiving an immaterial trace (*athar*) from one of the celestial souls. Crucially, as I shall argue in chapter 7, it is the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*), mercurially mediating between the material and immaterial worlds, that delivers this celestial 'trace' to the

³⁷ See al-Akiti, 'The Three Properties of Prophethood'.

imagination. The imagination then sets about constructing what is experienced as a revelatory vision or a veridical dream. In this way, Avicenna explains that whilst the immediate object of the vision is the creation of the perceiver's own internal senses, its cause is nevertheless extra-mental, of a celestial origin.

Imaginational prophethood by means of noetic connection with the celestial souls is one of three aspects (*ḍurūb*) of prophethood. The other two are: (2) the extraordinary ability to intuit, by means of connection with the Active Intellect, the middle terms of syllogisms; (3) the ability to perform acts which breach the natural course of events by means of the *muḥarrika* or *motive faculty*: this is achieved by the possession of a powerful internal sense called the estimative faculty (*wahm*).

So, in *al-Sirr*, Rāzī builds his theory on astral magic on what is common to both imaginational prophethood and prophetic occult power: the estimative faculty. Now, the raw occult power of a prophet or magician, exercised by the *wahm* is, in the Avicennan theory, and in the terminology of *al-Sirr*, *fiṭrī* (innate). Rāzī's interest in *al-Sirr* 1:4 is in the notion that spiritual techniques can develop and train this power in one not so fortunate to possess this capacity innately. Once trained, the practitioner can connect with the celestial souls and somehow draw down their forces into a talisman: then under the focused attention of the practitioner, these talismanic forces are directed towards a transitive objective.

So the talismanic idol is the earthly force which passively receives celestial forces under the direction of the practitioner's focused intent. But how does this theoretical model also apply to the ritual of planetary ascent, during which a

talismanic idol is conspicuous for its absence. Why should this long ritual be the focus of *al-Sirr*, when it purports to be a work describing talismans?

Although when he describes the practicalities of the Sabian craft, Rāzī uses the word ‘talisman’ in the sense of an object (either an idol or a ring), in his definition at the beginning of *al-Sirr*, he uses it in the sense of a process: *tamzīj* (‘blending’). I hope to show that, during the ritual of planetary ascent, the earthly forces which passively receive the dynamically active celestial forces are internal faculties of the aspirant’s soul; the active earthly psychic force which is involved in the process is the aspirant’s rational soul which willingly submits to transformation. It is in this sense that he himself becomes a ‘talisman’. With the completion of the ritual, into which he is initiated by his perfect nature, he gains knowledge of and power over all that the celestial spheres hold sway. This is the Sabian soteriology.

In **chapter 2**, I shall examine the general introduction to *al-Sirr*. I will show that its discussion of the virtue of occult knowledge and its practical application is expressed in terms of a teleological ethical theory: its pursuit is a soteriological enterprise, the completion of which results in the perfection of the soul and its transformational elevation to the ontological level of the celestial spirits. Then having presented an overview of the Sabians as depicted in *al-Sirr* and in Rāzī’s *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, and a discussion of the Indic influence on Rāzī’s understanding of Sabianism, I shall turn to the conclusion (*khātima*) of the work and its parting counsel (*waṣīyya*) to its royal patron. I will show that Rāzī, who declares himself as the author of the work, exhorts whomsoever would attain the complete philosophy (*al-falsafa al-tāmma*) to invoke his own perfect nature (*ṭibā’ahu al-*

tāmm). Furthermore, he urges him to rely on the fourth treatise of *al-Sirr* in order to master how the ritual of planetary ascent is to be performed. Not only does Rāzī speak of both doctrine and ritual with approval, but he even prescribes for his royal patron the adoption of the former and the practice of the latter. These facts constitute compelling evidence that Rāzī was himself personally committed to beliefs central to Sabianism. This must determine how we read the work as a whole.

Having established Rāzī's attitude towards Sabianism, we will proceed in **chapter 3** to examine the cosmological beliefs which justify their astrolatry as the means by which noetic connection is established with the celestial spirits. For these, Rāzī formulates philosophical proofs, mainly gleaned from Avicenna, for their belief in the celestial spheres as: living, rational beings possessed of volition; the causes of sublunary change; cognizant of both universals and particulars; and responsive to human communication by means of adoration and ritual. Integrated into these philosophical proofs are arguments, derived from Abū'l-Barakāt, of the reality of the perfect nature as the celestial origin of the human soul, connection with which is a necessary precondition for undertaking the planetary ascent ritual. This model has no role for the Avicennan Active Intellect or the Giver of Forms: the former is replaced by the perfect nature, the latter by the starless sphere.³⁸

Chapter 4 is essentially a commentary on the definition of talismans with which *al-Sirr* begins, examining how Rāzī deploys Avicennan arguments to show how

³⁸ Rāzī rejects the Active Intellect in his *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma* (See Rāzī, *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma*, 2, 281-284, observed by Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, fn. 45, p. 118). For the Active Intellect and human intellection, see McGinnis, *Avicenna*, pp. 130-140; see also Adamson, 'Non-Discursive Thought'.

celestial motion determines sublunary change, and how the talisman can harness the powers of this process. This is followed by **chapter 5** which explores Rāzī's more technical account of how talismans are practically made. **Chapter 6** examines how Rāzī draws on Avicennan internal sense theory to account for how spiritual discipline might be trained for the purpose of working astral magic. I will argue in **chapter 7** that, given Rāzī's reliance on Avicennan internal sense theory, the Avicennan account of celestial soul noesis provides the best model for understanding how Rāzī was trying to rationalize Sabian astral ritual. The chapter will conclude with my argument that the adept who has completed the planetary ascent is consciously co-ordinated with what I will call the Avicennan 'perfected man' who has developed all three capacities of prophethood. **Chapter 8** will argue that from *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib*, it is possible to discern a distinct theory of occult epistemology which Rāzī roots in the *wahm*. In **chapter 9**, I shall explore an alternative account of visions and dreams expressed in *al-Sirr*, which is rooted in an extramission theory of vision. **Chapter 10** will demonstrate that Rāzī's 'clarification' (*bayyina*) concerning the error, or more accurately 'weakness' (*du'f*) of the Sabian approach does not reject a science of talismans *per se*, but the belief in any agency outside of God's power (*qudra*). And **chapter 11** will look forwards from *al-Sirr* to show how doctrines which he attributed to the Sabians, especially that of the perfect nature, were incorporated into the anthropology, soteriology, and epistemology of *al-Maṭālib*.

By the end of this thesis, I hope that I will have shown: that when he wrote *al-Sirr*, in spite of his declarations in his *kalām* works, Rāzī was, privately at least: 1) sympathetic to the Sabian doctrine of the ensouled nature of the celestial spheres; 2) not principally opposed to a science of talismans, the chief tool for

performing astral magic; 3) already committed to the teleological ethics which characterized both the Sabianism of *al-Sirr* and the soteriology which he articulates in *al-Maṭālib*; 4) thoroughly convinced of the doctrine of the perfect nature as a spiritual and philosophical guide; and 5) believed in some form of planetary ascent in the pursuit of this perfection. The philosophical justifications for all of these five commitments he carried forward into *al-Maṭālib* to synthesize these Sabian commitments with Islamic theology to formulate a new soteriology.

1.7 Approach of this study

This study is interested in analysing the theory of astral magic which Rāzī formulates in *al-Sirr* and how it can be understood as a soteriology which was subsequently integrated into his late philosophical-theological summa *al-Maṭālib*. It is for this reason that it will focus on a limited range of Rāzī's works. These works will be consulted in order to illuminate proofs in *al-Sirr* which are expressed in a condensed or obscure way. These works will be those most fully engaging with Avicennan thought such as the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, and *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, both written just after he wrote *al-Sirr*. With this same aim, I will also turn to Avicennan works such as *al-Shifā* and *Aḥwāl al-Nafs*. To explore the perfect nature doctrine, I shall examine the relevant passage from Abū'l-Barakāt's *Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*. And since I shall argue that key Sabian doctrines which feature in *al-Sirr* were to be subsequently integrated into the

systematizing thought of Rāzī's later soteriology, I shall focus my attention on *al-Maṭālib* 8, especially in the last chapter.

This study is focused on *al-Sirr* as a philosophical and theological work on astral magic. A broader investigation into the development of Rāzī's thought relating to such issues as causality and the nature of the soul and perception will clearly fall beyond the limits of this scope. Its focus also precludes it from pursuing a number of other very valuable approaches, all of which will have to remain for now *desiderata*. It will add nothing to the inquiry into the historical origins of the Sabians and their development as a trope in Islamic thought.³⁹ It will not investigate the occult sources which Rāzī used to write his technical account of astral magic; nor will it analyse the ways in which his understanding of the technical aspects of the talismanic craft matured and developed by the time he came to write *al-Maṭālib*. Nor will it examine the obvious relationship between the Sabian religion that Rāzī depicts and the mystery religions of late Antiquity, especially that which is evidenced in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, particularly the *Asclepius*.⁴⁰ Nor will it pursue the history of the perfect nature doctrine before Rāzī, including: (1) its obvious affinities with the Platonic concept of the personal daimon; (2) its inclusion in *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* in close association with the Sabians, the Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica and ritual invocation of the planets; and (3) its reception in *al-Wāridāt wa'l-taqdīsāt* of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī in connection with planetary prayers.⁴¹ Lastly it will not aim at contributing to the

³⁹ For this, see Van Bladel's *The Arabic Hermes*.

⁴⁰ See Burnett, 'The Establishment of Medieval Hermeticism', p.111-112.

⁴¹ On the personal daimon, see Adamson, 'Present without being Present: Plotinus on Plato's Daimon'; and Greenbaum, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology*. For the perfect nature in *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*, see Picatrix: *Das Ziel des Weisen*, pp. 187-194.

lively modern scholarly debate on the analytical categories of: magic; the occult; the esoteric; science and religion.

1.8 Summary of the Contents of *al-Sirr*

Al-Sirr comprises five treatises (*maqālāt*) prefaced by a general introduction. Each treatise divides into separate chapters (*fuṣūl*). The general introduction opens with a eulogy of occult knowledge and concludes with a discussion of twelve conditions relating to the attitude of mind which must be possessed by the one who would aspire to the acquisition of occult knowledge.⁴²

The first treatise opens with a definition of talismans as the blending of active heavenly powers with receptive earthly powers. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the epistemology of astrology, the science which identifies patterns of relationship between celestial configurations and sublunary phenomena. The fourth chapter is of great significance to the work as a whole, describing the occult power which can be exerted by the soul's estimative faculty and how it can be developed through spiritual training. Chapter five describes the various practices involved in astral ritual, including the use of images, suffumigations, and incantations. The sixth and last chapter of the treatise provides a 'clarification' on the 'weakness' of approach of the philosophers and the Sabians and a defence of Islam.⁴³

The second treatise, comprising just under half of the total length of the treatise, summarizes, without acknowledging its source, the astrology of Abū

⁴² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 1-7.

⁴³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 7-20.

Ma'shar as presented in his *al-Madkhal al-Kabīr* (Great Introduction to Astrology).⁴⁴

The third treatise treats of talismans. Its first chapter provides a detailed description of the process and ritual associated with the forging of the talismanic idol; its second and third chapters present instructions for talismans derived from two different sources. Its fourth and last chapter concludes by reconciling between Islamic scripture and the Sabian belief in an entirely ensouled cosmos.⁴⁵

The first chapter of the fourth treatise describes the eight doctrines of the Sabians, amongst which is included the doctrine of the perfect nature. The long ritual of planetary ascent is detailed in chapter two. The third prescribes rituals to propitiate the anger or hostility of any planet, whilst the fourth describes various aspects of the ritual such as specific sacrifices, suffumigations, and prayers. Chapters Five to Seven comprise technical instructions for invoking the Head and Tail of the Dragon; specific planetary magical operations and then descriptions of poisons and antidotes. Chapters Eight to Ten are devoted to operations for: neutralizing magic and amorous obsession; causing strife and enmity; and striking down a victim with illness.⁴⁶

The Fifth treatise describes the talismans of the seven planets according to *Kitāb al-Siḥr al-kabīr* by Ibn Waḥshiyya.⁴⁷

Translations of the ritual of planetary ascent and its invocations appear in Appendices 1 and 2; the third Appendix will contain a full reproduction of the

⁴⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 20-95.

⁴⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 95-110.

⁴⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 110-158.

⁴⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 158-174.

Cairo lithograph of *al-Sirr*. Here follows a concise summary of the main divisions of *al-Sirr* (numbers in square brackets refer to page numbers in the Cairo lithograph).

General Introduction [1-7]

1. On the general merit of knowledge [2-3]
2. On the merit of occult Knowledge and the perfection of the theoretical and practical capacities [3- 5]
3. Twelve conditions for engaging with this kind of knowledge [5-7]
 - (a) Conviction [5]
 - (b) Persistence [5]
 - (c) Industry [5-6]
 - (d) Concealment [6]
 - (e) Nocturnal Practice [6]
 - (f) Preponderance of good acts over bad [6]
 - (g) Veganism [6]
 - (h) Employment of Spirits for Important Matters [6]
 - (i) Refrainment from excessive petition of Spirits [6]
 - (j) Astrological Knowledge [6]
 - (k) Steadfastness and perseverance [6]
 - (l) Spiritual sensitivity [7]

Treatise 1: On General Principles [7-20]

1.1

Definition of talismans [7-9];

1.2

On whether knowledge of the natures of the heavenly bodies is possible [9-10];

1.3

On the method by which knowledge of the states of the celestial spheres can be attained [10]

1.4

On the fact that magic is based on the purification of the soul and the focusing of the *wahm* (*ta'liq al-wahm*) [11-17]

1.4.1

Ten illustrations of the occult power of the *wahm* over physical reality [11-12];

1.4.2

Innate (*fiṭri*) occult power [12-13];

1.4.3

Acquired occult power [13-17];

(a) Astrological indications of predisposition for the acquisition of occult power [13-14];

(b) Rejection of worldliness; [14]

(c) Physical and Psychological balance through regulation of the humours [14];

(d) Vegan diet and reduction in food consumption [14];

(e) Use of colours, fragrance and music to fortify the soul [14];

(f) Single-minded purpose [15-16]

(g) Establishment of connection with the celestial spirit by means of ritual, prayer and concentrated focus on an idol [16]

(h) Ṭumṭum al-Hindī on meditative focus, occult power, and directing the celestial powers with the power of the soul [16-17]

1.5

An adumbration of the ritual acts that the master of the craft performs (*dabṭ al-a'māl allatī yuzāwiluhā sāhib al-ṣan'a*) [17-19]

1.5.1

Four proofs that images exert an occult effect on the soul [17]

1.5.2

On the metaphysical origin of occult images and their [17]

1.5.3

On images (*ṣuwar*) and their occult effects, knowledge of which was only acquired by means of revelation and inspiration (*wahy wa'l-ilhām*) [17]

1.5.4

Proof that each image has its archetype (*mithāl*) in the heavens and that lower forms are subject (*muṭī'a*) to their archetypes in the higher world: serpents are subject to Draco; scorpions to Scorpio; predators to Leo [18]

1.5.5

On planetary correspondence with sublunary phenomena and their use in magnifying power of astral magical ritual [18]

1.5.6

Images are to be inscribed on materials sympathetic to the planet [18]

1.5.7

Repetition of incantations

1.5.8

Burning of aromatics before planetary idol and representation of the person in relation to whom the ritual is being performed [18]

1.5.9

Tying and blowing on knots and the utterance of incantations over them [18]

1.6

A 'clarification' (*bayyina*) on the weakness of the approach (*madhhab*) of the philosophers and the Sabians and an explanation of the correctness of the Islamic religion. [19-20]

Treatise 2: Astrology [20-95]

2.1

On the proofs that the heavenly bodies influence this world [20-26]

2.2

Response to the denial of planetary influence [26-29]

2.3

A Summary of Astrology [29-95]

Treatise 3: On Talismans [95-110]

3.1

General principles on making talismans [95-96]

3.1.1

A complete talisman draws on the influence of one fixed star and three assisting planets in order to capture the four elements: Mercury; the Moon; and the operative planet;

3.1.2

On the precise measurement of the four elements in the raw material within the raw material;

3.1.3

Correct seasonal timing for making the talisman;

3.1.4

How distance and speed of the planets determines their influence

3.1.5

Instructions for astrological timing;

3.1.6

On how and when to cast the metal into the mould to make the talisman, and the ritual performed.

3.2

Talismans of Abūdhāṭīs al-Bābilī [96-104]

3.3

Selections from Kitāb Yawāqīt al-Mawāqīt [105-109]

3.4

A Qur'ānic defence of the doctrine of the ensouled universe [109-110]

Treatise 4. On the invocation of the heavenly bodies [110-58]

4.1

Sabian Beliefs [110-114]

4.1.1

Three Sabian Sub-sects [110]

4.1.2

Eight Sabian doctrines [110-4]

4.2

Ritual of Planetary Ascent [114-120]

4.3

How to avoid hostility of the planets during the ritual [120-22]

4.4

On the suffumigations, sacrifices and invocations used in the ritual [122-7]

4.5

On the invocation of Draco [127-132]

4.6

On the operations of the Spirits of the Planets [132-7]

4.7

On Poisons and Teriacs [137-139]

4.8

On the Neutralization of Magic and Obsessive Love [139-141]

4.9.

On Operations to sow hatred and cause separation [141-151]

4.10

On causing illness [151-158]

Treatise 5: the Talismans of the Seven Heavenly Bodies [158-174]

Chapter 2: Sabians

The alternative Sabian soteriology depicted in *al-Sirr* enshrined the perfection of knowledge and power, the central theme of the general introduction to the work. In Rāzī's thought, 'Sabians' (*al-ṣābi'a*), whose historicity was not a central concern for Rāzī, represented a generic term denoting the adherents of any form of learned astrolatrous paganism, such as those who constituted the ancient civilizations of the Greeks, the Chinese, the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians and the Indians.⁴⁸

After examining the central theme of the general introduction to *al-Sirr*, this chapter will present an overview of Sabian belief and practice as presented in the work, supplemented by a brief exploration of their depiction in Rāzī's commentary on the Qur'ān, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*. From these two works will emerge the shape of the Sabian religious construct which represented the oldest religion of Man, with antediluvian origins, rooted in the observation of the natural rhythms of the cosmos. Thereafter, I shall briefly examine the use of Indian spiritual practice in the shaping of Rāzī's Sabian construct.

2.1 The justification for the study of occult knowledge in *al-Sirr*

Praise is due to God whose knowledge encompasses and whose wisdom penetrates all things; and prayers and blessings on the prophet of mercy, the mediator of the <Muslim> community Muḥammad, and on his pure

⁴⁸ A synonym for this term might be 'talismán masters' (*aṣḥāb al-ṭilasmāt*), whose views on the celestial spirits Rāzī records in *al-Maṭālib* 7 in a chapter entitled: 'a report on what the talismán masters said concerning the attributes of the high celestial spirits', which reports the views of the Greeks, the Chinese and especially the Indians (see *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 387-395).

family. This book gathers together whatever has reached us of the science of talismans, magical operations (*siḥriyāt*), evocations (*‘azā’im*) and planetary invocation *<da ‘wat al-kawākib>*, whilst disavowing all that is opposed to the faith, the peace of religious certainty (*salm al-yaqīn*) and reliance on the benevolence of the Merciful.⁴⁹

The concise exordium of *al-Sirr* represents a general panegyric of knowledge and wisdom. Appropriately the traditional pious opening passage begins with praise of God ‘whose knowledge encompasses and whose wisdom penetrates all things’. Implicit in this prayer is a proleptic defence of the subject material he is about to treat, material that might appal the “orthodox” Muslim: ‘the science of talismans, magical operations (*siḥriyāt*), evocations (*‘azā’im*) and planetary invocation (*da ‘wat al-kawākib*)’.

This implicit proleptic defence argues that since God’s knowledge embraces all things, no knowledge should be deemed accursed; since God’s wisdom infuses all, nothing can be said to be created in vain. And since this science invokes the mediation of spiritual beings (*rūḥāniyāt*), by the will of the adept, to achieve intended effects in the world of generation and corruption Rāzī, emphatically declaring his own Islamic confessional commitment, appropriately invokes blessings on the prophet of mercy in his capacity as the true mediator between God and the Muslim community.

He presents *al-Sirr* as as a compendium of magical theory and practice that ‘gathers together whatever has reached us’ (*kitāb yajma ‘ fīhi mā waṣala ilaynā*) concerning talismans. He adopts the tone of a neutral observer, whose Islamic

⁴⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

confessional commitments do not intrude much into the presentation; the passages in which Rāzī defends Islamic orthodoxy against the claims of the masters of talismans are rare, relatively brief and do not detract from the main purpose of the work. Rāzī is robust in his ‘disavowal of all that is opposed to the faith’ (*ma‘a al-tabarri’ ‘an kulli mā yukhālif al-dīn*). With this disavowal, Rāzī acknowledges the provocative nature of the material which he presents which would outrage any “orthodox” sensibility.

Knowledge, according to the general exordium of *al-Sirr*, is the means by which the rational human soul is delivered from the darkness of material reality and corporeal desire, which veil the soul from perceiving reality as it is. In knowledge and wisdom is the soul’s ennoblement; in engrossment in sublunary reality lies its utter ruin:

Knowledge (*al-‘ilm*) is the <very> life of the rational soul drawing out the heart from the darkness of nature (*al-ṭabī‘a*) which has enshrouded living souls and veiled them from the world of life with the ornaments of nature that are ruinous for he who conceives not the realities and is not honoured with knowledge (*lā yataṣawwir al-ḥaqā’iq wa-yatasharrāfu bi’l-‘ilm*).⁵⁰

To amplify this, Rāzī relies not on Islamic authorities but the pre-Islamic Greek sages. According to a saying attributed to Socrates, the wise have:

...asserted the living soul is the vessel of wisdom, and denied that it is to be found in scrolls and books. For it is pure, living, holy, incorruptible, containing neither filth nor mortal pollution. It cannot be entrusted to

⁵⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

aught but living souls, untouched by moribund flesh. Souls are fortified with wisdom just as bodies are fortified with eating and drinking. Wisdom washes souls from the filth and impurities of nature as clothes which are washed in a basin. When the soul knows wisdom, it yearns and longs for the world of life; inclines towards the rejection of natural base desires, which are fatal to living souls; and escapes from the captivity of nature and its condition by which the people of <this> world are bound (*al-shahawāt al-ṭabī‘iyya al-mumīta li’l-nufūs al-ḥayya wa-najat min asr al-ṭabī‘a wa-ḥālatiha allatī qad ta‘allaqa ahl al-‘ālam bihā*).⁵¹

Wisdom is living; it does not dwell in inanimate books but the soul of the one that inclines towards it. Wisdom nourishes the soul; purifies it of filth; and secures its salvation from captivity in the world of gross materiality. By the following words, attributed to Hippocrates, the reader is exhorted, in the strongest possible terms, to embody its reality:

The wise man is not he who knows the path but then swerves away from it, donning the robe of ignorance; nor does he find <eternal> life who does not strive for the salvation of his soul (*wa-laysa yaḥyā man lam yas‘a fī najāt nafsihi*). A <final> death in <bodily> decomposition (*al-mawt fī al-bilā*) is better for the ignorant man than life <after physical> death: for when the base cravings of nature (*radhā’il al-ṭabī‘a*) attach themselves to the soul and bind it in their snare, then it dies death after death, and endures pain upon pain, and perhaps may remain bound, never to find salvation from it (*wa-rubbamā baqiyat marbūṭatan lā tanjū minhā*). If the captive prefers the humiliation of his captivity to the glory of salvation

⁵¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

and liberation (*al-najāt wa'l-khalāṣ*), contenting himself with that which is worthless, then for him a <final> death would <indeed> be a peaceful repose <*rāḥa*>.⁵²

Nothing could be of more concern to man's immortal soul than the pursuit of knowledge. For in it lies his salvation and liberation from the pain and suffering of embodiment. Knowledge is a soteriological enterprise.

Of all fields of inquiry, occult knowledge has the highest virtue. According to its masters, as reported by Rāzī, occult astral knowledge is the summit of human intellectual endeavour, combining the most dignified knowledge with the most dignified power:

The masters of this knowledge combined the pleasure (*ladhdha*) of possessing the noblest knowledge with the pleasure of the noblest kind of power (*ashraf al- 'ulūm wa-ashraf anwā ' al-qudra*). As for the pleasure of <this> knowledge, it is because this knowledge guides you (*yuwaffiquka*) to the mysteries of the higher and lower worlds (*asrār al- 'ālam al-a lā wa asrār al- 'ālam al-asfal*); indeed it transforms you such that you become a witness unto the spiritual beings, their interlocutor – indeed one of their company and one of their like (*yaj 'aluka bi-ḥaythu taṣīr mushāhidan li'l-rūḥāniyāt wa-mukhāṭiban lahum bal mukhtaliṭan bihim wa-ka-wāḥidin min amthālihim*) . As for the pleasure of power, it is because <practitioners> are empowered to perform all objects of desire (*yaqdirūna 'alā jamī ' al-murādāt*), including curing difficult illnesses which defy the expertise of doctors, such as leprosy, paralysis and obsessive love, for they enlist the

⁵² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2. I have not yet located the source for this quote.

aid of the spirits (*yasta 'inūn bi-rūḥāniyāt*) whilst doctors use corporeal means (*jismāniyāt*): and spiritual means (*rūḥāniyāt*) are stronger than the corporeal, without a doubt. Moreover, the master of this knowledge is empowered to subdue his enemy without engaging in war and exposing himself to combat.⁵³

The object of this most noble knowledge is the mysteries of the Higher and Lower Worlds and how the spirits which inhabit the former effect the generation and corruption of temporally originated phenomena (*ḥawādith*) in the latter.⁵⁴ These spirits, referred to alternatively, but inconsistently, as 'arwāḥ' (sing. *rūḥ*) or 'rūḥāniyāt', are the denizens of the celestial spheres. In *al-Sirr*, Rāzī co-ordinates these celestial spirits with the angels of the Islamic revelation.⁵⁵

A corollary of this occult knowledge is pleasure (*ladhdha*): the perfection of the soul as a simple primary end, sought for its own sake, the pursuit of which engenders its own pleasure. Its result is the ontological transformation of the knowing subject such that he becomes: 'a witness unto the Spiritual Beings, their interlocutor – indeed one of their company and one of their like'. From Rāzī's perspective, the claim made by the masters of this occult knowledge to such a transformation constitutes a claim to angelomorphosis. By means of this transformational knowledge, the adept is represented as being able to enlist the aid of the celestial spirits to act in ways in the sublunary world which are stronger and superior to those who act by means of the corporeal. In so doing,

⁵³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Rāzī often speaks of the 'nobility' (*sharaf*) bestowed on the one who possess knowledge. Compare for instance the first chapter of his epistemological introduction to *al-Maṭālib* in which he explores the 'nobility of knowledge' (*sharaf al- 'ilm*) (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, pp. 37-41).

⁵⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 109-110.

he is liberated from engrossment in material reality and raised to the rank of the celestial angels.

2.2 Sabians in *Al-Sirr*: A General Overview

The alternative Sabian soteriology, which substituted the mediating guidance of prophets with that of the celestial spirits, was rooted in the veneration of the heavenly bodies. The wandering planets; the fixed stars; the signs of the Zodiac; and the three hundred and sixty degrees of the starless sphere which surrounds them -- all exerted their influence on the generation and corruption of terrestrial phenomena. As long as Man remained ignorant of them, he remained in their thrall; but once he understood them, and their effect on the rhythms of the cosmos and his own soul, then he stood the chance of gaining some kind of agency, and ultimately, of transcending his own incarnated existence. Of central importance to the system of Sabian practice as conceived by Rāzī was the talisman, a planetary statue or idol. Its construction, at the correct astrological timing, allowed the practitioner to affect, in accordance with his intent, reality in the centre of his geocentric universe, in ways which ran contrary to the usual course of apparent cause and effect.

The definition of the talisman that introduces the first treatise of *al-Sirr* structures the subsequent presentation of the theory. Whilst in *al-Sirr*, he cites no authority for this definition, in *al-Maṭālib*, where the definition reappears verbatim, it is explicitly attributed to the Sabians. A talisman is:

...the blending of <dynamically> active celestial forces with passive elemental forces to make manifest that which runs contrary to the

natural course of events or to prevent from occurring what normally would agree with it.⁵⁶

Two levels of reality are introduced: the supralunary reality of the heavenly spheres, the '<dynamically> active celestial forces', and the reality of the myriad sublunary phenomena which fall under their sway. The higher are ontologically linked with the lower by a web of sympathetic connections, or planetary and zodiacal correspondences (*munāsabāt*). The base products of nature and human endeavour only have meaning and significance insofar as they participate in the intricate geometry of celestial movement. The definition implies a third level of reality, which brings together the supralunary with the sublunary, through a process of active 'blending' (*tamzīj*). This third level is the link between them: the soul of the practitioner and the talisman which he casts. It is on this level that the products of nature and human artifice are gathered together to participate in celestial reality in ways determined by the intent of the Sabian adept. These three levels, the superlunar, sublunary and psychic, provide the organization for the theoretical passages of *al-Sirr*. They also inform Rāzī's exposition of talismans in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, as we have already encountered (see section 1.6). Explaining the concept of the talisman as the bringing together of celestial with sublunary forces, he divides the latter into the receptive forces of the material used in the talismanic ritual and the active psychic forces – which can safely be presumed to be those of the talisman master:

⁵⁶ *Al-Sirr*, p.7: *tamzīj al-quwā al-fa'āla al-samāwiyya bi'l-quwā al-munfa'ila al-'unṣuriyya li-ajli al-tamakkuni min iżhāri mā yukhālifu al-'āda aw al-man'ī min mā yuwāfiquhā*. Compare the close wording from *al-Maṭālib* 8 which states that 'talisman' is an expression for: '...the blending of <dynamically> active celestial forces with passive elemental forces to bring about that which runs contrary to the natural course of events or prevents from occurring what would normally agree with it.' *Al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 149. In *al-Sirr*, sublunary passive forces are referred to as 'elemental' (*'unṣuriyya*) whilst in *al-Maṭālib*, they are referred to as 'earthly' (*arḍiyya*).

Know that celestial forces do not affect preternatural events without the bringing together (*inḍimām*) of passive receptive elemental forces (*al-quwā al-‘unṣuriyya al-qābila*) with active earthly psychic forces (*al-quwā al-naḥsiyya al-arḍiyya al-fā‘iliyya*) and this <bringing together> is the talisman. This is what he [i.e. Avicenna] is relating here, and thus have we already explained it, so consult *al-Sirr al-Maktūm* if you desire an in-depth investigation (*taḥqīq*).⁵⁷

So, returning to *al-Sirr*, Rāzī begins his theoretical discussion with the first treatise on the level of the talisman master’s soul and its ‘active earthly psychic forces’. After examining the various epistemological difficulties which underlie astrology, a branch of knowledge necessary for the timing of talismanic operations, Rāzī argues that empirical analysis must be supported by revelation (*waḥy*) to the human soul and its inspiration (*ilhām*) by a numinous external source in order to secure the sound basis of astrology as a valid field of inquiry. Rāzī then shifts his focus to the operation of the soul itself and the necessity of focusing its estimative faculty (*wahm*) in order to secure the success of any task.⁵⁸ This discussion provides an introduction to the real core of the first treatise: an exploration of: (1) the nature of the soul innately imbued with occult power; and (2) of the spiritual austerities by which such power may be acquired by the soul not so naturally predisposed. A crescendo of philosophical arguments, to establish the reality of the former and the efficacy of the latter, reaches its climax with a long passage of a distinct Indian yogic tone, quoted on the authority of a certain ‘Tumtum al-Hindī’ (‘Tumtum the Indian’), which

⁵⁷ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 663-664. Notice here that the referent of ‘talisman’ here is more process than object.

⁵⁸ We shall examine the nature and importance of this internal sense faculty, which is so crucial in Avicennan psychology in the third part of this thesis.

expounds on the occult powers developed by someone who attains a heightened meditative state (*markaz al-fikr*). Thus does Rāzī present the level of reality of the adept's soul, the focus of which blends the '<dynamically> active celestial forces', referred to in his definition of the talisman, with 'passive elemental forces'.

These supralunary active forces and sublunary passive elemental forces are the subject of the second treatise. After presenting arguments establishing that the heavenly bodies influence generation and corruption in this world, Rāzī presents what amounts to a summary of the *Kitāb al-madkhal al-kabīr* ('Great Introduction to Astrology') of Abu Ma'shar whose rational justification for astrology, Pingree argues, derives from the rationalizations of the philosophizing Sabians of Ḥarrān.⁵⁹ His subsequent presentation of long lists of different sublunary phenomena and their planetary correspondences relies too on Abu Ma'shar. The importance of their inclusion resides in the fact that the products of nature and human artifice, which derive their meaning from their participation in the transcendent celestial reality, are brought together in Sabian astral ritual.⁶⁰ Ultimately the aim of the planetary ascent ritual is self-

⁵⁹ See Abū Ma'shar's '*Kitāb al-madkhal al-kabīr*'. On Abū Ma'shar, see Pingree in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. For a refutation of David Pingree's theory of a Sabian Ḥarrānian influence on Abu Ma'shar, see Van Bladel, the *Arabic Hermes*, pp.115-118. Whether or not there was a historic Sabian Ḥarrānian influence on Abu Ma'shar is irrelevant to the present discussion. What is relevant is the fact that, citing him as the authority for the ritual of planetary ascent, Rāzī believed Abu Ma'shar to have had intimate knowledge of Sabian practice. For Abū Ma'shar's theory on astral causation, see Adamson 'Abū Ma'shar'.

⁶⁰ A brief glance at the detailed contents of *al-Sirr* 2:11, entitled 'On the distribution of all colours, tastes, occult properties, actions, character traits amongst the Seven Planets', assists us in gaining some impression of how comprehensive and all-encompassing was the Sabian vision of a sublunary reality entirely governed by planetary correspondence. (see *al-Sirr*, pp. 53-8) Included in the list are individual examples of the following categories of natural phenomena and products of human culture: tastes; colours; textures; physical attributes; terrains; dwelling places; countries and regions; non-precious metals; precious materials; fruit and grains; trees; plants and crops; foods and medicines; forces and powers; animals; birds; simple organs and limbs; complex organs and limbs; organs of perception; ages of man; members of the family

divinization through mimesis of the celestial bodies and thus the celestial souls that move them.⁶¹ The Sabian claim that astral ritual can be relied on as a means to change some aspect of terrestrial reality issues a direct challenge to the Islamic theological doctrine that since God's power (*qudra*) extends to all existing things, no agency exists except God's. Seeing that, for Rāzī's Sabians, astral ritual represents a praxis by which the Avicennan prophetic properties of unseen knowledge and occult power might be achieved by all, it is natural that *al-Sirr* should include a robust and detailed defence of astrology, the science par excellence which informs Sabian belief and determines its rituals.⁶²

Moreover, Rāzī draws on an eclectic range of authorities to explain this occult system of belief and practice including Greeks, Persians and Indians. The Indian contribution, as represented by Ṭumṭum al-Hindī, to the general Sabian construct is particularly important. His two contributions to Rāzī's general account of this astral religion come at highly significant junctures in the narrative. The first derives from his book on the images of the three hundred

household; human physical appearance; character traits; behavioural traits; actions and nature; professions and social classes; religions and clothes; planetary images.

⁶¹ See conclusion of chapter 4.

⁶² He lodges a defence in the belief in celestial influence by first demonstrating the effects of solar and lunar motion on the terrestrial world. He then applies this conclusion *mutatis mutandis* to the other heavenly bodies. Thus, drawing on Abu Ma'shar, he adduces as evidence of solar influence on both celestial and terrestrial reality the Sun's effect on: the orbits of the higher planets; the waxing and waning of the Moon; the vitalization of animal life; variation in global temperature and its different environments; the seasons and growth of plants; the seven climes and the races to be found therein. (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 20-23). By way of contrast, the Moon affects: the tides; the bodies of animals; the humoral balance; hair growth; milk production; egg white; sleep (it is especially bad to sleep in moonlight). Certain fish emerge at the beginning of the lunar month; the Moon exerts an influence on the planting of trees and seedlings and on the growth of grasses and herbs. There are three ways in which the Moon exerts a greater effect on the sublunary world than the Sun. Firstly it is the closest planet to our world and therefore its effect on it is the most powerful. Secondly the movement of the Moon is swift, and its changes of state are many. Since the movements of the rest of the planets are slow, whilst the changes that occur in this world are many, it is more logical to attribute the changes which occur in this world to the motions of the Moon. And thirdly, because of its swift motions, the Moon blends the lights of some planets with the lights of the others: this blending is the most proximate principle cause of temporally originated events in this world. (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 25). For the philosophical defence of astrology, see Adamson, 'Abū Ma'shar'; Saliba 'Ash'arites and the science of the stars'; Kukkonen, 'Causality and Cosmology'; McGinnis, 'Natural Knowledge'.

and sixty degrees of the starless sphere, which provides crucial information for the successful casting of talismanic idols. The second is his striking description of the ability of the adept who has mastered meditative focus, to control the elements with the power of mental concentration and to communicate with the celestial souls. These two contributions provide the necessary bridge between cosmology and psychology vital for the Sabian soteriological system.⁶³

2.3 Sabians in *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*

Just as he did in *al-Sirr*, so Rāzī treats the Sabians in his highly influential Qur'ānic commentary *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* as a heresiological category comprising a wide range of historical groups and nations and theologically distinct positions. But in the attempt to place them within a hierarchy of religions, Rāzī's *al-Tafsīr* equivocates between designating them as privileged '*ahl al-kitāb*' (people of the book) and relegating them to an intermediary status between this dignified category and that of degenerate polytheists.

2.3.1 Sabians as People of the Book

The Sabians are mentioned explicitly on just three occasions in the Qur'ān. The first appears in the second *sūra*:

⁶³ For Rāzī's discussion of the images of the degrees of the starless sphere described by Ṭumṭum al-Hindī, see chapter 5. For the description of the power of perfected meditative focus, see Chapters 6 and 7.

As for the believers, for the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians who believe in God and the Last Day, and who do righteous deeds – these have their wage with their Lord. No fear shall fall upon them, nor shall they grieve.⁶⁴

Commenting on the identity of the Sabians in this verse, Rāzī gathers three opinions. The first defines the ‘*ṣābi*’ as one who ‘abandons his religion for another’: thus did the Arabs call Muḥammad, who manifested a religion contrary to theirs.⁶⁵ The second opinion cited provides detail as to their beliefs:

As for the second <opinion>, Qatāda said: ‘they are a people who worship the angels and pray to the Sun five times a day.’ He also said: ‘Religions are of five <types>, four of which belong to Satan and one of which belongs to the Merciful. <The four are>: the Sabians who worship the angels; the Magians who worship fire; those who commit polytheism, worshipping idols; and the Jews and Christians.’⁶⁶

In this second opinion the Sabians, who like Muslims observe five daily prayers, but who unlike them direct their worship to angels and pray to the Sun, are accorded an intermediary position which lies between the honoured status of the People of the Book and the depravity of idolaters. This intermediary status in the religious hierarchy is maintained in the third opinion concerning the Sabians, an opinion which Rāzī himself adopts:

The third <opinion>, which is the closest <to the truth>, is that they are a people who worship the planets (*al-kawākib*) and they are associated with one of two theological positions (*thumma la-hum qawlān*): the first is that the

⁶⁴ Qur’ān 2:62.

⁶⁵ *Al-Tafsīr* 3, p.112. For the medieval Islamic sources which support variations on this interpretation, see Gunduz, *The Knowledge of Life*, pp. 17-19.

⁶⁶ *Al-Tafsīr* 3, p. 112-3.

Creator of the world is God – exalted is He! – except that He enjoined the veneration (*ta'zīm*) of these planets and that they should provide the direction of prayer, supplication and veneration (*ta'zīm*). The second <of their theological positions> is that God – exalted is He! – created the spheres and the planets but it is the planets which govern this world, both its good and evil, its sound health and disease, and that it is they which indeed created it; thus it behoves Man to venerate them for they are the gods which govern this world but which worship God – exalted is He! This doctrine (*madhhab*) is the position attributed to the Chaldeans whom Abraham – upon whom be peace – came to refute and whose doctrine he came to repudiate.⁶⁷

This third opinion thus collapses the three categories of Sabians we encounter in *al-Sirr* into two groups. The first asserts the existence of the Creator who enjoins on them the veneration (*ta'zīm*) of the planets, as opposed to their worship (*'ibāda*). Their veneration of the planets is thus the fulfilment of a divine injunction. The religion of the second group is more degenerate in nature. For them the planets are the creators and governors of this world: since man is hostage to their caprices, they are to be worshipped as gods in their own right. The link between God and man, the former being too transcendent to be the object of the latter's attentions, is severed. Thus, whilst for the first group of Sabians the planets provide the focus of veneration, for the second group they are the very objects of worship.⁶⁸ This second group is explicitly identified as the

⁶⁷ *Al-Tafsīr* 3, p. 112-13.

⁶⁸ Elsewhere in *al-Tafsīr*, when discussing astrolaters in general (not Sabians in particular), Rāzī says: 'As for those engaged in the worship of things other than God, their creeds are many. They include those who worship the planets. Such people fall into two categories. There are those who maintain that God – exalted is He! – created the planets to which He delegated the

Chaldeans, the very community in which Abraham was raised and whose religion he was divinely commissioned to repudiate, just as Muḥammad was commissioned to repudiate the religion of Mecca's Arabs. The Chaldeans are thus a specific subcategory of Sabian.

Rāzī mentions the Sabians elsewhere in *al-Tafsīr* in his exegesis of Qur'ān 22:17, where he includes the Sabians amongst the Muslims, Jews and Christians, who believe in the Creator as an agent 'possessed of volition' (*fā'il mukhtār*), and who follow the teachings of the divinely inspired prophets.⁶⁹ This category of believers is contrasted with those who follow false prophets, such as the Magians (*Majūs*), and with those who reject the very notion of prophethood, namely the idolaters, the polytheists and the Brahmins (*al-barāhima*). Presumably, therefore, the prophet whom the Sabians followed was divinely inspired. And yet somehow their belief in prophethood remains deficient and the divine revelation in which the Sabian religion is rooted enjoys a lesser status to that of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims.

Rāzī's Qur'ānic exegesis is thus ambivalent towards the Sabians. On the one hand they are categorized as People of the Book, who believe in a Creator possessed of volition, and affirm prophethood; the religions of the People of the Book are set in opposition to those of the polytheists, of whom the Indian Brahmins are representative, who have no revealed religion and deny

government of the lower (terrestrial) world; so the planets are the governors of this world and they say that it is necessary to worship these planets; the spheres and planets then worship God and obey Him (in their turn). Others who are more extreme deny the Creator and maintain that the spheres and the planets are by their very nature necessarily existent, their non-existence and their cessation being impossible; they govern the conditions of the lower world. Such are pure *Dahriyya*. Those who worship other than God include the Christians, who worship the Messiah, and also the worshippers of idols (*'abadat al-aṣnām*).'*Al-Tafsīr* 13, p. 38.

⁶⁹ See *al-Tafsīr* 23, p. 19 for commentary on Qur'an 22:17: 'As for the believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians and the polytheists – God shall judge between them on the Day of Resurrection'.

prophethood. On the other hand, there are those amongst the Sabians, namely the Chaldeans to whom Abraham preached, whose religion is pure astrolatry.

2.3.2 Aetiology of Idolatry

Rāzī is not content merely to condemn idolatry as abominable polytheism. He wants to understand why any rational human soul would be seduced by such a practice. So it is the people of Noah, the first people to have adopted idolatry, to whom he turns for his exploration of the phenomenon. Reflecting on the idolatrous abominations of the community to which the patriarch was sent to reform, Rāzī asserts that ‘there is no religion older than idolatry’ (*lā dīna aqdam min ‘abdat al-aṣnām*).⁷⁰ He observes the fact that it is self-evident that a graven image which human hand has wrought cannot be the creator of that same human hand. What, asks Rāzī, can be the rationality that explains idolatry? He says the most likely explanation (*al-ta’wīl al-aqwā*)⁷¹ is that:

People saw the changes in the conditions of the lower world as being contingent on changes in the conditions of the planets (*marbūṭa bi-taghayyurāt aḥwāl al-kawākib*). For the four seasons are occasioned by either the Sun’s proximity or distance from the zenith, and by reason of

⁷⁰ *Al-Tafsīr* 13, p.38. Exception must be made, presumably, for the religion of Adam.

⁷¹ In the same passage Rāzī mentions two other explanations which he finds less compelling. The first he quotes on the authority of Abu Ma‘shar whom he reports as saying: ‘Many of the people of China and India affirmed the existence of the Deity and angels except that they used to believe that He – may He be exalted – is a body of the most beautiful form and that the angels also have beautiful forms except they are veiled from us by the heavens. And so it follows that they took for themselves images and statues of exquisite shape and form.’ (*Al-Tafsīr*, 13, p. 39.) As for the second Rāzī says: ‘they believe that God – exalted is He – delegated the government of everything within the climes to an angel and that He delegated the government of every division of each of the world’s dominions to a heavenly spirit (*rūḥ samāwī*). Thus they say the governor of the seas is an angel; the governor of mountains is another angel; the governor of the clouds and the rains is an angel; the governor of provision is an angel; the governor of war and fighting is an angel. Since they believed this, they took for each angel a specific idol and temple constructing each idol with that which is appropriate for the celestial spirit.’ (*Al-Tafsīr* 13, p. 39.)

the changing of the four seasons different conditions are brought about in this world. Then people observed the conditions of the other planets (*aḥwāl sā'ir al-kawākib*) and so began to believe that states of felicity and affliction were connected to the way in which the planets were positioned in relation to people's ascendant signs (at the time of their birth). So when they began to believe this, most people were led to suppose (*ghalaba 'alā ḡunūn akthar al-khalq*) that the principle cause of events which come to be in this world was the celestial applications and the planetary correspondences (*ittiṣālāt al-falakiyya wa'l-munāsabāt al-kawabiyya*). When they adopted that belief, they exerted their utmost in the veneration <of the planets>.⁷²

By means of direct observation, Rāzī's idolaters come to associate the Sun's distance from the zenith with the changing of the seasons in the sublunary world and therefore go on to posit a causal link between the two phenomena. They then extend this reasoning to the movements of the other heavenly bodies surmising that the fortunes of individuals are determined by the configurations of the planets at the time of their birth. They then draw the conclusion that sublunary events are caused by the configurations of the planets to which veneration is owed. The arc of Rāzī's presentation of the justification of astrology in the second treatise of *al-Sirr* is determined by the same logical trajectory.

The same passage in the *al-Tafsīr* continues:

⁷² *Al-Tafsīr*, 13, p. 39. This passage is a repetition of what appears in *al-Tafsīr* 2, p. 123.

Then, there were those amongst them who believed <the planets> were by their very essence necessarily existent (*wājiba al-wujūd li-dhawātihā*). Others believed <the planets> were contingent, being created by the Greatest God, but who nevertheless governed the conditions of this world; thus did they assert belief in mediators between the Greatest God and changing conditions in the <sublunary> world.⁷³

Whilst the theological position that Rāzī attributes to the first group represents the most degenerate form of polytheism, the position of the second group most closely resembles that of Abraham's Chaldeans who worshipped the heavenly bodies as divine mediators with an utterly transcendent God. Returning to the idolaters of Noah, Rāzī says:

Irrespective of these two suppositions, they busied themselves in the worship and veneration of <the planets> but when they saw that they would disappear from sight for most of the time, they took for each planet an idol wrought from material the essence of which corresponded to it (*min al-jawhar al-mansūb ilayhi*).⁷⁴ So for the Sun they adopted an idol wrought of gold, adorning it with precious stones corresponding to the Sun, namely rubies and diamonds. Observing the same principle, they adopted for the Moon an idol wrought of silver. Thus they turned

⁷³ *Al-Tafsīr*, 13, p. 39.

⁷⁴ The practical measure of adopting idols to serve as the focus of worship when the planets had disappeared from sight is explicitly attributed to the Sabians by Rāzī in his *I'tiqadat firaq al-Muslimīn wa'l-Mushrikīn* (Beliefs of Muslim and Polytheist Sects) where he says the Sabians are: 'a people who say that the governor and creator of the world is the seven planets and the stars. They are worshippers of the heavenly bodies. When God sent Abraham on his prophetic mission, the people were following the religion of the Sabians [...] Know that their worship of idols was an innovation in their religion for they used to worship the stars when they rose and when they wanted to worship them when they had set, they had no choice but to fashion images and likenesses of the planets. So they wrought idols and devoted themselves to their worship and from there emerged the worship of the planets.' (Rāzī, *I'tiqādāt*, p. 90.)

themselves in worship of these idols, their objective being the worship of the planets and the pursuit of their favour. In light of this examination, it becomes clear that the original intention behind idolatry is the worship of the planets.⁷⁵

Like the philosophers and the Sabian talismanic magicians described in *al-Sirr*, Noah's idolaters conclude by way of empirical observation that the heavenly bodies determine change in the sublunary world. Moreover the planetary idols they fashion are wrought of metals and jewels which correspond to the planet which is the object of veneration. The resemblance of idol to talisman becomes clearer.⁷⁶

This explanation for the development of idolatry also appears in Rāzī's commentary on Qur'ān 2:22. To it, however, he adds an observation that explicitly links idolatry to talismanic magic. He says:

Astrologers (*aṣḥāb al-aḥkām*) used to avail themselves of certain astrological times which would occur only after long intervals such as one or two thousand years (*kānū yu 'inūn awqātan fī al-sinīn al-mutaṭāwila naḥwa al-alf wa'l-alfayn*) and they used to claim that whoever struck a

⁷⁵ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr* 13, p. 39.

⁷⁶ The passage continues to describe the responses of the prophets to the reasoning underpinning idolatry: 'As for the prophets – peace be upon them – they had in this regard a number of responses. One was to establish proof that the planets exert no effect at all on conditions in this world, as God – exalted is He – said: "His is the creation, His is the Command" (Qur'ān 7:54), having made clear that the planets have been made subject (to His Command). The second is that the planets, whilst they do exert effects on this world, display all the evidence of contingency and therefore they must be created and thus engagement in the worship of the Principle is more fitting than engagement in the worship of that which is subordinate (*al-ishtighāl bi- 'ibādat al-aṣl awlā min al-ishtighāl bi- 'ibādat al-far'*) so the evidence indicates that what results is the religion of idolatry as we have mentioned [...] thus it is clear that the doctrine of idolatry cannot be refuted unless the belief in the Sun, the Moon and the other planets as gods which govern this world is refuted.' *Al-Tafsīr* 13, p. 39. As we shall later examine, Rāzī explores these responses when he examines in detail the beliefs of the Sabians in the fourth treatise of *al-Sirr*.

talisman at that time in a specific way would derive benefit from it in certain ways, enjoying felicity or fertility or the repulsion of disasters. So when they wrought that talisman, they would venerate it, believing that they were deriving benefit from it. So when they exaggerated their veneration it became like worship and with the passage of time they forgot the original purpose and busied themselves in the worship of <talismans> out of ignorance.⁷⁷

2.3.3 Sabian Idols as Talismans

Discussing the idolatrous Chaldean Sabian community in which Abraham was raised and whose polytheism he repudiated, Rāzī writes:

They were rational people and therefore knew, of necessity, that they [i.e. their idols] were inanimate objects (*jāmidāt*). However, perhaps it was the case that they used to believe they were statues of the planets (*tamāthīl al-kawākib*) and that they were talismans (*ṭilasmāt*) wrought in such a way that they would bring benefit to anyone who worshipped them and bring grievous harm to anyone who would scorn them.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Rāzī, *Al-Taḥṣīn* 2, pp. 123-124. In the same passage, Rāzī speaks of the astral idolatry of the Greeks before Alexander: 'Know that before the conquests of Alexander the practice of the Greeks was to build for themselves temples which were named after the spiritual powers and the luminary bodies each of which they adopted as objects of worship. There was the temple of the First Cause – which was for them the Divine Command – the temple of the Pure Intellect (*'Aql Ṣarīḥ*), and the temple of Absolute Governance (*al-Siyasa al-Muṭlaqa*), the temple of the Soul and Form; all of them were circular. The Temple of Saturn was hexagonal; Jupiter's was triangular; Mars' was rectangular; the Sun's was square; the <external shape of the> temple of Venus was triangular but its internal shape was square; the <external shape of the> Temple of Mercury was triangular whilst its internal shape was rectangular; the Temple of the Moon was octagonal'. (*Al-Taḥṣīn* 2, p. 125.) This passage is derived from *al-Mīlāl wa'l-Niḥāl* of Shahrastānī whose understanding of the Sabians as a religious category clearly influences Rāzī's presentation in his *Taḥṣīn*. See *al-Mīlāl wa'l-Niḥāl*, p. 368. For how 'kaldānī' and 'kasdānī' came to be Arabic appellations for 'Chaldeans', see Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans of Iraq*, p.48.

⁷⁸ *Al-Taḥṣīn* 22, p. 183. Rāzī's identification of the community to which Abraham preached as Sabian is confirmed in his *I'tiqādāt* p. 90.

Elsewhere, Rāzī reinforces the association he makes between idols and talismans during his exegesis of Qur'an 6:80, which describes Abraham remonstrating with his native community whose religion was one of idolatrous astrology.⁷⁹

Commenting on Abraham saying: 'I have no fear of your idol worship', Rāzī says:

They tried to strike in him fear of their idols [...] but fear only arises in relation to someone who can either cause benefit or harm; idols, being inanimate objects, are impotent, incapable of bringing about benefit or harm, so how could fear of them ever arise? Were it said there is no doubt that talismans exert special effects, why then should it not be possible that fear of them should arise in this respect? We respond by saying: the power of a talisman depends on the influences of the planets and we have demonstrated that the power of the planets to influence only occurs by the creation of God – exalted is He – so only God in reality can be the object of hope and fear.⁸⁰

The Sabians as a category occupy an ambiguous position within the religious hierarchy which mediates between pure idolatry and the revealed Abrahamic religions. Their practice was one of astrology. Grounded in the belief that the movements of the heavenly bodies determine change in the sublunary world, their worship focused on planetary statues which, acting as talismans, could direct planetary influence in accordance with their will. Their antediluvian religious practice was identical to that of the idolaters to whom Noah preached. Theirs was the oldest religion in world.

⁷⁹ 'His people disputed with him [i.e. Abraham]. He said: 'Do you dispute with me about God now that He has guided me? I have no fear of your idol worship, unless my Lord intends some matter. My Lord encompasses all in His knowledge. Will you not reconsider?'"Qur'an 6:80

⁸⁰ *Al-Tafsīr* 13, p. 62.

The construct of the Sabian religion, as evidenced in both *al-Sirr* and *al-Tafsīr*, thus challenged the following Islamic theological beliefs: that there is only one Necessarily Existent; that all besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible; that all possibles are originated in time; that nothing has agency expect God; and that only prophets can receive revelation.

2.4 Sabians and Indians

It was the figure of Ṭumṭum al-Hindī which provided Rāzī with the necessary solder to weld together the cosmology of Abu Ma‘shar and the psychology of Avicenna to forge the idol of Sabian religion. As we shall discover in chapter 5, Ṭumṭum al-Hindī is the authority cited by Rāzī for the images of the starless sphere, so crucial for the process of forging a talisman in the account that appears in *al-Sirr* 3:1; he is also the authority for the fullest description of the adept’s meditative focus when performing occult ritual. For Sabian soteriology lies at the point where macrocosm and microcosm meet. I shall now turn briefly to a few works in which Indic thought and practice came to be associated with Sabians. My intention is to bring into focus the utility of Indian religion, with its emphasis on meditative concentration, for understanding the Sabianism depicted in *al-Sirr*.

It was Pingree who first noted the occurrence of Sanskrit names in the Sabian planetary prayers transmitted in the tenth-century grimoire *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*.⁸¹ He subsequently noted that these prayers appeared for the first time in the Arabic tradition recorded by ‘Umar ibn al-Farrūkhān al-Ṭabarī; a less

⁸¹ Pingree, ‘Some Sources of the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*’.

contaminated version is preserved in a mediaeval Latin translation.⁸² Sometime in the ninth century, additions were made to the prayers recorded by al-Ṭabarī. In the original version, the planets were invoked by their Arabic names; in the version that is incorporated into the *Ghāyat*, Greek, Pahlavī, and importantly, Sanskrit names were added.⁸³ Pingree notes the similarity between the planetary rituals with which these prayers are associated in the *Ghāyat* and astrolatrous ritual recorded in the Sanskrit *Yavanajātaka* of *Spujidhvaja*. He observes:

Among the earliest descriptions of the ceremonies (*grahapūjā*) performed in honour of the planets themselves is that preserved in the first *khaṇḍa* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāna*, a compilation from earlier sources apparently put together in the sixth century. In this are described the incenses, flowers, substances (for making images of the stellar deities), foods and drinks utilized in the rituals not only of the planets, but of the *nakṣatrāṇi* as well. The prayers are short invocations calling upon the planets by several of their names and epithets to be present. The similarities of such rituals to those used in the West are quite striking, though of course they are also thoroughly Indianized.⁸⁴

As for Shahrastānī, his chapter on Indian religion entitled *Ārā al-hind* ('Opinions of the Indians'), in his *al-Milāl wa'l-niḥāl*, leads the reader to infer a close

⁸² Pingree, 'Al-Ṭabarī on the Prayers to the Planets'.

⁸³ Pingree, 'Sabians of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition', p.22.

⁸⁴ David Pingree, 'Some Sources of the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*' (1980). Pingree adduces these planetary rituals as evidence of some kind of connection between Ḥarrān and India, without proof to support his restriction of the meaning of the term 'Sabian', as it is used in the *Ghāyat*, to the pagans of Ḥarrān. On this point, see Van Bladel, *the Arabic Hermes*, pp. 115-118.

philosophical and theological affinity between Sabianism and Indian religion.⁸⁵ The various categories of Sabian whose gradual decadence from worship of supracelestial spiritual beings; to worship of the planets; to worship of idols; and finally into the self-deifying delusion of Pharaoh, provide the basic structure for his analysis of Indian religion.⁸⁶ Indeed this decadence of the Sabians is a theme which deeply informs the theory of the history of religions in Rāzī's *al-Tafsīr*, as already noted in the previous section. Of particular interest to the exploration of Rāzī's Sabians, is Shahrastānī's description of a certain sect of the Brahmins whom he designates as the masters of meditation and estimation (*aṣḥab al-fikra wa'l-wahm*).⁸⁷

For these Brahmins, the practice of meditation (*fikr*) is given the utmost importance as the mediator between the sensible and intelligible worlds (*al-mutawassiṭ bayn al-maḥsūs wa'l-ma'qūl*); the means by which the forms of *sensibilia*, and the essences of *intelligibilia*, are apprehended; and the reservoir of knowledge derived from the two worlds (*mawrid al-ilmayn min al-ālamayn*).

This being the case:

⁸⁵ Shahrastānī, *al-Mīlāl wa'l-niḥāl*, pp. 305-369. Lawrence observes: '...Sabianism provides the organizing principle as well as the theological impetus for *Ārā al-hind*. All the groups which Shahrastānī cites and all the data which he has gathered are related to the categories transposed from the earlier section on the Ḥarrānian Sabians.' *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, Lawrence, p. 74.

⁸⁶ Shahrastānī categorizes Indian religion into five categories: the Brahmins; the people of the spiritual beings (*aṣḥab al-rūḥāniyyāt*); the worshippers of the planets (*abadat al-kawākib*); the worshippers of idols (*abadat al-aṣnām*); the sages of India (*ḥukamā' al-hind*).

⁸⁷ Shahrastānī, *al-Mīlāl wa'l-niḥāl*, pp.604-605. For a full translation of and commentary on the relevant passage, see *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, Bruce Lawrence, pp. 44-45 and pp. 114-118. Lawrence translates *aṣḥab al-fikra wa'l-wahm* as proponents of 'meditation and imagination'. This translation overlooks the significance of *al-wahm* was a faculty distinct from the imagination. This sect is not only the most accomplished in the use of meditation and the direction of the estimative faculty, but it is also 'the most knowledgeable concerning the starless sphere' (*wa ḥā'ulā'i 'a lam minhum bi'l-falak*). The significance of this fact will only become apparent when we examine in chapter 6 Rāzī's account in *al-Sirr* 3:1 of how to forge a talismanic idol, for which process, knowledge of the degrees of the starless sphere and their associated images is crucial. According to *al-Sirr*, this is a field in which the Indian Ṭumṭum al-Hindī has particular expertise and for which he is cited as the main authority.

...they exert their utmost to divert the faculty of estimation (*al-wahm*) and their meditative focus (*al-fikr*) from sensible objects by means of rigorous spiritual disciplines and strenuous exertions. So when the meditating mind (*al-fikr*) is abstracted from this <sensible> world, that <intelligible> world discloses itself to it. Sometimes it is informed of occult matters; sometimes it is empowered to withhold the rains; sometimes it can direct the estimative faculty to <strike> a living man dead in an instant. This possibility is not remote for the estimative faculty <can> wield an astonishing effect which acts on bodies.⁸⁸

Once the mind has been trained to a high level of meditative focus, it acquires both knowledge of occult matters, and the power to act directly on bodies and to influence souls: it can even influence the rain and kill a man remotely. The ability to perform such remarkable acts at a distance is by means of the *wahm*, or the estimative faculty, a mysterious internal sense faculty, crucial to human cognition, theorization on which represents Avicenna's key development on Aristotelian psychology. Noted by Avicenna, and reproduced by Rāzī for the same purpose in *al-Sirr* 1:4, Shahrastānī adduces, as evidence of the operative power of the estimative faculty on the physical world, the reality of the Evil Eye, and the estimative faculty's vertiginous effect on a man walking on a high wall:

...is not the power of the Evil Eye (*iṣābat al-‘ayn*) the action of the estimative faculty on an individual? Does not a man, walking along a

⁸⁸ *‘fa-yajtahidūna kulla al-juhd ḥattā yuṣarrifū al-wahm wa’l-fikr ‘an al-maḥsūsāt bi’l-riyāḍāt al-balīgha wa’l-ijtihādāt al-mujahhada ḥattā idhā tajarrada al-fikr ‘an hādihā al-‘ālam tajallā lahu dhālika al-‘ālam fa-rubbamā yukhbar ‘an muḥayyabāt al-aḥwāl wa-rubbamā yuqwa ‘alā ḥabs al-amṭār wa-rubbamā yūqi ‘al-wahm ‘alā rajulin ḥayyin fa-yaqtuluhu fi’l-ḥāl. Wa-lā yustab ‘adu dhālika fa’inna li’l-wahm atharan ‘ajīban fī taṣrīf al-ajsām wa’l-taṣarruf fi’l-nufūs.’ Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa’l-niḥal*, p. 604. In order to convey the range of meanings conveyed by the word *fikr* as it is used in this passage, I have rendered it in three different ways: ‘meditation’; ‘meditative focus’; and ‘meditating mind’.*

high wall, instantly fall, though the steps which he takes are no longer than those which he takes on flat ground.⁸⁹

Both examples are adduced by Avicenna, and reproduced by Rāzī for the same purpose in *al-Sirr* 1:4.⁹⁰

The power of heightened meditative focus, inculcated by spiritual discipline and a strict diet, to facilitate: (1) the cognition of intelligibilia; (2) communication with spiritual beings; and (3) controlling natural phenomena, is enjoyed not just by Rāzī's masters of the occult astral craft, as described in the first treatise of *al-Sirr*, but also by the *rishis* depicted by Gardizi:

Some others connect a <true> sage with <the knowledge of> astronomy, medicine and the other sciences. They are all philosophers using their senses perpetually to that purpose. According to them, through hardship and great pain, one can reach a state in which one can see angels, converse with them, and derive benefit from them. They have produced books of sciences and arts. They say that through *sensibilia* they can rise to the conception of *intelligibilia* [...] They prepare their food of dates, plants and herbs, so that it should be light for their senses. As they eat such plants all their life, their eyes become sharper and their hearts quicker in the uptake. They obtain what they wish, be it rain or wind, or hail; they bring down birds; or capture animals; or fly like birds.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa'l-nihal*, p. 605.

⁹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 11. For further discussion, see chapter 6.

⁹¹ Gardizī, Abū Sa'īd 'Abd al-Ḥayy ibn al-Ḍaḥḥāk ibn Maḥmūd, *Zayn al-Akḥbār*, MS. King's College, 213, Cambridge, translated by Vladimir Minorsky, in *Gardizī on India*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, quoted in *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, Bruce Lawrence, p.122.

But far more impressive than these accounts by either Shahrastānī or Gardīzī of Indian meditative power is that attributed by Rāzī in *al-Sirr* to Ṭumṭum al-Hindī. It merits full quotation:

...the meditator (*mufakkir*) abstains from sex. He does not fill his stomach. His gaze does not fall on aught but that on which he meditates (*yufakkir*). He does not seek anything other than that on which he meditates. He does not meditate on anything other than that element (*jins*) to which the object of his meditation belongs: if it belongs to the element of fire, then his meditation is of a fiery nature; if to water, then it is of water; if to air then it is of air; if to earth then it is of earth. He inhales no air unless it resembles that on which he meditates. He does not move a limb unless it is in the pursuit of attaining the object of his meditation. He does not descend from the height of his meditation that he has reached except to seek respite. He does not gaze on the light of meditation itself (*lā yanẓuru ilā nūr al-fikr bi-aynihi*); he does not gaze on anything except the centre-point of meditation (*markaz al-fikr*); no concern of his own affairs commands his attention like his meditation. He eats nothing that derives from an animal; he does not eat aught that he fears may harm his meditation. This is the etiquette observed by the one who would ascend to the centre-point of meditation (*hādhā adab al-murtaqī ilā markaz al-fikr*). As for he whose meditation has connected with the centre-point of meditation (*ammā man ittaṣala fikru-hu bi-markaz al-fikr*), his meditation feeds him, waters him, brings slaves under his command, dispatches rain, lightning, thunder, lightning bolts and earthquakes. At this point, he is in command of the Earth's elements, the spirits breeze over him (*ṣāfaḥat-hu*

al-arwāḥ), his body becomes a dwelling place which he can alight in and depart from at will. He can visualize all species of noble forms, large and small (*taṣawwara bi-anwā' al-ṣuwar ash-sharīfa fi as-ṣighari wa'l-kibar*); he will delight with marvellous spirits; and he will reach the ultimate goal that he sought. He who ascends to the centre-point of meditation (*markaz al-fikr*), his passion (*'ishq*) does not leave him until he descends from it.⁹²

If this passage is merely a Rāzīan pastiche of genuine accounts of Indic spiritual practice, it is certainly rendered all the more convincing by such unusual and ostensibly technically-sounding language such as *markaz al-fikr* (centre of meditation) and *nūr al-fikr* (light of meditation). The following traits of Ṭumṭum's idealized meditator resonate with the themes, raised in the introduction to *al-Sirr*, of asceticism and spiritual training which lead to perfection of the soul and its control over physical reality: withdrawal from bodily pleasure; veganism; and complete and unwavering focus on the object of intent. Any use of the physical senses must serve this meditative focus. The objects of physical perception must: (a) share an elemental congenereity with the object of intent; and (b) must be closely associated in the cognition of the meditator with that shared element. Now, assuming that this process of meditation (*fikr*) is non-discursive, the meditator's cognitive association of physical object with that shared element must arise from such a level of mastery of natural philosophy as to be instinctual and immediate. The complete realization of natural philosophical learning and meditative focus represents human perfection, whereby the soul, unshackled by the body, can roam wherever it wills; command men and nature; commune with numinous beings;

⁹² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.16.

and possess almost an occult knowledge of all forms and power over physical reality.

This blend of asceticism, spiritual training, meditative focus and mastery of natural philosophy is precisely what characterizes the training of the Sabian adept who forges a talismanic idol in the account in *al-Sirr* 3:1. And the state of perfection attained by Ṭumṭum's meditator resembles that which is attained by the Sabian adept who completes the planetary ascent ritual, to whose command the celestial spheres yield. But the additional virtue of the Sabian adept is that, since he is working not only with the four elements of the sublunary world, but also with the intricate web of planetary correspondences on which earthly phenomena are contingent, his soul represents the point at which celestial and terrestrial realities meet.

Rāzī's inclusion of the Indian material, with its focus on meditative practice, represents an imaginative elaboration of the 'active earthly psychic forces' employed by the talisman master to blend active celestial forces with sublunary, receptive elemental forces, the planetary correspondences (*munāṣabāt*) of which are listed in such great detail in *al-Sirr* 2. To achieve this ability, these active psychic forces are trained using spiritual austerities, which will be the subject of chapter 6. Once trained to a sufficient degree, the adept is able to establish noetic connection with the celestial souls, the subject of chapter 7.

2.5 Rāzī's attitude to Sabianism

How therefore are we to read *al-Sirr*? What is Rāzī's attitude to the astral magic of the Sabians he describes therein? Three possible theories present themselves. I assess them in what is in my view their order of increasing plausibility:

- (i) Firstly, *al-Sirr* could be a heresiological work, the Sabians constituting merely a fictitious heresiological category, representing the follies of a popularized Avicennism.⁹³ This would mean that the entire work was a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* deployed by a committed Ash‘arī theologian, such as the one that wrote *Nihāyat al-‘uqūl*, with the purpose of showing that the logical implications of Avicennism, if pursued to their fullest extent, would lead to idolatry and the complete destabilization of the Islamic institution of prophethood. This seems unlikely. It seems even more implausible as such a hypothesis would have to explain the central role of the Barakātian doctrine of the perfect nature in this construct, a very un-Avicennan notion indeed.
- (ii) Secondly, it could be read as a thought experiment, envisioned with an encyclopedic, though disinterested, knowledge of talismans. This remarkable work of the imagination gave Rāzī, the sobre Ash‘arī theologian, the conceptual space in which to explore ideas, such as the doctrine of the perfect nature, in a non-committed way, with a view to integrating them into the future systemization of philosophy and theology of *al-Maṭālib*. This theory would leave unexplained why Rāzī would have devoted so much effort to the diligent summarization of Abū Ma‘shar’s astrology and the meticulous and precise description of talismans.
- (iii) Thirdly, it could be a work of purely disinterested scholarly inquiry in which he was reporting, with the distance of a magisterial

⁹³ Thusly has Michot characterized the Sabians as depicted by Shahrastānī in his *al-Milal*: see Michot, ‘L’avicennisation de la sunna’. See also Michot: ‘La Pandémie avicennienne’.

observer, either historical or contemporary practices: after all, Rāzī also wrote works on physiognomy, medicine and astrology.⁹⁴ Moreover, in *al-Tafsīr*, he is evidently not content merely to condemn idolatry: he wants to theorize on why idolatrous men would ignore the self-evident truth, which could only be denied by a lunatic, that an idol wrought by their own hand can avail them nothing.

There is a fourth possibility. It has been remarked that for most of *al-Sirr*, Rāzī adopts the tone of a neutral observer. Brief indeed is his ‘clarification’ (*bayyina*) of the ‘weakness’ (*du‘f*) of Sabianism in *al-Sirr* 1:6, restricting himself to asserting God as the only Necessarily Existent Being, an agent possessed of volition, whose power (*qudra*) extends to all things. He refrains from assaulting its talismanic science *per se*, confining himself to attacking the assertion of any real agency outside of God’s power (see chapter 10).⁹⁵ It is with this neutral tone that he describes his work as a book which merely ‘compiles’ (*yajma*) the information on astral magic which happens to have come his way.⁹⁶ Indeed, in his concluding section (*khātima*), he refers to himself merely as:

...the compiler of the book (*jāmi‘ al-kitāb*), the Imām and investigator (*al-muḥaqqiq*) Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.⁹⁷

This impression of neutrality surely would support the third of the above theories. But this is no ordinary compilation, for it conceals a very serious

⁹⁴ He wrote *al-Ṭibb al-kabīr* (on medicine) in 573/1177; *Kitāb al-Firāsa* (on physiognomy) in 573/1177; and the *Ikhtiyārāt al-‘Alā’iyya* (on astrology) in between 585 and 590 (1189-1194): see Altaş, ‘Fahredden er-Rāzī’nin Eserlerinin Kronolojisi’, p. 150-4.

⁹⁵ See chapter 10.

⁹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164.

purpose: to engage with astral magic, understanding it on its own terms, whilst attempting to use all the intellectual tools at his disposal to explain its efficacy.

Moreover, in his concluding section, this mask of neutrality slips. He speaks of the first philosophers (*al-ḥukamā al-awwalūn*) teaching their students a certain astral magical operation in order to gain wealth and the esteem of a ruler. But, he says with a tone of disdain, such an operation is performed merely for worldly need (*mas'ala wa ḥāja*). He, by way of contrast, is teaching something of far greater value:

As for he who seeks knowledge and the perfect philosophy, then should he invoke his perfect nature (*man ṭalaba al- 'ilm wa'l-falsafa al-tamma fa- 'alayhi bi-da 'wat tibā 'ihi al-tamm*). The Imām, the investigator (*al-muḥaqqiq*), Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī said: we have <now> made clear, in the treatise 'On invoking the heavenly bodies' (*fī maqālati da 'wati al-kawākib*) <in> this book, the reality of the perfect nature (*ḥaqīqat al-ṭibā ' al-tamm*). So let the seeker of knowledge rely on this treatise to master how to know (*fali-yasta 'in ṭālib al- 'ilm bi-tilka al-maqāla li-yaṣīra muḥītan bi-kayfiyyati al- 'ilm*).⁹⁸

The last phrase is a little awkward in the Arabic and demands closer scrutiny. I turn to Tehran MS 6853 to resolve the issue. In fol. 274 b, the last phrase reads as follows:

⁹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164. In MS 6853 Tehran, fol. 274b, instead of '*al-imām al-muḥaqqiq Fakhr al-dīn Muḥammad al-Rāzī*', we read: '*mawlānā al-dā 'ī ilā Allāh bi'l-ḥaqq raḍīya Allah 'anhu wa 'an aslāfihī*'.

*li-yaṣīra muḥīṭan bi-kayfiyyat al-‘amal.*⁹⁹

Although this metathesis from ‘ilm (knowledge) to ‘amal (operation), or ‘amal to ‘ilm is indeed an easy scribal error to make, it expresses a satisfying symmetry since performing the ‘amal leads to ‘ilm and the perfect philosophy. But of course, from the perspective of Arabic syntax, ‘amal is the more natural reading. This being the case, this counsel takes on an altogether different meaning:

we have <now> made clear, in the treatise ‘On invoking the heavenly bodies’ (*fī maqālati da‘wat al-kawākib*) <in> this book, the reality of the perfect nature (*ḥaqīqat al-ṭibā‘ al-tāmm*). So let the seeker of knowledge rely on this treatise to master how to perform the operation (*fali-yasta‘in ṭālib al-‘ilm bi-tilka al-maqāla li-yaṣīra muḥīṭan bi-kayfiyyat al-‘amal*).

Here an ambiguity arises. What is this operation? Is it the invocation of the perfect nature, or is it in fact the ‘invocation of the planets’, or the planetary ascent ritual, which is the central focus of *al-Sirr*? The method of invoking the perfect nature is described at the end of *al-Sirr*, 4:1. After describing it, Rāzī says:

It is necessary for whoever would plunge deeply into invoking the heavenly bodies (*da‘wat al-kawākib*), to exert great effort in order to know which heavenly body it [i.e. the perfect nature] is (*yajib ‘alā man yakhūḍ fī ‘ilm da‘wat al-kawākib an yajtahid ḥattā ya‘rif anna dkālīka al-kawkab ayy al-kawākib huwa*).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ The concluding section is missing in all the witnesses to *al-Sirr* which I have viewed in the Bodleian, apart from MS Marsh 212 which, in fol. 91a, gives the same reading as that which is to be found in Tehran MS 6853.

¹⁰⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 113-4. The Cairo lithograph reads ‘*bi-khuṣūṣ*’ which must be an error. I prefer the reading of Tehran, MS 6853, fol. 141 a, which reads ‘*yakhūḍ*’; the word ‘*ilm*’ is missing.

So *al-Sirr* 4:1 establishes the noetic connection with the perfect nature as a necessary precondition for the operation (*‘amal*) of invoking the heavenly bodies, described in the following chapter *al-Sirr* 4:2. Moreover, Rāzī commences his description of the ritual of the planetary ascent with the words: *‘fī kayfiyyat al-‘amal’*. The case for this *‘amal*, which Rāzī is encouraging the king to perform, being the ritual of planetary ascent is indeed strong.¹⁰¹

So just as the first philosophers taught their students astral magic to gain wealth and standing, so Rāzī was advising his potential royal patron to perform a ritual of far greater significance, which would lead to his attainment of the perfect philosophy and his mastery over the planets which govern generation and corruption in the sublunary world.

All three of the aforementioned theories on Rāzī’s attitude to Sabianism seem utterly implausible in light of this evidence. We are forced to conclude the soundness of the fourth possible theory: Rāzī was advising the ‘king’, as a seeker of knowledge (*tālib al-‘ilm*) in pursuit of the perfect philosophy, to invoke his perfect nature and to start the long ritual of planetary ascent. Of course it is still possible to assert that Rāzī was only counselling the king to gain knowledge of how to perform the ritual without actually performing it. But having prescribed for him the invocation of the perfect nature, I would argue that such an unnatural construction of the text would require compelling external justification. I can see none.

¹⁰¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 114. I should point out that in the Cairo lithograph we read: *fī kayfiyyat hādhihi al-‘amal* – an obvious grammatical error. But in Tehran MS 6853, fol. 141b, we read: *fī kayfiyyat al-‘amal*.

The conclusion that Rāzī himself was a crypto-Sabian would appear ineluctable. It is in light of this conclusion that the rest of this thesis will precede, exploring as it does those philosophical arguments deployed by Rāzī in order to construct a model that could explain the efficacy of the Sabian approach as means of perfecting the soul. Only in chapter 11 will I explore how this model was then integrated into the Islamic soteriology of *al-Maṭālib*.

2.6 The Ritual of Planetary Ascent

When Rāzī disavowed all that was opposed to the religion in the introduction to *al-Sirr*, perhaps it was the Venus and Mars stages of the ritual which he had in mind. Since this ritual is the central focus of the work, I shall provide a summary of it here, omitting the technical astrological instructions for when each stage is to be commenced. These will be provided in the full translations of its description and of its associated planetary invocations (*da'wa*), which appear in appendices 3 and 4.

The ritual of planetary ascent, described in *al-Sirr* 4:2, involves the subjugation of the planets (*taskhīr al-kawākib*), beginning with the moon, then seeking its aid in the subjugation of the next, one by one, until the subjugation of Saturn, the final stage, by which time all one's desires are attained. A necessary condition for attempting it is a stabilized connection with one's perfect nature.¹⁰² For the aspirant to be qualified to perform this ritual he must be born under the correct astrological conditions; he must have mastered knowledge of the stars; and he must begin each stage of the ritual with the prescribed astrological timing. He

¹⁰² See Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113-114.

must observe the correct requirements relating to place, clothing, food, fasts, sacrifices, and aromatics. Details of the appropriate aromatics to be burnt, the sacrifices to be made, and the prayers to be addressed to the planets are given in *al-Sirr* 4:4.¹⁰³

The central component in the aspirant's performance of each stage is the repetition of liturgical planetary prayers. These set the tone of the aspirant's mental and emotional attitude towards the planet which he addresses. Correct astrological timing for each stage usually means when the relevant planet is in a strong position astrologically, either in its house or in its exaltation, and is free of malefic aspects. Given that they are rational conscious beings, possessed of free will, the planets will be more favourably disposed to answering the needs of its devotee when it is in a felicitous state; when it is malefically afflicted and weak in its position, then the planets are like men burdened by their own suffering and grief, and unlikely to listen to the petitions of their devotees.¹⁰⁴ Each stage of the ritual, except for the Sun, is performed at night. There now follows a brief overview of the ritual. In the co-ordination of timing, space, bodily orientation, diet, emotional attitude and the stimulation of the senses through aromatics, visions, music and prayer, the brandishing of cultic objects and ingestion of cultic foods, the aim of each stage is to establish a powerful noetic connection with the planet invoked.

The Moon

¹⁰³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 122-7.

¹⁰⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 123.

The ritual to subjugate (*taskhīr*) the Moon (*taskhīr*) lasts a year and it is described month by month. It is commenced at a time when the Moon is in its weakest position astrologically.

The aspirant is to prepare himself mentally for the ritual by fasting three days before commencement; he should reduce his food intake such that his purity becomes manifest; he should ingest and give in charity meat and organs in correspondence with the Moon; he should harm no animal; he should avoid gazing on corpses; and he should avoid all impure substances; he should shave his head; and his diet should comprise moist things.

A prayer is repeated. By the six month he has conditioned himself such that he becomes like a lover of the moon, distraught and tearful when he does not see it. During the seventh and eighth months, his shadow increases in length. 'Abu Ma'shar' reports that when he performed this ritual, his shadow extended to 1,000 cubits. In the ninth and tenth months, the moon's light exceeds that of the sun and he cannot bear looking at it directly. The aspirant is cautioned not to look directly at the moon, however hard it may be during this period lest he be blinded. In the eleventh month he sees in his sleep every night the lunar sphere, the sun, the moon and the planets, all of which apprise him of matters (unspecified).

By the twelfth month, his heart finds peace and joy. He becomes indifferent to kings and princes and between sleep and wakefulness he sees true portents and he sees what will happen each day in advance, even though it may be in a distant land. When he sees all these signs and the solar year is complete, then at

that point he will know that his goal has been achieved and the moon has been subjugated

On the thirteenth month the aspirant seeks the utmost that can be attained by the power of the moon. Under specific lunar configurations, he is to stand, wearing certain attire, sewn with certain jewels, carrying an iron bracelet; he is to gaze upon the moon with his left eye. He receives knowledge of Shari'ah, religion, higher knowledge, arithmetic, engineering, geography, waters, agriculture, education of children, knowledge of how to repel the harm of liars and slanderers; how to repel the harm of forgetfulness, cowardice; he is to seek strength in opinion and the power to turn enemies into slaves and friends into kings and to bring happiness to any person whom he so chooses. The aspirant can make requests to the Moon depending on which planet it is applying to; he is to change his garment appropriately. Each of these lunar applications to the different planets prepares the aspirant for the succeeding stages in the ascension ritual. The cultic props that he uses depending on the planet to which the Moon is applying prefigure the props which are used in the later rituals. Thus when the Moon applies to Saturn, he should carry a bone in his hand; during the lunar application to Jupiter he is to carry a rosary; when it applies to Mars he brandishes a naked sword. It is fitting that the Moon ritual introduces him to all the planets since it is the fastest moving planet, the closest to the Earth, and the one which blends the rays of all the other planets before they reach the sublunary sphere.

Rāzī then provides further information on how the Moon can be used once it has been subjugated. For the destruction of enemies, the aspirant is advised to await

the Moon's configuration with a certain planet in the eighth house: the planet determines the kind of death the aspirant's enemy will suffer. To prolong life, the aid of the moon and Jupiter and his associated fixed stars is sought.

Mercury

Mercury's aid is sought for all matters pertaining to the intellect, language, philosophy, mathematics, and occult knowledge. Before proceeding to his subjugation, these things must first be sought from the Moon thrice, in a diffident manner; when they are not forthcoming, leave must be requested from the Moon to approach Mercury. He is to brandish a golden sceptre. A description of appropriate clothing jewellery, food with which to break his fast is provided.

Venus

When the Moon is approaching conjunction with Mercury, ideally there being just seven degrees between them, the aspirant thrice seeks from the Moon and Mercury what is under the sway of Venus: women, mothers, young people, siblings, riches, entertainment, things which gladden the heart, jewellery, lovers, alcohol, marriage, and expertise in magic. Then the aspirant asks leave from the Moon and Mercury to seek these things from Venus. He is to wear green clothes, certain jewels and perfumes. He is to prepare a drinking session with beardless boys, and male and female singers. The session is to be held in a place opposite the point where Venus rises; he is to recline on green cushions; they are to eat hearts; he should position himself at a place where he can see the rising of Venus. Thus should the session be, for three days: they should engage in nothing but drinking wine, homosexual acts and fornication for three nights;

then on the third night, when Venus rises he should recite the poetry, in Arabic and Farsi. He is to make devoted obeisance for eventually his approach will be accepted and the sign of this will be that the beardless boys and women will approach him sexually without being bidden. He is then to ask of Venus those things which fall under her sway.

The Sun

The aspirant is to seek out the gold palaces of kings; he should wear gold silk, precious rubies, a gold crown, gold rings with red rubies. He is to fast, restrict the amount he eats and spend generously in charity to feed predatory beasts associated with the sun, such as lions, and tigers. When the sun reaches the first degree of Aries, he stands in praise of the sun, extolling the power that he gives to kings, the light that he gives to the Moon. He is to continue this practice at certain times of the day and night for a period of six months. By the end of this period, certain signs that his obsequies have been accepted will become manifest. His animal and bodily powers will be enhanced as will be his intellect. With the completion of a year, he is to ask the Sun for those things which fall under its sway such as the animal soul, the intellect, light, power and rulership, high standing, gold and buried treasure.

Mars

The process of Mars's subjugation should begin when it is in Capricorn, the sign of its exaltation; none of the planets which have already been subjugated should be in quartile conjunction or in opposition. Mars should not be in a position that is malefic in relation to Saturn at the beginning of the operation; the Sun's aid should be sought in the subjugation of Mars which cannot be in conjunction

with Venus as she is hostile to Mars. When these conditions are fulfilled, then Mars can be safely invoked. The magician is to wear copper and brass rings, red wool and a blood red *qalansūwa* , to carry a drawn sword in the right hand and in the left the severed head of a man. The sword must be stained with the blood of the severed head. The severed head must not be that of a Turk. He is to eat of the head (*yaj 'alu ghidha'ahu min al-ra's*) and give others of it to eat. The magician is to stand silently before Mars saying naught, and he will be shown great things from which he should not take fright. Then for the number of days during which he was disturbed by these 'great things' he is to prostrate with his face in the dust. He is then to stand and praise Mars with full force and gusto (no specific formulae are given here) and he is to seek the protection of the Sun from the harm that Mars can inflict. He is to seek from Mars the destruction of countries and enemies.

Jupiter

The aspirant is to seek the aid of Mars in Jupiter's subjugation. He should wear the colours and rings associated with Jupiter and have in his possession the Qur'ān, Islamic prayers and the Divine Names; he is to fast and reduce his consumption of food until, in less than one month, he will attain his goal. He is to ask Jupiter for riches, generosity, a balanced constitution, justice, leadership, truthfulness, love, faithfulness to oaths, love of good things and hatred for the bad.

Saturn

Saturn should be in one of its houses or in dignity, Capricorn being the most appropriate. The more planets that are aligned in a particular relationship the

better. The magician is to wear a woven green silk conical hat and a fine black silk shirt; he is to hold in his hand a bone; and distribute in charity the meat of the right leg and the intestines. In Saturn's subjugation he is to seek the aid of Mercury. He is to persist in his service (*fī khidmatihī*) for two and a half years, after which he will be given power and other benefits which he will know once he receives them.

Part Two: Sabian Doctrines and the Talismanic Craft

Chapter 3: Eight Sabian Doctrines

3.1 Introduction

In discussing the eight doctrines of the Sabians as presented in *al-Sirr* 4:1, which constitute the justification for astrolatry, we shall examine what philosophical arguments Rāzī chose to engineer in order to explain the efficacy of their practice. The eight doctrines immediately precede Rāzī's presentation of the planetary ascent ritual in *al-Sirr* 4:2. Of these doctrines, three are absolutely essential to the structure of the justification. They are: (1) the celestial spheres possess rational souls; (2) these souls understand the universal and the particular; and (3) they are the causes of all sublunary change. The remaining doctrines provide the rationale behind the practice of idol worship itself: the celestial spheres, being the proximate causes of all sublunary change and perceptive of it, are consequently deserving of human worship; and on account of the regular absence of the planets from human vision, their idols can serve as the foci for veneration.

The three essential doctrines are supported by arguments which are Avicennan. The propositions that the celestial spheres possess rational souls and that they are cognizant of universals and particulars is justified by arguments adapted from the third *namaṭ* of Avicenna's *Ishārāt*. He complements these three core doctrines with those which derive their respective proofs from an argument formulated by Abu'l Barakāt al-Bahgdādī, in his *Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*, to justify the Sabian doctrine of the perfect nature. In constructing the eight doctrines of the Sabians, Rāzī adapts Abu'l Barakāt's proof for the perfect nature and

superimposes it onto the Avicennan core structure of the philosophical justification for astrolatry. The resultant composite defines the challenge that Rāzī has set himself: to reconcile elements foreign to his publicly professed classical Ash‘arism, which possess the potential to serve a later systematization of philosophical and theological thought which was subsequently realized in *Maṭālib*.

The three core arguments which constitute the Avicennan core structure presuppose the existence of the supracelestial intellects, which are not investigated in *al-Sirr*. But when we examine, in light of Rāzī’s commentary, the original arguments in *al-Ishārāt* from which they are adapted, we will discover that celestial motion is driven by the desire of the spheres to imitate the intellects. This will provide the basis for my contention that the planetary ascent ritual represents a human attempt at mimesis of the celestial spheres: by co-ordinating his soul with the cosmos, he realizes the perfection of the souls which move the heavens.

Before considering the eight doctrines of the Sabians in detail, I shall deal with a few preliminary matters. Firstly I shall discuss the context of the eight doctrines in *al-Sirr*; secondly I shall present Rāzī’s tripartite heresiological categorization of the Sabians to whom these doctrines are attributed; and thirdly I shall summarize their content. In the course of their detailed examination, I shall focus on two of the three core doctrines and their sources in *al-Ishārāt*.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, I shall explore the ways in which Abu’l-Barakāt’s proof for the perfect nature is adapted in two different ways: either to supplement the primary

¹⁰⁵ The proof for the spheres being the proximate causes of sublunary change is the same as the proof for the efficacy of talismans which we find in *al-Sirr* 1:1. It is more appropriate to examine this proof in chapter 4.

Avicennan proof for a particular proposition; or as a proof in its own right justifying the original Barakātian doctrine. The first five doctrines, which establish the celestial souls as objects of veneration, merit individual analysis. The last three, which focus on the implications of this belief for Sabianism, I will conveniently treat as a unit under the title “Sabianism”.

3.2 Three Sabian sub-sects

Before we discuss the three theologically distinct groups into which Rāzī divides them, it would be helpful to consider an overview of what Rāzī has already said about the Sabians’ occult belief and practice. In *al-Sirr* 1, Rāzī introduces the proof deployed by the philosophers and the Sabians that the planetary movements are the proximate causes of change in the sublunary world; and that the ability to predict their configurations makes possible the casting of a talisman as a means of directing their influence for a particular end. It is only in *al-Sirr* 3, having presented the necessary astrological knowledge in *al-Sirr* 2, that Rāzī describes in detail the practical craft of casting a talisman. Rāzī delays the presentation of Sabian cosmological doctrines and their proofs until *al-Sirr* 4:1, which provides the philosophical justification for the belief that the heavenly bodies are governed by celestial rational souls which are: possessed of volition; aware of the changes they cause in the sublunary world; and responsive to human communication. This is the theoretical foundation of the long planetary ritual that is the main focus of the work as a whole.

Now, Rāzī’s characterization of the three mutually exclusive Sabian theologies at the beginning of *al-Sirr* 4:1 forms an introduction to his treatment of the eight

doctrines shared by them all. Whilst all believe the celestial spheres and the heavenly bodies are living, rational beings governing change in the sublunary world, they differ concerning their ontological status. He says:

The Sabians believe that these spheres and planets are living and rational, governing the World of Generation and Corruption. Then they differed <concerning this belief>, maintaining three different doctrines. (1) The first doctrine is that these bodies are necessarily existent by virtue of their essences, their needing no originating principle and that rather it is they who produce the effect of the existence of this world (*al-mu'aththir fī wujūd hādihā al- 'ālam*). Their doctrine is false since each body is a composite, whether in actuality or in potential (*imā bi'l-fi'l aw bi'l-quwwa*) and for its realization each composite depends on the realization of each one of the parts <which constitute> the composite <which> are distinct from it. (*yaftaqir taḥaqququ-hu ilā taḥaqquq kulli wāḥid min ajzā'i al-murakkabi ghayra-hu*). So each body depends on something other than it and each thing which is dependent on another is <only> possible in its essence (*mumkin li-dhāti-hi*). (2) The second doctrine is that the spheres and the planets are <only> essentially possible <in their> existence (*mumkina al-wujūd li-dhawāti-hā*), but <they are> necessarily existent by way of the necessitating action of a pre-eternal producer of effects (*bi-ijāb mu'aththir azalī*), just as the Sun produces illumination. These are the Sabians and the philosophers. (3) The third doctrine maintains that they occur by way of the action of an agent possessed of volition (*fā'il mukhtār*), namely the Most Supreme God, and that that god created these planets, investing each with a special power, and delegating them with

the authority to govern this world. They say this does not diminish from the majesty of God – exalted is His splendour – for what imperfection is there for a king to possess obedient slaves. Then He delegated to each of them the government of a specific kingdom and rule over a specific clime. In general, despite their differing doctrines, they claimed the spheres and the planets have specific attributes.¹⁰⁶

The first category of Rāzī's Sabians is unreservedly polytheistic, asserting the reality of the heavenly bodies as gods, each being characterized by necessary existence. The second maintains an emanationist model of reality in which the heavenly bodies are possessed of necessary existence only insofar as it is necessitated by the relationship which links them to the Eternal Producer of Effects, in the same way that solar rays are emanations of the Sun to which they are ontologically posterior. Believing God to be necessitating by His essence (*mūjib bi'l-dhāt*) the Sabians of this second category have a distinctly Avicennan hue to their theology. By way of contrast with the Necessary being of this second group, the Necessary being of the third group of Sabians is a creator God, possessed of choice and volition, who delegates to the heavenly bodies control of generation and corruption in the sublunary sphere.

The Sabians, presented here in an ascending hierarchy that begins with an unrepentant polytheism and ends with a theology closest in resemblance to Rāzī's own confessional commitment, are thus far from being a theologically homogenous group. Of these three, it is significant that it is the second group, distinguished from the other two with the designation of 'the Sabians and the Philosophers', which embraces a distinctly Avicennan theory of cosmogenesis

¹⁰⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

by way of emanation from the one Necessarily Existent.¹⁰⁷ If the first group comprises an unapologetic polytheism, the second comprises a form of popular Avicennism. But what is common to all of them is the belief that events in this world are determined by the heavenly bodies.

3.3 Summary of the Eight Doctrines

The eight doctrines which comprise the philosophical justification for Sabian idolatrous astrolatry can be summarized as follows.¹⁰⁸ (1) No fewer than three proofs are invoked to establish the first proposition, on which the entire argument relies, namely that the celestial spheres are living rational beings. (2) That the connection of the celestial soul with its sphere is to be located in its planet, thus explaining the focus of Sabian veneration, forms the second proposition. The third and fourth propositions establish the spheres as: (3) cognizant of the universals and the particulars; and (4) as the proximate causes of generation and corruption in the sublunary world: thus they are the worthy objects of veneration for the aspirant who would gain the kind of knowledge and power extolled in al-Sirr's general introduction of *al-Sirr*. (5) The fifth proposition states that the heavenly bodies (*al-kawākib*) are either, according to the philosophers, simple spheres or, according to the Kasdanian Sabians, theriomorphic bodies which are the archetypes of sublunary animals.¹⁰⁹ (6) The sixth proposition, namely that the celestial souls are the proximate causes of

¹⁰⁷ It is the belief of this second group that most closely corresponds to the definition of talismans in *al-Sirr* 1:1.

¹⁰⁸ Although Rāzī asserts that the eight doctrines are common to all three categories of Sabian, it is only the second category which seems to be explicitly linked to the activity of philosophy.

¹⁰⁹ The loose use of the term *kawākib* allows Rāzī to construct a hypothetical controversy on their shape: see discussion in section 3.4.

human rational souls, perceive their worship, and are responsive to their acts of communication, justifies astrolatrous Sabian ritual.¹¹⁰ (7) The veneration of planetary idols, fashioned in order to provide the focus of worship when the heavenly bodies are absent from human sight, is rationalized by the seventh proposition. (8) The eighth proposition is that the perfect nature – the personal celestial spirit – from which the existence of the individual human soul derives, plays a necessary tutelary role, by way of inspiring intuitions, in the education of the aspirant who would invoke and address the planets.¹¹¹ The Barakātian proof for the perfect nature stands on its own terms – instead of acting as a supplementary proof for a separate doctrine – when adduced to establish the eighth; however, it also features as an additional proof for the first doctrine, complementing the primary Avicennan proof, and is also deployed to substantiate the sixth doctrine that the celestial souls are particularly sensitive to our communications and acts of veneration. I shall therefore explore these propositions in detail, in the order in which they appear in *al-Sirr*, examining where appropriate their Avicennan and Barakātian sources.

3.4 Analysis of the Eight Sabian Doctrines

3.4.1 Celestial Spheres and Planets (*al-aflāk wa'l-kawākib*) as living, rational beings

As we have already mentioned, three separate proofs are adduced to establish that the celestial spheres and planets are living, rational beings, possessed of

¹¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

¹¹¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp.110-114.

volition. This of course is a necessary condition of their receptivity to human communication, by which they can be persuaded to act or not to act. On this premise the entire Sabian approach, in its three theologically distinct varieties, rests. I shall now examine all three in the order that they appear in *al-Sirr*.

3.4.1 (a) Argument from the circular nature of celestial motion

al-Sirr

Rāzī's Sabians privilege a distinctly Avicennan argument, based on the observation of the circular motion of the celestial spheres and planets, to establish their most important doctrine. Its simple syllogistic structure reasons as follows: (1) the movement of every moving body is either: natural, coerced or volitional (*ṭabī'īyya aw qasriyya aw irādiyya*); (2) circular celestial movement can neither be natural nor coerced; (3) therefore, celestial motion must be volitional. The necessary corollary of this conclusion, which is left unsaid as it hardly requires explicit articulation, is that in order to possess volition, the celestial spheres and planets must have souls.¹¹² Each of the two supporting premises on which the argument rests is substantiated by its own separate argument.

Turning to the first premise, the very corporeity of any mobile under examination, whether it be sublunary or supralunar, determines that only those three logical possibilities mentioned can explain its motion. In justifying that

¹¹² 'The first proof [i.e. that the celestial spheres and planets are living, rational beings] is that the spheres are moving. The movement of every moving thing is either: natural, coerced or volitional. Since the movements of the spheres and the planets are neither natural nor coerced, then they must be volitional.' Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

this is indeed an exhaustive list of all logical explanations (*bayān al-ḥaṣar*) for bodily motion, Rāzī's Sabians argue that:

...this is because the movements of these spheres are caused either by reason of: (1) their corporeity (*li-nafsi jismiyyatihā*); or (2) by reason of something superadded to that corporeity (*li-shay'in mawjūdin fī tilka al-jismīya*); or (3) by reason of something external to it (*li-shay'in khārij 'anhā*).¹¹³

They rule out the first of these major disjuncts on the ground that, were motion to arise purely as a result of corporeity, then all bodies would manifest the kind of circular movement by which the celestial spheres are characterized: since they clearly do not, mere corporeity cannot be the cause of celestial circular motion.¹¹⁴ Major disjunct (3) admits of two subsidiary minor disjuncts, for were there an external cause of circular celestial motion, then it must either be: (a) a body or bodily (*jism aw jismānī*); or (b) neither a body nor bodily. In eliminating the first of these, Rāzī's Sabians affirm the second minor disjunct (3)(b), and in so doing, they are compelled to affirm major disjunct (2), namely that celestial motion is caused by reason of something superadded to celestial corporeity. To eliminate the possibility contained in minor disjunct (3)(a), they reason that were it true, namely that the external cause of circular celestial motion is a body or bodily (*jism aw jismānī*):

...then the particularization (*ikhtisāṣ*) of that external <entity>, out of all other bodies, with this power to influence (*mu'aththiriyya*) <the celestial

¹¹³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

¹¹⁴ 'We only say the <motion> cannot <arise> due to its corporeity because were it so then all bodies would participate in this movement'. Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

sphere> must arise by reason of some other external <entity>, thus necessitating a *regressus ad infinitum* (*al-tasalsul*).¹¹⁵

Minor disjunct 3(a) can therefore be safely dismissed as an explanatory cause of celestial motion, leaving 3(b), namely that it is caused by an external entity which is neither a body nor bodily. Were such an external entity to exist, then its influence would extend equally to all bodies; this being the case, the celestial sphere or planet would therefore require some other cause by reason of which it becomes the unique recipient of the influence of that external entity and thus driven to circular motion: the cause of its unique receptivity to the influence of the external, non-corporeal entity is precisely the subject of major disjunct (2) – ‘something superadded’ to the planet or celestial sphere. Thus they argue that were the external entity which acts as the cause of celestial motion:

...neither a body nor bodily then its relationship would extend to all bodies equally (*yakūn nisbatuhu ilā jamī‘ al-ajsām ‘alā al-sawīyya*) and were this <influenced> body not particularized by something by reason of which it became more appropriate for the receiving of the specific influence from it, then a selective determination (*tarjīh*) of a possible would have occurred without anything to have caused that selective determination (*la kāna dhālika tarjīhan li’l-mumkin min ghayr murajjih*) – and that is impossible. If that body were particularized by something by reason of which it became more appropriate for the receiving of that influence from a separated <intellect> (*mufāraq*) then that would constitute an admission that the specific body only became particularized with <its> specific movement by reason of the power

¹¹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

superadded to it (*quwwa mawjūda fīhi*) and that is what is meant (by the second abovementioned major disjunct).¹¹⁶

Thus it is established that circular celestial motion is caused by a power ‘superadded’ to the corporeity of the planet or celestial sphere. All that remains now to be determined is whether this superadded power is natural, coerced, or volitional. The answer to this question provides the proof for the second premise on which rests the argument for the living, rational nature of the celestial spheres from their circular motion. The proposition that the superadded power is coerced would require the kind of invalid argument of infinite regress which we already encountered when Rāzī’s Sabians reasoned that the direct cause of celestial motion could not be an external body. Only two possibilities remain, and what determines which of them is true is the fact that:

...either this power has awareness (*shu ‘ūr*) of that which arises from it, thus being volitional (*irādiyya*) or it does not, and so is natural.¹¹⁷

Two separate arguments relying on the circularity of celestial motion are deployed to invalidate the assertion that the power superadded to the celestial sphere is natural:

...the first is that were this the case, then the point from which the sphere moved [i.e. the *terminus a quo*] would have been fled from naturally (*mahrūban ‘anhā bi’l-ṭab* ‘) and that which is fled from naturally cannot <also> be naturally sought (*maṭlūban bi’l-ṭab* ‘). And so if the celestial motion were natural then it would be impossible for it to move

¹¹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110. This very passage was discussed by Jon McGinnis in his lecture ‘For every action...’.

¹¹⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

naturally (*bi'l-ṭab'*) towards that which it moves towards naturally; the converse (*al-tālī*) is <also> false because each point towards which the sphere moves, the sphere moves towards it by means of a movement away from it, gaining in distance from it even as it moves towards it: thus the <sphere's> movement is not natural.¹¹⁸

Visualizing the celestial sphere moving against an absolutely stationary background which contains a fixed point of reference would assist our understanding of this argument. At any given time the planet, as it moves with the rotational motion of its sphere, like the gemstone in the bezel of a ring, is either moving towards or away from the point of fixed reference. Were such motion natural, then that fixed point of reference, in relation to the planet, would be at the same time both a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*. This would lead to a contradiction, since as a point of reference for natural motion, no point can be both. The second reason why celestial motion cannot be natural is that:

...nature (*al-ṭabī'a*) moves towards everything which is naturally sought (*maṭlūban bi'l-ṭab'*) by way of the shortest distance and there is no aspect of circular movement (*al-ḥaraka al-mustadīra*) which is like that. So, circular movement is not natural. So since these two disjuncts <that either celestial motion is natural or coerced> have been proven false, it becomes established that they are volitional and thus that the spheres are living beings (*ḥayawānāt*).¹¹⁹

Thus do Rāzī's Sabians prove the existence of the celestial souls that are superadded to the corporeal spheres which they govern. But in so doing, they

¹¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

¹¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

must posit the existence of entities beyond space and time, separated (*mufāraq*) from corporeity, which provide the motive influence (*mu'aththirīya*) that the celestial souls direct in particular to their own spheres. These are none other than Avicenna's separated intellects, whom as we shall presently discover, the celestial souls in their perpetual motion, attempt to imitate in the pursuit of their own perfection.

Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt*

The argument of Rāzī's Sabians that circular celestial motion is volitional is derived from the twenty-sixth chapter of the third *namaṭ* of Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt wa'l-Tanbīhāt*:

The movements of the body that has in its nature a propensity for circular <motion> are among the movements of the soul and not those of nature; otherwise, with the same movement, such a body would naturally turn away from what it naturally turns toward, and with its movement it would naturally seek a certain position in the place where it naturally leaves this position and runs away from it. But it is impossible that that which is naturally sought (*al-maṭlūb bi'l-ṭab'*) is naturally abandoned, or that that from which one naturally runs away (*mahrūban 'an-hu bi'l-ṭab'*) is that which is naturally intended. Rather, this may happen in the volition due to conceiving a certain purpose that requires a diversity of disposition. Thus it has become clear that the movement of such a body is animated and voluntary.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Avicenna quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 321. Commenting on this chapter, Rāzī says:

Avicenna does not in this passage provide an explicit argument against external coercion as a cause for celestial motion. Naturally, such an assertion would lead to a *regressus ad infinitum*; but in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, Rāzī adds to this the fact that, having disproved that celestial motion can be natural:

...it is also impossible to be coerced because coercion is the opposite of naturalness and if naturalness has no role here then so is it impossible for coercion. Since these two disjuncts are proven false it thus becomes established that the movement is volitional.¹²¹

But the argument that the fixed point of reference in relation to the celestial sphere cannot be both the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of circular celestial movement could also be deployed against the assertion that such movement is volitional. Distinguishing the volitional explanation from the natural explanation, Avicenna says:

‘When he [i.e. Avicenna] spoke of the soulish powers which move elemental bodies, he wanted to speak of soulish powers (*al-quwā al-naḥsāniyya*) which move the celestial bodies (*al-ajrām al-falakiyya*) and before that he spoke of the fact that the movements of the spheres are soulish and volitional. The evidence for this is that their movements are by their nature circular (*mustadīra bi’l-ṭab’*) and anything that is like this is soulish. As for the fact that their movements are circular, this is obvious. By saying ‘by their nature’ (*bi’l-ṭab’*), he wanted to exclude the etheric sphere (*kurra al-athir*) since its circular movement is not by reason of its nature. As for the fact that the movement of each thing which, by its nature (*bi’l-ṭab’*), moves with a circular motion is soulish, this is because this movement is either: natural, coerced or volitional (*immā an yakūn ṭabī’iyya aw qasriyya aw irādiyya*). That it can be natural (*ṭabī’iyya*) is false because, suppose there were a <fixed> point on such a body, as soon as the mobile (*al-mutaḥarrik*) reaches <the point> it would leave it; and its act of leaving the point is also in essence the act of moving towards it. So were this movement natural, then that <point> which is sought by reason of its nature (*al-maṭlūb bi’l-ṭab’*) is also that which is left by reason of its nature (*matrūk bi’l-ṭab’*), and that which is left by reason of its nature (*matrūk bi’l-ṭab’*) is also sought by reason of its nature (*al-maṭlūb bi’l-ṭab’*). And since that is false, the assertion that <the movement> is natural is proved false.’ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 321-2.

¹²¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 322.

...rather, this may happen in the volition due to conceiving a certain purpose that requires a diversity of disposition. Thus it has become clear that the movement of such a body is animated and voluntary.¹²²

Expanding on Avicenna's rather condensed response to this objection, Rāzī explains:

...it cannot be said <that> if it were volitional then this same problem would also arise, because we say that is <indeed> possible (*jā'iz*) for volitional movement because if the aim of the volitionally moving mobile (*gharaḍ al-mutaḥarrīk bi'l-irāda*) were something that could not find completion (*amr lā yatimm*) other than with circular motion, then that which is sought at one time becomes that which is abandoned at another (*ṣara al-maṭlūb fī waqt matrūkan fī waqt ākhar*) since its being sought or being abandoned (*maṭlūbiyyatuhu wa matrūkiyyatuhu*) is accidental, not essential (*bi'l-'arḍ lā bi'l-dhāt*) and the thing which is essentially sought (*al-maṭlūb bi'l-dhāt*) is but <that> other aim (*wa innamā al-maṭlūb bi'l-dhāt dhālika al-gharaḍ al-ākhar*).¹²³

Thus with volitional movement, any fixed point of reference becomes either sought or abandoned according to the volition of the celestial soul, the ultimate aim of which – 'the thing which is essentially sought' – cannot be fulfilled other than by means of perpetual circular movement.

4.4.1 (b) Argument from the existence of the human rational soul

¹²² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 321.

¹²³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 321-2.

Having proved the existence of the celestial souls by adducing the Avicennan argument from the circularity of celestial motion, Rāzī's Sabians supplement it with an argument from the existence of the human rational soul. This proof is adapted, almost verbatim in parts, from a proof developed by Abu'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī in his *Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*, which seeks to demonstrate that the origin of the human rational soul is a celestial spirit (*rūḥ falakī*). We shall therefore discuss this proof and doctrine firstly as it appears in *al-Sirr*, and secondly as it appears in *al-Mu'tabar*.

The Perfect Nature in *al-Sirr*

Rāzī's adaptation of Abū'l Barakāt's proof that the causes of the human rational souls must be the celestial souls rests on three premises: (1) the causes of human rational souls must be souls; (2) human rational souls are the noblest and most perfect of all elemental souls; (3) the cause is always superior to its effect. Rāzī's Sabians feel no need to substantiate premises (2) and (3). But they justify the first with the following proof:

...rational souls are neither bodies (*ajsām*) nor do they need bodies. However, for their actions, they are dependent (*muftaqira*) on bodily tools (*ālāt jismāniya*) and the effect (*al-ma'lūl*) necessarily resembles, suits and corresponds with its cause (*wa'l-ma'lūl lā budda wa an yushbiha al-'illata wa yulā'ima-hā wa yunāsiba-hā*). So the causes (*'ilal*) of these souls must exist in accordance with this <same> characteristic (*ṣifa*). By this I mean they

are neither bodies, nor in their essences are they needful of bodies. So it is established that the causes of these human souls are <also> souls.¹²⁴

The human rational soul is such that it is: (a) non-corporeal; and (b) reliant on a body in order to act. Since the nature of an effect necessarily resembles the nature of its cause, the cause of the human rational soul must also be: (a) non-corporeal; and (b) reliant on a body in order to act. So having established that members of a certain class of soul must be the cause of human souls, they reason that the former:

...are either elemental souls (*nufūs 'unṣuriya*) or they are heavenly souls (*nufūs samāwiya*). They cannot be elemental souls for the noblest and most perfect of the elemental souls are human souls and the nobler cannot be an effect (*ma'lūl*) of the baser. So it follows that they are the effects (*ma'lūla*) of celestial souls (*nufūs falakiya*). Thus it becomes established that the planets and the spheres possess (*li'l-kawākib wa'l-aflāk*) knowing, perceiving souls (*nufūs 'ālima mudrika*) which are the causes of human souls.¹²⁵

Both the celestial and the human soul are rational: the *differentia* between the two is that the latter requires an elemental body to act. A corollary of this, which Rāzī's Sabians do not explicitly state but which the reader is entitled to infer, is that were the latter to transcend its reliance on the elemental body, and came to act through a celestial body, then it would have ceased in essence being human, having transformed in essence into a celestial soul.

¹²⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.111.

¹²⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.111.

At this point, having projected onto the Sabians this second proof for the existence of the celestial souls, Rāzī no longer needs to follow the trajectory of the original argument formulated by Abu'l-Barakāt which was to prove that the cause of the human soul is a celestial soul, called the perfect nature (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*), which plays the role of an inspiring tutelary spirit which can perfect human knowledge and power. It is a doctrine which lies at the heart of Sabian belief, and anticipates the subject of the eighth and last of the doctrines which Rāzī attributes to them. So, following Abu'l-Barakāt, Rāzī's Sabians reason that since the cause must be stronger and nobler (*aqwā wa-ashraf*) than its effect it follows of necessity that the heavenly souls are stronger and nobler than human rational souls. And since human souls are the effects of the celestial, the former, in their own very mortal sublunary existence, resemble the latter in profound ways. Rāzī's Sabians reflect that:

...just as the celestial bodies are greater and loftier, their substances simpler and more powerful, their colours – which are their lights – nobler and more radiant, similarly their souls must also be more perfect in knowledge, in power and in all the attributes of nobility and loftiness. So the substances of these human souls resemble the substances of the heavenly souls in the same way that the effect resembles the cause, the actions of the effect resemble the actions of the cause. So just as the planets first rise, their power increasing until they reach the apogee, then decline hour by hour until they set, so in the same way you observe the growth of children, then the power of youth, then then the subtle

spread of weakness in middle age, which finally ends in old age, then death which no treatment can avert and no medicine cure.¹²⁶

Thus during the course of its earthly life, the human soul, consciously or otherwise, is engaged in a kind of mimesis of celestial motion. The Sabians of *al-Sirr* deploy the concept of the perfect nature to account for what they regard as the essential variation that exists between human souls:

Human souls are numerous and also differ in substance: there are some souls which are evil by nature whilst others are good. Such is the case with respect to intelligence, acumen, beauty and generosity. Each species must have a separate cause. Since there is a similarity between the cause and the effect and that one thing cannot resemble two different things, then for each group of these human souls is a heavenly soul which is its cause, bringing it into existence.¹²⁷

Thus humans of a certain moral character and intellectual acumen constitute a species of human, each member of which derives his or her existence from the same celestial soul, and naturally displays an inclination towards other souls who hail from the same origin:

Between the human souls which share the attention of the same celestial soul, there exists a love and an affection which they do not share with others, like that which exists between brothers. The heavenly soul takes care of their strengthening, their development and their defence.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

¹²⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.111.

¹²⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.111.

Of significance for our examination of the Rāzī's attitude to the Sabian doctrines which he only purports to be reporting, is his attempt at this point to coordinate Sabian doctrine with Islamic belief, finding confirmation for it from the Prophet. Concerning the celestial origin of the human soul he observes:

The philosophers (*al-ḥukamā'*) of old called it 'the perfect nature', in allusion to which the Prophet – God's peace and blessings be upon him – said: 'In His possession are souls who are like enlisted soldiers: those who have <already> come to know each other are in harmony with each other; those who are ignorant of each other fall into difference.'¹²⁹

The relationship between this celestial soul and its human effects is compared to the relationship between father and child:

The loving care which these celestial souls show human souls is like the loving care that a father shows to his children. He is the one who guides a man in his sleep to his best interests; when he is awake, he guides him in his thoughts towards his goal; he is the one who casts into the human heart notions which benefit. He is called the Perfect Nature since the cause is higher, more powerful and more perfect in its nature.¹³⁰

Rāzī reports the Sabians as asserting:

Of the things which prove the soundness of what we have said are <our> repeated experiences (*tajārib*) of the astral laws for they point to what we have said concerning the causes of souls.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

¹³⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

¹³¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 111-112.

Thus for Rāzī's Sabians, the truth of the doctrine of the perfect nature, established as it is by reason, is corroborated by repeated experience.

The Perfect Nature according to Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī

This will now be an appropriate point for a brief excursus to examine Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdadi's treatment of the Perfect Nature: this will reveal the extent to which Rāzī relies on this account to formulate his proof for the Sabian doctrine. For Abū'l-Barakāt, each human soul belongs to an astral spirit which is the cause of the human soul's very existence; the astral spirit watches over the human soul's welfare and inspires it with every good thought. The differences between these higher astral spirits account for the differences in the natures of their human correlatives in the sublunary world.¹³²

Abū'l-Barakāt discusses the Perfect Nature in the twentieth chapter of the second volume of his *Kitab al-Mu'tabar*.¹³³ He reasons that since effects are more amenable to definition than their causes the latter are therefore defined by the former. Knowledge of a thing is more perfect (*atamm*) when its cause is defined. The cause – or causes – of human souls are either more mysterious (*akhfā*) than human souls vis-à-vis their existence and their nature as causes, or their existence is apparent whilst their nature as causes remains mysterious. He dismisses the possibility that the causes of human souls can be bodies, since bodies in their own essence, and insofar as they are bodies, cannot act as efficient causes. Rather, they act as material causes for things existent in primal

¹³² Al-Zarkan, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wa ara'ahu*, pp. 482-3.

¹³³ Abū'l-Barakāt, *Kitab al-Mu'tabar*, 2, pp. 388-393. See Davidson *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect* pp. 154-161. On Abū'l-Barakāt's thought, see Pines, *Studies in Abu'l-Barakāt Al-Baghdādī*; Pavlov, *Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Scientific Philosophy*; Griffel, 'Between al-Ghazālī and Abū'l-Barakāt'.

matter. He also rejects the possibility that the causes of human souls can be accidents because a cause must be more perfect (*atamm*) in its existence than its effect. Moreover, he rejects the possibility that the proximate efficient causes of human souls can be the holy substances (*al-jawāhir al-qudsiyya*) which have no connection with bodies.¹³⁴

The human soul resembles its cause and everything within the human soul derives essentially from the cause. Both the human soul and its cause are non-bodily essences, although the existence of the human soul's cause is prior and more perfect (*atamm*). Everything in the sublunary world, whether it be a soul, an action, a state or an event has its equivalent in the heavens; and all that is in the heavens has its equivalent in that which is above the heavens, beyond the dimension of space. Just as human souls rely on bodies in order to act, so the causes of human souls, when they act, are attached to bodies which are nobler than those of their human equivalents.¹³⁵

After excluding the possibility that the causes of human souls can be of the elemental world, Abū'l-Barakāt looks for their cause amongst the stars and their spirits:

whose bodies are greater and loftier, whose substances are simpler and more powerful, and whose colours – which are their lights – are nobler and more resplendent.¹³⁶

Despite their movement and their shifting positions, their attributes remain stable, their essences unchanged. By means of their perpetual cyclical motions,

¹³⁴ Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Mu'tabar*, p. 388.

¹³⁵ Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Mu'tabar*, p. 389.

¹³⁶ Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Mu'tabar*, p. 390.

causation connects the world of contingent time to the world of time without beginning. Similarly, human souls in their substances endure. The human soul manifests in the body like a rising star; it grows in strength and power inside its body; its strength augments then diminishes like a setting star. In a similar way, says Abu'l-Barakat:

...we observe the growth of children, the strength of youth, the approach of the middle age, the weakness of dotage, and then the inevitability of death which no treatment can avert and no medicine cure.¹³⁷

The differences in size, nature, movement and light of the stars are reflected in the differences that obtain in their human counterparts in the sublunary world. Moreover the amities and enmities that exist between humans are mere reflections of those that exist between the stars. Abū'l-Barakāt deploys the fact that profound differences exist between the natures of men to confute the notion that the cause of human souls can be but one, namely the Active Intellect.¹³⁸ Thus each star governs a number of human souls, each of which shares in the nature of its star which:

watches over it, guides it, supports it, helps it win victories, brings it strength and aid, chases away from it harm and protects it and it is called the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭiba al-tāmm*).¹³⁹

Some, says Abu'l-Barakat, call the Perfect Nature an angel, 'which has the same relation to the human soul as the father has with his son, and which is the

¹³⁷ Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Mu'tabar*, p. 390.

¹³⁸ Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Mu'tabar*, p. 391.

¹³⁹ Abū'l-Barakāt, *al-Mu'tabar*, p. 391.

proximate cause that is known to us.’¹⁴⁰ Abū’l-Barakāt calls it ‘the real father’¹⁴¹ and asserts that:

This angelic spirit shows compassion for the individual that relates to it and cares for it in the same way that a father does with his child....from it derive the dreams, which a man sees in his sleep, which bring him news, give him reminders, glad tidings, warnings, instructions and knowledge.¹⁴²

Now, we return to the main central focus of this section, namely the additional proof, which argues for a celestial origin of the human rational soul, which the Sabians adduce to supplement the Avicennan proof for the existence of the celestial souls. For the purpose of complementing this primary Avicennan proof in constructing Sabian doctrine, Rāzī need only adduce the introductory section to the Barakātian proof for the perfect nature. Nevertheless, Rāzī proceeds to adduce the entire proof, which is superfluous to this specific aim. His purpose cannot therefore be merely restricted to adducing an additional proof to supplement the Avicennan argument for the existence of celestial rational souls: it must extend beyond this. It is my contention that his purpose is to integrate as fully as possible the Barakātian doctrine of the perfect nature into the Avicennan structure of the Sabian philosophical justification for astrology.

4.4.1 (c) Argument from the nobility of life and its place in the cosmic hierarchy

¹⁴⁰ Abū’l-Barakāt, *al-Mu’tabar*, p. 391.

¹⁴¹ Abū’l-Barakāt, *al-Mu’tabar*, p. 391.

¹⁴² Abū’l-Barakāt, *al-Mu’tabar*, p. 392.

The third argument adduced by Rāzī's Sabians to prove the existence of celestial souls invokes the principle that life is inherently noble. Since divine wisdom has determined that the superior rank in the cosmic chain of being is nobler than the inferior, it is more deserving of a nobler form of life. Therefore the supralunar world must possess superior forms of life to that which are to be found in the sublunary world, the apex of which is represented by the human rational soul:

The third proof is that the celestial bodies are nobler than the base composite bodies <of this world> (*al-ajrām al-falakīya ashraf min hādhihi al-ajrām al-murakkaba al-khasīsa*). Life is nobler (*ashraf*) than lifelessness (*al-jamādiyya*). How then could it be appropriate for the Divine Wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-ilāhiyya*) and Perfect Generosity (*al-jūd al-tāmm*) to give the base that which is noble whilst withholding it from the noble?¹⁴³

Applying this principle to the elements, they reason that fire, being the most subtle and the furthest removed from dense, lifeless earth, is the very source of life, producing the heat of the innate disposition (*al-ḥarāra al-ghazīriyya*) on which life depends. It shares the same genus (*jins*) as heavenly fire, by virtue of its inherent balance, in contrast with the humoral fire which has a tendency towards imbalance and entropy.

Also we witness that those things which are opposed (*muḍādda*) to life are coldness, dryness and density and these are the properties of pure earth. As for water, since it is more subtle than earth, it is closer to the nature of life. As for air, since it is more subtle than water, it is the soul

¹⁴³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112.

and the nourishment of life. As for heat it is the source and spring of life: heavenly heat is of the same genus as the heat of the innate disposition (*al-ḥarāra al-samāwīya min jins al-ḥarāra al-ghazīriyya*) by virtue of its balance (*i'tidāl*).¹⁴⁴

Now, given that fire and the heat which it produces are the source of life; and since according to Galen the aeric sphere, which girdles the earth, contains a plenitude of spirits; it is even more apt that the fiery sphere should teem with life, for its fire is balanced, gentle and inert (*mu'tadila hādiya sākina*); *a fortiori*, since the heavenly bodies are nobler and more subtle than even the fiery sphere, then the spirits which they contain must be more numerous and nobler (*akthar wa ashraf*). It is noteworthy that at this point, Rāzī is keen to interject into the Sabian line of reasoning his observation that it is in fact in complete conformity with the Islamic revelation:

...for this reason, the Prophet – may God's peace and blessings be upon him – said: 'heaven creaks and it is right that it should do so: there is not even the space of a hand's width in it in which an angel is not standing, bowing or prostrating.' So how close is the proof of the sages to the revelation of the prophets!¹⁴⁵

The three objections to this Sabian argument which Rāzī subsequently lists are therefore objections to a prophetically revealed truth. They are: (1) the path of the heavenly bodies is regular (*'alā nahj wāḥid*) – were they living beings then their paths would be diverse; (2) since the fire of the sun is so intense, the solar

¹⁴⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112.

¹⁴⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112. See chapter 11 for Rāzī's qualified reconciliation between the Sabian perspective and Islam.

sphere, despite being nobler and more subtle, cannot sustain life; (3) life cannot be sustained without a “special structure” (*binya makḥṣūṣa*), such as man’s humoral balance (*mizāj*); the celestial spheres lack the kind of structure which can sustain life.¹⁴⁶

The rebuttal of the first objection has two grounds. Firstly, when an agent possessed of choice makes the best choice in any given situation, no discrepancy arises between the agent and nature.¹⁴⁷ And secondly, those who raise this objection are asked:

... do you not believe that the mover <of the spheres> is God – exalted is He – and He is a choosing agent and that as such He moves them in one way without change? So then your belief that the action of the choosing agent must change is proven false.¹⁴⁸

In rebuttal of the second objection, no concession is made that a producer of heat must itself be hot. Moreover, even if this concession were made, certain life forms, such as the ostrich and salamander nevertheless thrive in such intense heat. The third objection is rebutted with the same response since the substance of its argument is much the same as that of the second.¹⁴⁹

This third argument demonstrating the reality of the celestial rational soul is less a logical, more of a rhetorical, proof, which appears in Rāzī’s *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, another exploration of Avicennan thought. The argument asserts that since causes are superior to their effects, and closer to perfection, the

¹⁴⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112.

¹⁴⁷ ‘The first aspect is what Ptolemy mentioned namely, that when the choosing agent seeks the best then there is no difference between (the choosing agent) and nature (*al-mukhtār idhā ṭalaba al-aḥḍal lam yabqa bayna-hu wa bayna al-ṭabī ‘a farq*)’ (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112).

¹⁴⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

¹⁴⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

celestial spheres, being the causes of sublunary rational and sensate souls must be possessed of a superior form of rationality and perception:

...how can base bodies be uniquely characterized by life, perception (*idrāk*) and rationality (*al-nuṭq*) whilst the noble luminous bodies are deprived <of such attributes> despite the fact that they are the causes of such perception and rationality occurring in this <sublunary> world? And it is plain that the cause (*al-sabab*) is more deserving of every <form of> perfection than its effect (*al-musabbab*).¹⁵⁰

Now since the celestial spheres are alive, it follows that the entire cosmos is alive – indeed it is one living creature, a reality which is not threatened by the fact that the four sublunary elements are inanimate, since their portion of existence within the greater cosmic whole is but a mere jot.¹⁵¹

Following a somewhat similar trajectory to that of the second proof in *al-Sirr* for the existence of the celestial souls, which infers the rationally ensouled nature of the spheres from the fact that they are the most likely causes of human souls, this third proof in *al-Sirr* reasons from the inherent nobility of life, and the fact

¹⁵⁰ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 2, p. 102. It is curious that Rāzī should refer to the celestial spheres (*aflāk*) as the causes of rational human souls – this account of anthropogenesis bears remarkable resemblance to the Barakātian thesis of the perfect nature which we have just encountered.

¹⁵¹ ‘And if it is established that the celestial spheres are alive, then it is correct to make the general statement that the entire cosmos is an animal (*al-‘ālam kulluhu ḥayawān*) <a proposition which> is not undermined by the fact that the four elements are not alive – for their portion is but small because in comparison to the celestial spheres, the sum total of all the four elements is almost imperceptible. The <rules> of analogy would require that the sum <of all four elements> in <its relation to> the sphere of Saturn be compared to that of a point in a circle. So then how would the analogy stand in relation to that which is above the sphere of Saturn? And it is plain that were there a small pearl in a man’s intestines, this would not represent an impediment to it being said that this indicated that the body is alive, even though the ratio of the pearl to the body of the man is greater than the ratio of the four elements to the sum of the heavens. Indeed in the body of an animal are many bodies which are neither alive nor sensate (*ghayr ḥayya wa lā hassāsa*) such as the humors (*akhlāt*), the bones and more else besides. So if there is no impediment <to saying> that, then so <it can be said here>: indeed it is more apt.’ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 2, p.102

of human rational life, that those beings superior to man in the cosmic hierarchy must be possessed of life. In contrast with the first proof, inferences about the celestial world in these last two proofs are drawn from observations about the sublunary world.

3.4.2 The planet is where the celestial soul and body meets

Being the focal point at which the celestial rational-bodily soul complex interfaces with the body of the sphere, the planet represents the co-ordinating centre of celestial activity, under the direction of which celestial spirits act on specific parts of the sphere. The analogy of the planet's relationship with the sphere is as the relationship of the heart to the human body. Rāzī accounts for this second doctrine of the Sabians concerning the celestial spheres as follows:

The second attribute is that the wise have said the sphere is like the totality of the <human> body (*jumlatu al-badn*) whilst the planet is like the heart. And just as the primary connection (*al-ta'alluq al-awwal*) of the soul is with the heart, and then by means of the heart, to the rest of the body, so too the primary connection of the celestial spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-falakiyya*) is with the planet, and then by means of the planet, to all of the sphere. Just as the human soul then divides up into many different powers (*quwā kathīra*), each one of which is connected to one of the organs/limbs of the body, so the celestial soul divides up into many powers, each one of which has a special connection with a specific part of the sphere.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113. Compare *al-Maṭālib* 7, *On Higher and Lower Spirits*, p. 8: '...as for the spirits which govern the celestial bodies, then the most apparent (*al-aẓhar*) is that the spheres for them are like the bodies, the planets are like the hearts, and the lines of rays which emanate from the bodies (*ajrām*) of the planets (*al-kawākib*) flow in the manner of subtle luminescent bodies (*ajṣām*)

The nature of these celestial spirits is ambiguous: on the one hand they could act as the purely natural pneuma of Galenic physiology which possesses no volition of its own; on the other hand, they could each indeed be possessed of individual volition, each instance of which works entirely in concert with the rest of the celestial host. But in the context of Sabian astrolatry, the planet serves as the most appropriate focus for veneration of the celestial sphere as a whole.

3.4.3 Celestial perception of the universal and the particular

al-Sirr

That they perceive both the universal and the particular constitutes an argument that the celestial spheres have rational souls and are the necessary mediators between Rāzī's Sabians and the supracelestial world. Once again this is an inference drawn from the repeated observation of the celestial circular motion. Given that the planets are living volitional beings, their particular movements must be performed as a result of conscious choice; from this Rāzī's Sabians infer that they must also be capable of apprehending particular knowledge items.

...they say that the spheres and the planets are perceptive (*mudrika*) of the particulars and the general. As for the assertion that they perceive the particulars, it is because they perform particular acts by way of will

which emanate from the heart and brain to reach the rest of the organs (*a ḍā'*). Moreover, just as there is for each body <but> one soul, from which emanates to every part of the body a power that governs it....'

(*irāda*) and whatever acts thus is cognizant of particulars (*‘ālim bi’l-juzīyāt*).¹⁵³

Their knowledge of the universals (*kullīyyāt*) which derive from the supracelestial world is inferred from the perpetual nature of their circular motion, since:

...their movements must have a purpose (*gharaḍ*) for pointless activity (*al-‘abath*) cannot continue in perpetuity, nor indeed could it endure for most of the time. Moreover that purpose cannot be particular because if its realization were impossible (*in kāna mumtani‘ al-ḥuṣūl*) then it would no longer be an eternal purpose; and if its realization were possible then it would be necessary for the <movement of the> sphere to cease once the purpose has been realized (*wajaba wuqūf al-falak ‘inda ḥuṣūl gharaḍihi*) and that is impossible. That its purpose is particular has been proven to be false: so it becomes established that its purpose is general. Everything that has a purpose must be cognizant of it: thus it is established that <the spheres and the planets> perceive the general and the particular.¹⁵⁴

The argument which demonstrates that the celestial souls perceive universals thus rests on two premises, each with its own supporting proof: (1) perpetual celestial motion has a purpose; (2) the purpose of that motion is universal. The implied third premise of course is that everything which pursues by its activity a universal purpose must also be able to perceive the universal.

The first premise is established by the following simple syllogism: celestial motion is perpetual; no activity that is perpetual can be without purpose;

¹⁵³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112.

¹⁵⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.112.

therefore celestial motion must have a purpose.¹⁵⁵ The second premise rests on eliminating the possibility that the object of celestial motion can be the particular, thus leaving the universal object as the sole remaining explanation. Thus if the object of such motion is particular, its realization would be either: (a) impossible; or (b) possible. If impossible, then we would be forced to conclude that perpetual celestial motion has no realizable object; this being the case, it cannot properly be said to have purpose: so it must constitute pointless activity (*'abath*). This conclusion leads to a contradiction of previously established premise (1). Therefore, if the object of celestial motion is particular, its realization must be possible. But, were it indeed possible, then once it were realized, celestial motion would cease: this leads to a contradiction of the proposition, contained in premise (1), that celestial motion is perpetual. Thus, the object of celestial motion cannot be particular. So it must be universal.

In summary, the ability of the celestial souls to perceive both universals and particulars is inferred from the fact of their perpetual motion. Insofar as the motions of their spheres occur in space and time, they are particular; and since they perform them with volition, it can be inferred that they also perceive them; thus they are able to perceive the particular. And since their motion is perpetual, their purpose cannot be said to be realizable in a particular way for once realized, they would then cease, contradicting the initial premise that their motion is indeed perpetual. Their purpose must therefore be universal. Just as Rāzī's Sabians inferred from the circularity of celestial motion that the spheres must be living and rational, possessed of choice and volition, so they infer from

¹⁵⁵ That celestial motion is perpetual (*dā'im*) is assumed by Rāzī's Sabians: he does not attribute to them any supporting argument establishing this proposition.

the perpetual nature of celestial motion that the spheres perceive the universal as well as the particular. This being the case the Sabian adept, once he has achieved noetic connection with the celestial souls, is theoretically able to receive understanding of both kinds of knowledge.

Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt*

This Sabian argument for the celestial soul's perception of the universal and particular is an adapted version of a more involved proof, which was advanced by Avicenna in the third *namaṭ* of his *al-Ishārāt*,¹⁵⁶ that the celestial spheres are possessed of rational souls. He reasons that, since movement is never an aim in of itself, the purpose of celestial motion must be other than mere movement for its own sake. This must be the universal realization of an infinite series of configurations. Each individual configuration is particular; but the realization of an infinite series of configurations is a universal aim. Therefore, the celestial soul which governs the motion of its sphere, perceiving both the universal and the particular, must indeed be rational, possessed of universal volition. Avicenna says:

By volition, the movement of the first body is not for the sake of movement itself because it (movement) is not of the sensible perfections (*al-kamālāt al-ḥissiyya*), nor of the intellectual perfections (*al-kamālāt al-ʿaqliyya*). It [i.e. movement] is only pursued for <an aim> other than it (*innamā tuṭlab li-ghayri-hā*). Nothing is more befitting to <this movement> than <celestial> configuration (*laysa al-awlā lahā illā al-wadʿ*) <which> is

¹⁵⁶ See chapters 27-29, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 322-327.

not a determined but rather a hypothetical existent (*laysa bi-mu‘ayyan mawjūd bal farḍī*). Nor does <this movement> stop at the determined hypothetical <configuration> but rather at the determined universal <one> (*mu‘ayyan kullī*). So this <movement> is an intellectual volition (*tilka irāda kullīyya*).¹⁵⁷

In his commentary to this passage, Rāzī refers to what is subsequently identified as the celestial rational soul as the Possessor of Universal Volition (*ṣāhib al-ra‘y al-kullī*). He explains that, according to Avicenna, the aim (*maqṣūd*) of the sphere in its movement cannot be for its own sake:

...because the quiddity (*māhiyya*) of movement is that it is a first perfection (*kamāl awwal*) so it is a means for the second perfection (*wasīla al-kamāl al-thānī*). And since its quiddity is that it is a means for something else, it cannot be a purpose in of itself (*istaḥāla an yakūn hiya nafs al-maṭlūb*). Thus it becomes established that the aim of the sphere in its movement is something other than movement.¹⁵⁸

This aim is the realization of something which exists only in potential (*bi‘l-quwwa*), namely the actualization of the celestial configurations:

So the purpose of <celestial> movement is to actualize the configurations (*istikhrāj al-awḍā‘ ilā al-fi‘l*); the aim is not a specific individual configuration (*waḍ‘ mu‘ayyan shakṣ*) otherwise once it were arrived at, then it would stop. Rather the aim is a determined universal configuration (*waḍ‘ mu‘ayyan kullī*).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 323.

¹⁵⁸ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 324.

¹⁵⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 324.

Of course, being determined (*mu'ayyan*) seems in apparent contradiction to being universal (*kullī*). Rāzī understands Avicenna's response to such an objection in the following terms:

Being determined (*mu'ayyan*) does not contradict (*lā yunāfi*) its being universal because each one of these individual determined <configurations> is determined and shares in being determined (*fa-hiya mushārika fī mu'ayyaniyya*) but they are distinct <from each other> by means of their own specificity (*mumāyiza bi-khuṣūṣiyātiha*) and that which they share is other than that by <reason of> which they are distinct (*mā bihi al-ishtirāk ghayr mā bihi al-imtiyāz*). So the specific, insofar as it is absolutely determined (*muṭlaq al-mu'ayyan*), is something universal. This is what he [i.e. Avicenna] asserted in the introduction when he said that if an idea is predicable on many then it is universal whether it be specific to an individual or not. Thus is it established that the aim of this movement is something universal and this demands a universal intention (*qaṣd kullī*) and the universal intention is known as intellectual volition. Thus is it established that the movements of the spheres have a principle, namely the Possessor of Universal Volition.¹⁶⁰

Avicenna is confronted by an obvious dilemma. Observing the eternal nature of celestial motion,¹⁶¹ he must maintain that its object is universal, since if its object were particular, then its realization would entail the immediate cessation of such movement. And yet at the same time, the configurations to which it gives rise are particular. He attempts to reconcile these seemingly contrary

¹⁶⁰ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 324.

positions by observing that the celestial configurations all share in being determined (*mu'ayyana*) and are thus universal, whilst at the same time being distinguished from one another by their own specificities.

The supracelestial intellect is an abstracted substance independent in its essence from the sphere with respect to all of its perfections (*jawhar mujarrad ghanī bi-dhātihi fī jamī' kamālātihi 'an al-falak*). But not so the celestial rational soul: for whilst it is also abstracted from the body of the sphere, the former nevertheless has a relationship with the latter which is analogous to the relationship between our souls and our bodies. The perfections of the celestial rational soul are not independent of the sphere which it governs, the perpetual motion of which pursues a universal aim (*gharaḍ kullī*), driven by a universal intention (*qaṣd kullī*), and subject to universal perception (*idrāk kullī*). The possessor of such universal intention and perception cannot be bodily: it must be an abstracted substance. But this substance cannot be the intellect since, says Rāzī interpreting Avicenna:

...everything whose aim is an action must be in need of that action in order to attain perfection [...] and everything that seeks perfection is not an abstracted intellect but rather is a soul. Thus, in this way, is established the assertion <of the reality> of the rational celestial soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqā al-falakiyya*).¹⁶²

In governing the eternal motion of the sphere the celestial rational soul realizes its own perfection. The attempt to seek perfection by means of motion is

¹⁶² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 326.

characteristic of souls rather than intellects. It is for this reason that Avicenna posits the existence of the celestial rational soul.¹⁶³

That the sphere possesses a bodily soul, which is the means by which the ‘universal opinion’ of the celestial rational soul becomes particularized in specific celestial movement, is an inference drawn by Avicenna from the fact that:

A specific particular thing (*shay’ makḥṣūṣ juz’iyy*) cannot arise from a universal opinion for <such a universal opinion cannot> become specified (*lā yatakhaṣṣaṣ*) with <one> particular rather than another, unless <that be> by reason of a specifier (*mukhaṣṣiṣ*) that is necessarily linked to it (*illā bi-sabab mukhaṣṣiṣ lā maḥālata yaqtarinu bihi*) – not by itself alone.¹⁶⁴

Explaining this statement, Rāzī comments:

...the relationship of the universal to all particulars is one such that no one particular is more fitting than another to issue from the universal. So either a universal arises, which is absurd, or nothing arises from it, and that is what is meant. So it is established that no particular arises from a universal opinion but that particular must issue from a particular volition, and the possessor of particular volition is a bodily power (*quwwa jismāniyya*). Thus is it established that the sphere has a bodily soul.¹⁶⁵

The rational-bodily celestial soul complex thus provides the means by which influence from the supracelestial intellect, which exists beyond space and time,

¹⁶³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 325-6.

¹⁶⁴ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 326; Inati, *Physics and Metaphysics*, p. 113.

¹⁶⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* p. 327.

can flow to the sublunary world. Being both abstracted but nevertheless connected with the body of the sphere, the celestial rational soul perceives both universals and particulars, translating the former into particular instantiations in the sublunary world by governing the celestial bodily soul, which affects the movement of the sphere, in the attempt to realize an infinite series of configurations. For Avicenna, the reality of the celestial rational souls is a mystery which is:

...veiled from all except those who have perfected the divine wisdom
(*darban min al-naẓar mastūran illā ‘alā al-rāsikhīn fī al-ḥikma al-muta‘āliya*).¹⁶⁶

Janus-faced, the rational-bodily celestial soul complex at once receives the universal abstractions of the supracelestial realm and translates them into motion.¹⁶⁷

3.4.4 Celestial spheres as the causes and perceivers of sublunary change

It has previously been mentioned that the proof that celestial motion is the principle of sublunary change was adduced in the first treatise as a means of justifying the efficacy of talismans. When this proposition is considered in light of: (1) the Avicennan proof which deduces the volitional nature of celestial motion from the circularity of its movements; and (2) the principle that any agent which acts with volition must be cognizant of the effects of its actions, it

¹⁶⁶ Avicenna, quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 325.

¹⁶⁷ Rāzī expresses doubts about Avicenna's solution to the seeming paradox of the celestial sphere's motion. He observes: '...so insofar as it performs particular acts and then abandons them, it must be a body and insofar as it yearns to imitate the intellect then it is abstracted (*mujarrada*). So there is no escape from this philosophical impasse (*‘uqda*) unless it be asserted that: [(1)] these particular acts have no need of particular perceptions; or [(2)] that an abstracted substance can be possessed of particular perceptions; or [(3)] that a bodily power can perceive abstracted things; or [(4)] that the purpose of moving the sphere is not yearning for imitation. Regarding whichever of these positions they adopted, they left their own distinct doctrinal school and definitive statement.' Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.329.

follows that the planets must be cognizant of all events which occur in this world:

...you already know the aforementioned proof at the beginning of this book that the proximate principles of coming to be of events which come to be (*al-mabādi' al-qarība li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādith*) in the World of Generation and Corruption must be the movements of the spheres and the applications of the planets; and you already know that they perform their acts by volition (*bi'l-irāda*) and that anything which acts with volition is cognizant of its action. Therefore these planets are cognizant of all contingent events which occur in this world, whether they be natural, coerced or by choice (*sawā'an kānat ṭabī'iyya, qasriyya aw ikhtiyāriyya*).¹⁶⁸

Of course, this account of celestial causation of *all* sublunary events and perception thereof gives rise to the intractable aporia of how to reconcile determinism with human agency and free will. For if the planets are cognizant of all sublunary events, as effects produced by their own circular motion, including those which are the result of the individual choice of sublunary agents, then a seeming contradiction would appear to have arisen.¹⁶⁹ Be that as it may, the fact that the planets are cognizant of all sublunary change justifies the Sabian belief that some form of noetic connection with them would provide knowledge of the unseen world.

3.4.5 The Shape of the Planets

¹⁶⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 112.

¹⁶⁹ See Kukkonen, 'Causality and Cosmology'.

Theological differences aside, the fifth doctrine attributed by Rāzī to the Sabians represents the only point of contention between the distinct categories of Sabian: specifically, between the philosophizing Sabians and the Chaldean sages (*al-ḥukamā al-kasdāniyūn*). The former are committed to the doctrine that the planets are spheres on two grounds. The first is an empirical proof: they appear circular. The second reasons that since: (1) the planetary bodies are simplexes, as opposed to the complexes of terrestrial bodies composed of the four elements; and (2) all simple bodies are circular, they conclude the planets must be circular:

The Philosophers adduced two proofs that they are spheres (*kurrāt*); the first is that we observe them as spherical (*mustadīra*); the second is that they are simple and the shape of anything that is simple is spherical (*wa'l-basīṭa shaklu-hā al-kurra*).¹⁷⁰

Their Chaldean counterparts refused to concede their belief in the theriomorphic shape of the planets to such philosophizing. They countered that a triangle or a square, for instance, might appear as a sphere when viewed at a vast distance.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, they resisted the assertion that the planets were simplexes, the acceptance of which would demand that they disavow their theriomorphic belief. They are reported as saying:

...we do not concede that they are simple <bodies> so why could not one of their parts be of one nature and another part of another nature,

¹⁷⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

¹⁷¹ References to shapes might not merely be for the sake of illustration but reflect something more meaningful such as the shapes of the Sabian temples on earth. See *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 394 for the shapes of the Greek planetary temples before the time of Alexander: Saturn's was a hexagon; Jupiter's a triangle; Mars' a rectangle; the Sun's a square; Venus's a triangle containing a square; Mercury a triangle containing a rectangle; the Moon's an octagon.

except that one part, with its nature and essence, would have to be cohere with another part <of a different nature> in such a way as to prevent dissolution and disintegration (*al-inḥilāl wa'l-infikāk*).¹⁷²

This belief was the natural conclusion of their understanding of the causal relationship between the planets and their sublunary effects. For they maintained that the form of the planets:

...was that of animals which are to be found in this world, adducing as evidence that which we have already demonstrated, <name>) that the effect must resemble its cause, and be congeneric and similar (*al-ma'lūl lā budda wa-an yakūna mulā'iman li-'illatihi mujānisan lahā wa mushābihan*).¹⁷³

Thus the nature of the causal relationship is one of similarity (*mushābaha*) and 'congenereity' (*mujānasa*) between the superior cause and the inferior effect. Once this is established:

...it follows that the bodies of the higher world must be the real causes of those in the lower world, sharing with them a resemblance in both shape and form. And when we consider that the cause must be more powerful than the effect, it naturally follows that those animals which are in the Higher World are nobler and more perfect in form than the animals of this Lower World, their matter being different from the matter of creatures of the lower world for those shapes and forms are concomitants of their essences (*lawāzim dhawātihā*). And when we consider that the cause must be more powerful than the effect, it

¹⁷² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

¹⁷³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

naturally follows that the animals in the higher world perpetually endure, preserved from change (*mumtani 'a al-taghayyur*).¹⁷⁴

Thus the sages of the Chaldean Sabians infer the theriomorphic shape of the heavenly bodies (*al-kawākib*) on the *a priori* assumptions that: (1) that they are the causes of corresponding theriomorphic forms in the sublunary world; and (2) a resemblance necessarily exists between the cause and its effect. Vast distance explains why our limited sense perception erroneously apprehends their shape as spherical. They maintained a belief in the simple and naïve correspondence between the animals of the sublunary world and the divine entities that populated the supralunar, understanding almost literally the Hermetic dictum 'as above so below'. Indeed their simple identification of causality with congenericity between sublunary phenomena and their celestial principles provided the simplest account necessary to account for the efficacy of their occult practices which sought to influence the outcome of celestial action in this world by bringing together, in ritual, objects of planetary correspondence appropriate to the desired result.

3.4.6 Sabian worship

Building on the propositions that the celestial souls are perceptive of sublunary events and that they are the causal origin of human souls, Rāzī's Sabians aver that they pay particular heed to human acts of devotion:

...the celestial souls are the causes, the real fathers and the perfect nature (*al-ṭibā ' al-tāmm*) of earthly souls and their senses are far more powerful

¹⁷⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

than ours and since the cause must be more perfect than the effect then it is not unlikely that they regard with favour things in this world, for they hear the supplications of humans (*du'ā al-bashar*), see their adoration (*tubṣīr taḍurru'ahum*), smell the fragrance of their ritual subfumigations and incense; nor is it unlikely that they, their spirits and their helpers have special names (*asmā makḥṣūṣa*); nor is it unlikely that they appear before the one who serves and adores them (*tatajallā li-man yakhdumuhā wa yatadarra'ū ilayhā*) to reveal their names and those of their adjutants (*a'wān*) to the one who calls in supplication.¹⁷⁵

With the intimate relationship between human and celestial souls established, the Sabians can now speak of how the former might communicate with the latter through acts of devotion, for which they might be rewarded with revelatory experiences and occult knowledge of the names of planetary spirits which facilitate the fulfilment of their sublunary needs. Seeing that the heavenly bodies were held to be both the proximate causes of sublunary change, and the very causes of human souls, the Sabians took them as 'proximate gods of this world', to whom they directed their worship:

...Know that the Sabians, professing this set of beliefs which we have just explained, based their religion on these principles, claiming that the planets were the proximate gods of this world (*hādhihi al-kawākib hiya al-āliha al-qarība li-hādhā al-'ālam*); thus it naturally follows that it is necessary that the people of this lower world devote themselves to their worship and entreaty them with incense and sacrifices (*fa-lā jarāma*

¹⁷⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.113.

*wajaba 'alā ahl al-'ālam al-asfal an yashtaghilū bi-'ibādatihā wa al-tadarrū 'ilayhā bi'l-dukhn wa'l-qurbānāt).*¹⁷⁶

Since the heavenly bodies would regularly disappear from sight, they could not serve as constant foci for worship. Therefore planetary idols came to serve this purpose:

...and since they knew that the planets disappear from sight, it was natural for them to fashion statues and idols (*tamāthīl wa aṣnām*) <of them>, devoting themselves to the veneration of the planets (*wa ishtaghalū ta'zīman li-tilka al-kawākib*). This is the religion of idolatry (*dīn 'abdat al-awthān*).¹⁷⁷

Knowledge of how to invoke and address the stars is imparted by a man's perfect nature, often when he is in a hypnagogic state. Thus, since an individual's close and conscious relationship with his perfect nature is crucial for his occult education and training, it becomes necessary for him to identify to which planet it belongs:

...the Chaldeans have said that each man has a celestial soul (*nafs falakiyya*) - the Perfect Nature (*al-ṭibā'a at-tāmma*) which is in respect of him like a father who is kind and caring towards his child; it inspires in him that which is of benefit to him; it summons to his memory that which he has forgotten; it brings him to that which he seeks in his mind; and it shows him in his sleep that which is useful to him. It thus behoves the man who concerns himself with the knowledge of how to invoke the

¹⁷⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

¹⁷⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113. It is at this point that Rāzī makes a brief interjection in order to argue for the correct Islamic theological grounds on which this kind of astrolatrous idolatry is to be refuted. We shall discuss this in chapter 10.

planets (*'ilm da 'wat al-kawākib*) to exert himself such that he finds out which planet it is.¹⁷⁸

The phrase ‘...such that he finds out which planet it is’ might mislead the reader into thinking that an individual’s perfect nature is the celestial soul of the planet itself. This would lead to the somewhat absurd conclusion that the almost limitless range of human character types might be reducible to just seven. To avoid this misunderstanding, the phrase would require construction in light of the earlier discussion of the perfect nature, which proposed that:

...the planets *and* the spheres possess knowing, perceiving souls (*li'l-kawākib wa'l-aflāk nufūs 'ālima mudrika*) which are the causes of human souls.¹⁷⁹

And as we have already learnt from Rāzī’s Sabians, the celestial spheres possess a plenitude of rational souls. Thus for example the sphere of Mercury possesses a countless number of souls, each of which can act as the causal origin for innumerable individual human souls. Thus to establish a stabilized connection with his perfect nature, the practitioner of the Sabian religion would firstly be required to identify which sphere it is from which his soul derives. A twofold empirical method is applied: (1) identifying which planet possesses the strongest domination over his rising sign; and (2) inferring the planetary sphere by observation of his actions and moral character:

Sometimes they deduce it by means of the cause indicating the effect (*yastadillu 'alā dhālika bi'l- 'illa 'alā al-ma 'lūl*) which <method involves> looking at the ascendant sign at the time of birth <of the man in question> so that the planet with the strongest domination over his

¹⁷⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 113-4.

¹⁷⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 111.

rising sign (*aqwā al-kawākib isti'lā'an 'alā ṭāli'ihī*) becomes known. Sometimes it is deduced by means of the effect indicating the cause such that by knowing the actions and moral character of the man, the most appropriate star can be deduced. Both methods are relied on, so that by means of an inductive analysis of its conditions <which indicate that> that is such-and-such a planet (*al-kawkab al-fulānī*), his perfect nature becomes known.¹⁸⁰

Failing this twofold method, the practitioner can seek the revelation of the perfect nature through asceticism and fixed meditation, whereby all cognitive activities are directed to this one aim:

If he is unable to find out his perfect nature by this method, then let him discipline himself; pursue great lengths in severing all bodily ties; and immerse his meditation (*fikr*), his heart, his thought (*khāṭir*) and his imagination (*al-khayāl*) in the magnification (*ta'zīm*) of the perfect nature for it will inevitably appear to him. After that let him avail himself of its mediation with respect to whatever he will and desires.¹⁸¹

Once the perfect nature has been revealed to the practitioner, he is to devote himself to it for it will be the swiftest in response to his invocation and will mediate between him and benevolently disposed planets, such as Saturn, which would be benevolently disposed towards a Martian celestial soul or Jupiter towards a Venusian:

So let him occupy himself in its invocation and service for communication with it [i.e. the perfect nature] will be the easiest and it will answer his supplication more swiftly [...]; then let him avail himself

¹⁸⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.114.

¹⁸¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.114.

of its mediation with planets that are benevolently disposed to him (*al-kawākib al-sādiqa lahu*), whilst avoiding those planets which are hostile (*al-kawākib al-mu'ādiya lahu*), until the point that his position in that has become consolidated (*ḥattā yaqwī lahu amruhu fī dhālika*).¹⁸²

Whilst the empirical twofold method might be instructive in identifying to which planetary sphere any individual's perfect nature might belong, it would appear that the latter method of ascesis and meditation would be necessary in order to induce a revelatory experience of the particular celestial soul which acts as his perfect nature. Be that as it may, since connection with the perfect nature is absolutely essential to the practitioner's ability to address the other celestial spheres, it becomes apparent that it would also be crucial for any successful attempt at the planetary ascent ritual.¹⁸³

3.5 The Purpose of Celestial Motion

Previously we observed that the first Sabian proof for the existence of the rational celestial souls which argued from the circularity of celestial motion, relies on the positing of the supracelestial intellects, which are separated and abstracted from matter. This is now the appropriate juncture at which to explore their relationship with the celestial souls. In doing so it will be shown that the purpose of the eternal motion of the latter is the attempt to imitate the former, in the pursuit of perfection.

¹⁸² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 114.

¹⁸³ This construction of the two methods as complementary rather than as alternatives, however, is undermined by the phrase '...If he is unable to find out his perfect nature by this method', which would support reading them as alternatives. If this latter reading is indeed the correct one, then of course it leaves the question unanswered as to how the twofold empirical method can identify an individual celestial spirit as the perfect nature as opposed to merely the planetary sphere to which it belongs.

With this aim in mind, we return to the sixth *namaṭ* of *al-Ishārāt*. In the eleventh chapter, Avicenna asserts that celestial motion must be driven by the kind of motive (*dā'in*) which is possessed by a soul rather than an intellect. Moreover, this motive can neither be desiderative nor irascible (*shahwānī aw ghaḍabī*).¹⁸⁴

The reason for this, explains Rāzī, is that such motives only drive the actions of bodies which undergo 'increase and decrease', or change and transformation either for the better or for the worse: it would be absurd to attribute such change to the eternal and unchanging celestial spheres. Moreover, if the object of celestial desire or anger were attainable, then eternal celestial motion would cease on its realization, which is impossible; whilst if it were unattainable, then eternal celestial motion would just simply be an absurd act of folly.¹⁸⁵

Dismissing both desiderative and irascible motives as valid accounts for celestial motion, Avicenna asserts that it must resemble our own motions which are driven by the practical intellect. Moreover:

It is unavoidable that this soul's movement is directed toward a beloved (*ma'shūq*) and chosen object (*mukhtār*) in order to attain either: (1) the essence of this object; (2) (one) of its states; or (3) something that imitates these two things.¹⁸⁶

On the same grounds that he dismissed the desiderative and irascible motives as accounts for celestial motion, he eliminates the first two disjuncts, leaving only the need for imitation (*mushābaha*) of the beloved as the sole remaining explanation. Interpreting the intentions of Avicenna, Rāzī comments:

¹⁸⁴ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 445.

¹⁸⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 446.

¹⁸⁶ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 446; Inati, *Physics and Metaphysics*, p. 148.

...the aim (*al-maṭlūb*) is the attainment of imitation (*taḥṣil al-mushābaha*) of an attribute (*ṣifa*) which does not emerge into actuality in its entirety (*lā yakhruju ilā al-fi l bi-tamāmiḥā*), but rather in the successive <realization> of its parts throughout eternity (*‘alā al-dawām*).¹⁸⁷

The celestial soul cannot perfectly imitate the attribute of the supracelestial intellect, thereby bringing it into actuality, other than in a way that is gradual, stretched out over eternity. Avicenna explains the nature of this imitation thusly:

...that which yearns (*al-mutashawwiq*) imitates things in actuality – inasmuch as such things are free from potentiality – such that the good flows from it, as the good flows inasmuch as the resemblance is to the exalted and not inasmuch as it is a flow over the lower object.¹⁸⁸

Rāzī writes in elucidation:

...the celestial sphere, which we have supposed yearns for the realization of perfection, comes to imitate at that point, those things which are in actuality, namely the abstracted intellects, in two respects. One is in their abstraction from the nature of possibility and potential; the second is in their emanation of good things (*fayḍān al-khayrāt*) on that which is below them, which does not mean that the goal (*maqṣūd*) of the former is the emanation of good things on lower beings (*al-sāfilāt*). For we have explained that the higher does nothing for the sake of the lower. Rather the aim is imitation of the intellect insofar as it is a principle for the

¹⁸⁷ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 447.

¹⁸⁸ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 447; see Inati, *Physics and Metaphysics*, p. 149.

emanation of good things, on that which is below it, without seeking or desiring <to do so>.¹⁸⁹

Perpetual circular motion is thus the way in which the celestial spheres attempt to realize in their own selves the perfection of the intellects. By such motion they raise in themselves the supracelestial attribute (*ṣifa*) from the inferior ontological orders of mere possibility (*imkān*) and potential (*quwwa*) to the superior ontological order of actual realization. The extent to which they achieve this is the extent to which they realize the perfection of abstraction (*tajarrud*). And the measure of their realization of the attribute is the measure to which they gratuitously effuse goodness on that which is beneath them in the hierarchy of being. But since, it should be noted, beings of a higher ontological order do not act for the sake of beings of lower orders, this effusion of goodness, is not the aim of celestial motion but merely its concomitant. Avicenna identifies the principle of this effusion with:

...the celestial configurations (*aḥwāl al-waḍ'*) which are the emanational dispositions; that which is in potential in them flows in actual <realized existence> through that which is possible by way of successive realization.¹⁹⁰

The seeming obscurity of this philosophical allusion is illumined by Rāzī's commentary:

¹⁸⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 447-8.

¹⁹⁰ '...innamā yajrī mā bi'l-quwwa fihā majrā al-fi'l bi-mā yumkin min al-ta'āqub', Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.445; Inati translates as follows: 'Whatever is in potentiality in the heavens follows the same course, just as that of the actual inasmuch as this is possible by succession' (Inati, *Physics and Metaphysics* p. 149).

...the means by which the celestial sphere realizes its imitation of the intellect is naught but the bringing from potential into actual realization the <rotation> of the aions and the celestial configurations (*istikhrāj al-ayūn wa'l-awḍā'*).¹⁹¹

The celestial soul is thus motivated by a yearning for the supracelestial intellect which is its beloved (*ma'shūq*); this gives rise to the need of the former to imitate the attributes of the latter. Since the celestial soul is a rational-bodily complex, governing the body of a celestial sphere, in a way that is analogous to the human soul's command of its own body, it attempts to imitate the supracelestial attributes by translating its apprehension of them into the eternal motion of the sphere. In this way the transcendent, supracelestial realm becomes manifest within space and time through celestial motion. The aim of this celestial motion is mimesis.

According to Avicenna, so subtle is the nature of supracelestial mimesis that the faculties of man, who is mired in the corporeal 'world of exile' (*'ālam al-ghurba*), are simply incapable of perceiving its reality. He goes on to reason that if a moving entity (*muḥarrīk*) perpetually engages in mimesis, then it follows that such activity would exert an effect on its body in much the same way that our bodies are effected by the passions (*infī 'ālāt*) of our souls.¹⁹²

Rāzī sees in Avicenna's account of the relationship between the supracelestial intellect and the celestial soul an implicit pedagogy. This he foregrounds in his commentary, comparing it to the situation in which:

¹⁹¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 448.

¹⁹² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 453-4.

...a student, when he desires to imitate his teacher <with respect> to some of his perfections so that he might realize some of those perfections renewably (*'alā al-tajaddud*), displays within his body specific passions (*infi 'ālāt makhṣūṣa*); in general bodily passions for the most part are subject to the passions of the soul. Thus it is not remote that bodily motion should follow the yearning of the celestial sphere to imitate the intellect.¹⁹³

3.6 Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, we have seen how the Eight Sabian Doctrines are justified using Avicennan and Barakātian arguments. To prove that the celestial spheres possess rational souls which perceive the universal and particular and which drive motion that is the cause of sublunary change, Rāzī, in theorizing on the Sabian creed, need only have relied on Avicennan arguments. As such, philosophically the Sabians would have been a purely 'Avicennan'. Were the Sabians intended as an anti-Avicennan construct, then this would have been then he need not have introduced the Barakātian doctrine of the perfect nature, the celestial causal origin of the human soul. The Avicennan theory of celestial noetics is designed precisely to provide a rational account of communication between human and celestial souls. Rāzī must have been motivated by another need which was, I contend, a need to integrate the Sabian doctrine of the perfect nature into a theoretical model which can account for the individual's communication with the celestial spirits by means of the perfect nature's intercession. It is an attempt at a philosophical justification for the belief that

¹⁹³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 454.

each human soul has the potential to establish a special connection with his celestial causal origin which can therefore act, by means of revelatory visions and inspired intuitions, as a personal hierophant providing instruction in the mysteries of the planets and how to address them.

Having examined the Eight Sabian Doctrines in light of the Avicennan and Barakātian sources from which they were adapted; and after exploring those implied ideas, such as the supracelestial intellects, on which they are predicated; we are now in a better position to theorize on the purpose of the planetary ascent ritual and its role in the soul's perfection, drawing the following conclusions:

1. The relationship between the intellect and the celestial soul is analogous to that which exists between the teacher and student whereby the former stands in relation to the latter as a model to be imitated;
2. The yearning of the celestial soul to actualize the perfection of the intellect is translated within space and time into the motion of its sphere – as such celestial motion represents the mimesis of the supracelestial intellects;
3. An unintended corollary of this mimesis through motion is that the celestial sphere transmits to the sublunary realm, by way of emanation, all manner of good (*khayrāt*) which are traces from the supracelestial realm;
4. Both the celestial and the human soul are rational: the *differentia* between the two is that the latter requires an elemental body to act. Thus if the latter were to transcend its reliance on the elemental body,

and came to act through a celestial body, then it would have ceased in essence being human, having transformed in essence into a celestial soul: the lesser rational soul would thereby have transcended its own limitations to become the greater rational soul. It is my contention that this is what is intended by Rāzī in his introduction to *al-Sirr*, where he reports that the masters of the occult knowledge all concur that it:

...guides you to the mysteries of the Higher and Lower Worlds; indeed it transforms you such that you become a witness unto the Spiritual Beings (*mushāhid li'l-rūhāniyāt*), their interlocutor – indeed one of their company and one of their like.¹⁹⁴

5. Reasoning analogically from celestial motion, understood as mimesis of the intellects, the planetary ascent ritual, whereby the adept with his entire body and soul, attempts a mimesis of the celestial spheres, the aim of which is to transcend the ontological rank of humanity and become like them;
6. For the Sabians, the celestial souls are proximate gods (*āliha qarība*): to become like them is thus to become a god;
7. Such an apotheosis represents the return of the individual human soul to its causal origin, the perfect nature, itself a celestial soul;
8. It is the perfect nature which initiates the human soul into the mysteries of the planetary ascent, and acts as the psychopomp guiding it to its apotheosis.

¹⁹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 3.

Chapter 4: The General Physics of Talismans

4.1 Introduction

Having gained an overview of the cosmological and astrological beliefs that inform it, we are now better equipped to understand the Sabian talismanic craft. The definition is introduced by the word “qālū” (they said). Precisely who “they” are is not stated, but they can be presumed to be the “masters of this knowledge” (*āshāb hādhā al-‘ilm*) who extolled the virtue of occult knowledge and power in the introduction.¹⁹⁵ As we have already seen, the purpose of the talisman, as stated in the definition, is:

...the blending of heavenly active forces with elemental passive forces, for the sake of being empowered (*li-ajli al-tamakkun min*) to make manifest that which runs contrary to <the divinely mandated> convention of nature (*al-‘āda*) <which determines the usual sequence of cause and effect> or to prevent from occurring that which is consonant with it (*li-izhār mā yukhālif al-‘āda aw li’l-man ‘ min mā yuwāfiq-hā*).¹⁹⁶

The ensuing detailed investigation (*taḥqīq*) of the metaphysical principles which underlie the working of the talisman is structured around two premises. The first asserts the reality of heavenly forces which actively determine the generation and corruption of phenomena in the sublunary world – these

¹⁹⁵Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 3.

¹⁹⁶Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7. This definition of talismans is recycled in the *al-Maṭālib*: ‘Said the philosophers and Sabians: *talisman* is an expression for the blending of heavenly active forces with elemental passive forces, for the sake of being empowered (*li-ajli al-tamakkun min*) to make manifest that which runs contrary to <the divinely mandated> convention of nature <which determines the usual sequence of cause and effect> or to prevent from occurring that which is consonant with it (*li-izhār mā yukhālif al-‘āda aw li’l-man ‘ min mā yuwāfiq-hā*) (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib*, 7, p.149.)

heavenly forces of course are the planets and their spheres; the second proposition is that for such celestial agency to act with any efficacy in this regard, their influence must be received by appropriately disposed sublunary conditions. It is the first premise which receives the most detailed proof, the final conclusion of which is that whilst sublunary phenomena are ultimately caused by the pre-eternal necessarily existent, its influence is mediated through the celestial motion by which the 'active heavenly forces' are characterized. The ontological gap in the causal chain which leads from the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent by virtue of His essence to temporally originated sublunary phenomena is thus filled by the celestial spheres which are the pre-eternal and necessarily existent effects of the former, and the proximate causes of the generation and corruption of the latter.

The proof is a highly reworked and condensed adaptation of the first part of an argument for the eternity of the world, found in the first chapter of book nine of the *Metaphysics* of Avicenna's *al-Shifā*. Here, Avicenna argues for the existence of motion, deriving from the Creator (*al-khāliq*), which neither has beginning in time, nor end: namely that of the celestial spheres. The problem to which this is the solution is highlighted by Avicenna when he considers how temporally generated sublunary phenomena can ultimately be caused by the Necessarily Existent despite the fact that:

...the Existent Necessary in Himself is a necessary existent in all His aspects and that it is impossible for a state which did not exist previously to commence for Him. With <this>, it became evident to you that the

cause in <terms of> itself necessitates the effect, so that, if it is permanent, it necessitates the effect permanently.¹⁹⁷

The most curious and significant aspect of the proof as it is reworked in *al-Sirr* is that, in the course of demonstrating its final conclusion, it proceeds by exploring and eliminating all other seemingly possible logical disjuncts except one: the possibility that all that occurs as a result of the pre-eternal, necessarily existent, in fact occurs within time. This of course would be entirely compatible with belief in God as an agent possessed of volition who creates in time – the God of Rāzī. But now let us turn briefly to Avicenna’s argument in 9:1 of the *Metaphysics* in order to understand the philosophical concerns which inform the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*.

4.2 Avicenna’s *Metaphysics* 9:1

The aim of *Metaphysics* 9 is to prove the existence of motion which has no beginning in time. This motion is that which drives the celestial spheres and is the principle for the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena in time. And since the heavens are the product of the divine emanative process, it is a proof which accounts for the Necessarily Existent as the ultimate metaphysical principle of sublunary reality, whilst preserving the following two crucial principles: firstly, being necessarily existent in all his aspects, the Existent Necessary in himself cannot undergo change: thus he cannot change from a state in which he is not creating to one in which he is. Secondly, a cause –

¹⁹⁷ Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, p. 300.

since it is a cause – necessitates its effect in a way that is synectic: by its own essence without any temporal delay.¹⁹⁸

Now, since it is characterized by matter, and temporally originated, Avicenna argues that the terrestrial phenomenon comes into being as an effect in time either: (a) because its cause comes into existence, in which case, no time can intervene between the generation of the effect and the coming into being of its immediate efficient cause; or (b) because its immediate efficient cause has become close to the receptive cause in which the phenomenon is generated. As for (a), the reason that there can be no delay between the coming into being of the cause and the generation of the effect is that the necessity of another temporally originated being other than the cause would necessarily follow. And so, argues Avicenna:

That originated thing would then become the proximate cause. If the matter is repetitively prolonged in this manner, then there would necessarily ensue causes and temporal events coming all at once that are infinite and would necessarily occur simultaneously. But this is something for which we have known the principle dictating its refutation. It thus remains that the temporal causes do not <come about> all at once.¹⁹⁹

With (a) eliminated in this way, Avicenna affirms that the principles which govern the generation of sublunary phenomena are determined by the alternating proximity and distance of immediate efficient causes (*'ilal fā 'iliyya*)

¹⁹⁸ Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, p. 300.

¹⁹⁹ Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, pp. 300-1.

to and from receptive causes (*'ilal qābiliyya*). This can only come about through motion. This motion must be continuous, for if at any point it reached a moment of stasis, then another cause would be required for its resumption, leading to an infinite chain of regress. This being the case, it must be circular. This continuous, circular, pre-eternal motion of the celestial spheres, consists of an endless series of contiguous movements, originated in time, which act as the proximate efficient causes of terrestrial change. Being both pre-eternal, and consisting of individual movements, celestial motion provides the necessary ontological link between the eternal, beginning-less Necessarily Existent and the generation and corruption of innumerable sublunary phenomena.²⁰⁰

4.3 Theory of Talismans in *al-Sirr*

4.3.1 Proof of the heavenly forces

Now if celestial motion is the proximate efficient cause of sublunary phenomena, the talismanic craft represents the means by which such influence might be directed in order to act on terrestrial forces to bring about change in accordance with the practitioner's own objective. So now let us turn to the proof for the first premise of the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*: the positive affirmation of active heavenly forces as principles of sublunary change. It relies on the demonstration of three propositions:

- (1) The ultimate cause of temporal sublunary phenomena must be the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent;

²⁰⁰ Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, pp.301-2.

- (2) That to which the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in pre-eternity;
- (3) Pre-eternal celestial motion mediates between the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent and the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena.

We shall now explore the demonstration of each of these three propositions, the last of which is dependent on the previous two.

4.3.1 (a) The ultimate cause of temporal sublunary phenomena must be the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent

This proof begins by exploring whether the causes of ‘temporally originated phenomena (*ḥawādith*) in this elemental world’ are themselves temporally originated or pre-eternal (*qadīma*). The first disjunct can of course be eliminated on the grounds that if they are themselves:

...temporally originated then they would need yet other causes, thus giving rise to an *argumentum ad infinitum* (*tasalsul*) and that is absurd, because an influencing cause (*al-sabab al-mu’aththir*) must exist together with that which is caused (*al-musabbab*), so if that which influences the existence of each temporally originated phenomenon is yet another temporally originated phenomenon, and so on without end, then it would be necessary for those causes and effects which have no end to occur in one instant (*daf’atan wāhidatan*).²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.7. Rāzī discusses the generation of temporally originated phenomena in the elemental world in terms of ‘causes’ (*asbāb*). When we encounter the heavily adapted version of this discussion in *al-Maṭālib*, Rāzī speaks of their ‘cause’ (*sabab*).

The Avicennan account of causation demands that the effect necessarily arises simultaneously with the existence of its complete and sufficient cause.²⁰²

This being the case, the entire chain of originated causes and effects must spring into existence in one instant. But the sum total of the members of this hypothetically endless chain must ultimately end in that which, being not merely possible as they are, but rather necessarily existent, stands outside of the aggregate which they form. And since this chain finds its end in the necessarily existent, it cannot therefore be held to be endless without contradiction. So referring to the set of temporally originated causes and effects, it is reasoned that:

... <their> aggregate (*al-majmū`*) is possible and temporally originated both as a whole and in terms of every one of its parts; and every possible is originated (*muḥdath*) and every possible has a cause which is different from it. And so that aggregate, in its entirety, and in each one of its parts, needs a cause. And that thing which is different from the aggregate of possible things and from each part of that aggregate is, inevitably, not a possible. And so it <must be affirmed> that all possibles end with the necessarily existent, and the assertion of an endless chain is proved false (*baṭūla al-qawl bi'l-tasalsul*).²⁰³

5.3.1 (b) That to which the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in pre-eternity

²⁰² McGinnis, *Avicenna*, p. 199. For a full discussion of Avicenna's position that every cause coexists with its effect, see *the Metaphysics of the Healing*, Book 6, Chapter 2, pp. 201-5.

²⁰³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7.

Having established that all possible and originated things end with a necessarily existent eternal cause, the question is posed whether everything which arises as a result of the influence of this eternal <cause> occurs: (1) pre-eternally (*fī'l-azal*) or (2) within time. Included within the latter of these two logical disjuncts are positions opposed to the doctrine of the eternity of the world, and thus closer to an Ash'arī perspective:

...included in this disjunction (*yadkhulu fī hādihā al-taq̄sīm*) is the position of the one who asserts that a <given> originated phenomenon was only created (*khuliqa*) at this time because its creation (*khalq*) then was more fitting (*aṣlah*) than its creation at another time; or because its creation was dependent on the arrival of a specific time, either actual or supposed (*muḥaqqaq aw muqaddar*). And so for all these positions it is true that everything which arises as a result of the influence <of this eternal cause> does not occur pre-eternally (*fī'l-azal*).²⁰⁴

As was mentioned previously, this latter logical disjunct is not subjected to analysis and then either elimination or affirmation, at the very least, as a possibility: it is simply ignored. So assuming the truth of the former disjunct as it does, the argument then proceeds to prove that all that arises as a result of the influence of the necessarily existent -- which, as will subsequently be revealed include the celestial spheres -- must necessarily be ordered after it ontologically in pre-eternity (*wajīb al-tartīb fī al-azl*). This simply must be the case, because the only logical alternatives to this would be either: (1) an

²⁰⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7.

impossible ontological ordering (*mumtani` al-tartīb*); or (2) merely a possible ontological ordering (*mumkin al-tartīb*).²⁰⁵

Of course, the first of these two alternatives can be summarily dismissed. For were such ontological ordering of all that arises from the necessarily existent impossible, then it must follow that the necessarily existent gives rise to nothing and produces no influence at all (*laysa bi-mu'aththir aṣlan*). This would lead to an absurd contradiction of the original postulation that it does indeed produce an influence.

Less straightforward is the task of disproving that the ontological ordering of all that arises from the necessarily existent is merely possible, involving as it does the elimination of three hypothetical alternatives to the way in which such possible ontological ordering could be realized: (2a) the necessarily existent is sometimes the source of an effect and sometimes not; (2b) everything which should arise from the influence (*mu'aththiriyya*) of the necessarily existent does not in fact occur; and (2c) the necessarily existent changes from being an influencer from which no occurrent arises to one from which occurrents do arise. *Reductiones ad absurdum* are deployed to dismiss all three of these hypothetical realizations of possible ontological ordering.

Thus, if 2(a) were correct:

...the distinction between the time during which the influencer becomes in actuality a source for the effect (*maṣdar li'l-athar*) from the time during which it does not proceed thusly either depends: (2(a)(i)) on the

²⁰⁵ 'So if we say that everything which arises as a result of the influence <of this eternal cause> occurs pre-eternally (*fi'l-azal*) it would follow that the effect would necessarily be ordered after it <ontologically> because the effect (*athar*), were it not so <necessarily> ordered, then either such ordering (*tartīb*) would be impossible (*mumtani`*) or possible.' Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7.

superimposition of an additional attribute on it (*inḍimām qayd ilayhi*) or (2(a)(ii)) it does not so depend.²⁰⁶

Both disjuncts are invalid. 2(a)(i) is eliminated by the following *reductio ad absurdum*: before the superimposition of the additional attribute the influencer would not be complete in its influencing capacity, thus contradicting the original postulation that the influencer is indeed an influencer. Its companion disjunct 2(a)(ii) is eliminated on the ground that it offends ‘the principle of inferring the the preponderator from possibility’, since if it were accepted as true then it must be assumed that the actual existence of the possible has ‘been made preponderant without anything at all to cause such preponderance’ (*fa-qad tarajjaḥa al-mumkin min ghayr al-murajjih*).²⁰⁷

(2b) is immediately discounted on account of the contradiction to which it immediately gives rise:

If we were to say that everything which should arise due to influence (*mu’aththiriyya*) does not in fact occur, then if that cause were to endure forever (*in istamarra dhālika al-sabab abadan*) then it must be that it would never become that which produces influence (*mu’aththir*) – but we have just postulated that it is in fact a producer of influence pre-eternally (*fi al-azal*). This is a contradiction.²⁰⁸

The hypothetical situation of (2c) posits that, from a situation in which nothing arises from the influence of the necessarily existent, as in (2b), it undergoes change such that occurrences do indeed arise.

²⁰⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²⁰⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 7.

²⁰⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 7-8.

Such change could only occur in the necessarily existent due to a superimposed attribute (*qayd*). The question therefore arises: was the superimposition of this attribute due to a cause or not? If not:

...then a possible would have <in actuality> happened without an influencer (*fa-qad waqa 'a al-mumkin la 'an mu'aththir.*)²⁰⁹

This would lead to yet another contradiction. So, assuming that this change in the necessarily existent were indeed due to a cause, then the inquiry would be trapped in a chain of infinite regress which:

...would arise either from the aggregate of causes and effects which would exist in one instant – and that is what we have <already> refuted – or it would arise in such a way that each member <of the set of causes and effects> would be preceded by another, without <ever reaching> a beginning.²¹⁰

And so having assumed that, with no explicit justification, the occurrent to which the pre-eternal necessarily existent gives rise occurs also pre-eternally, the inquiry, eliminating impossible and possible ontological ordering by means of the *reductiones ad absurdum* we have encountered, reaches the conclusion that this process must be one of necessary ontological ordering.

5.3.1 (c) Pre-eternal celestial motion mediates between the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent and the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena

²⁰⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

Thus far, the argument has sought to demonstrate two propositions: (a) the ultimate cause of temporal sublunary phenomena must be the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent; and (b) that to which the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in pre-eternity. Now taken as proven, the argument seeks to deploy these two propositions to account for how the influence of the Pre-Eternal, Necessarily Existent, as the ultimate source of sublunary phenomena, can be mediated. For this purpose, it assumes that the:

...eternal, essentially necessary, producer of influence (*al-mu'aththir al-qadīm al-wājib li-dhātihi*) is also essentially emanative (*fayyād ayḍan li-dhātihi*).²¹¹

This being the case, a mechanism is required to account for how the unchanging simplex that is the Necessarily Existent acts as the ultimate emanative principle which produces the successive generation and corruption of innumerable sublunary phenomena. The solution, of course, is to be found in celestial motion, the process of which constitutes an endless series of individual, contiguous, temporally originated, planetary movements, such that:

... each originated phenomenon [i.e. planetary movement] is preceded by another such that the cessation of the prior (*inqiḍā' al-mutaqaddim*) is a condition for the emanation of the posterior (*sharṭ li-fayyādān al-muta'akhhir*).²¹²

Motion, it is averred, provides the best paradigm for how the cessation of one temporally originated phenomenon would be a condition for the generation of

²¹¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²¹² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

the next. Two different examples are adduced to illustrate how this might be the case, the one representative of natural motion, the other of motion driven by continuous volition. The former is illustrated by:

... the clod of earth (*madarat*) which is thrown upwards <and> returns to the earth by its own weight. So that which necessitates this movement from the *terminus a quo* to the *terminus ad quem* (*min awwal al-masāfa ilā ākhirihā*) is that weight. It only necessitates the movement of the body from the second point (*al-ḥayz al-thānī*) to the third point because the previous movement has caused it to reach the second point. So the occurrence of the first part of the movement and its cessation is a condition for the possibility that the weight becomes the cause of the movement of the body from the second point to the third. Such is the case with respect to all parts which constitute movement.²¹³

If the state of the earthen clod as it leaves the hand of the thrower and proceeds in its skyward ascent, and its state as it travels in its descent, are understood analogously as two distinct but contiguous, temporally originated, planetary movements, then the weight of the earthen clod is the natural, non-volitional cause of the latter, and the cessation of the first state is a pre-condition for the efficacy of the earthen clod in its consequent generation of the second state. The analogy is extended to human volitional movement. Thus:

... he who wants to go and visit a friend of his, this volition is that which exerts an influence in moving the body from that place to that friend except that the influence of that volition in bringing about the second

²¹³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

step is preceded by the occurrence of the first step and its cessation: in this way each preceding step is a condition for the empowering (*imkān*) of the influence of that volition on the occurrence of the succeeding step, <following> this way of ordering, until the final end of the distance.²¹⁴

Just as the cessation of the earthen clod's ascent is a pre-condition for the efficacy of its weight to produce the effect of its descent, so the cessation of a man's first step on his journey is a pre-condition for the efficacy of his volition to bring about the second step. For the continuous process of sublunary generation and corruption: 'there must be an eternal, perpetual motion (*ḥaraka sarmadiyya dā'ima*) mediating between the first principle and these originated phenomena.'²¹⁵

Motion, of course, not only characterizes bodies but also requires space. Thus, if this perpetual motion were rectilinear it would require infinite space (*ab'ād ghayr mutanāhiya*), a logical consequence which Avicennan cosmology would find absurd.²¹⁶ And so the argument is driven by the necessity to postulate the existence of: '...a body, the motion of which is circular, namely the sphere of the starless sphere (*al-falak*).'²¹⁷ Now, since it is a corporeal simplex, and:

...the <geometrical> relations (*nisab*) which arise between similar parts are similar; and similar matters, in the completeness of their quiddity (*fī tamām al-māhiya*) cannot be causes of different matters,

²¹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²¹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²¹⁶ '...it is impossible for this perpetual motion to be rectilinear (*mustaqīma*) for otherwise, the existence of infinite space would necessarily follow and that would be absurd'. Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²¹⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

then its perpetual circular motion cannot by itself act as the cause of multiple and diverse sublunary effects. Rather, they are caused by the complex web of geometrical relations, which forms as a result of the eternal rotation of the celestial spheres relative to each other, each of which contains a planet possessed of its own unique nature, moving at its own unique speed:

...the bodies of the spheres <contain> different natures, and these bodies, by reason of <the fact that> their <geometrical> relations and configurations (*tashakkulāt*) differ such that it is possible that these configurations are the principles for the occurrence of diverse originated phenomena in this world. So those bodies, <which are possessed of> different natures, <and > which are fixed in the bodies of the celestial spheres, are the planets (*al-kawākib*). So it is established that the proximate principles of the coming to be of originated phenomena in the world of generation and corruption, are the planetary applications (*ittiṣālāt al-kawākib*).²¹⁸

At this point, Rāzī makes explicit the connection between the talismanic craft and astrolatry, commenting that it is on account of their belief in the planetary applications as principles of sublunary change, that:

...the philosophers and the Sabians, have asserted the *ilāhiyya* of these planets, devoting themselves to their worship (*‘ibāda*), adopting for each one of them a specific temple and a particular idol (*ṣanam mu‘ayyan*), devoting themselves to their service.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

4.3.2 Passive receptive forces

As was made clear in the initial definition for which this account is an elaboration, the talismanic craft works with both active heavenly forces and passive sublunary forces. The latter must be suitably disposed (*mutahayyi'a*) to receive, as the result of a particular planetary configuration (*tashakkul gharīb*), the kind of celestial form (*hay'a*) which corresponds to the talisman master's intended effect:

Moreover, they held that the active principle is not enough for the occurrence of the effect. Rather, it is necessary for <passive> recipients (*qawābil*) to be present together with it; rather <all> conditions must be met, and obstacles removed. For perhaps an unusual <celestial> configuration (*tashakkul gharīb*) might occur <acting> on the matter of the Lower World which is most apt for the bringing about of unusual originated phenomena within the matter of the Lower World. So if sublunary matter is not suitably disposed (*mutahayyi'a*) for the reception of that form (*hay'a*) from the agents of influence of the Higher World, then that form (*hay'a*) would not come about.²²⁰

Certain impediments or unfulfilled conditions may thwart the suitable disposition of sublunary matter. But the expertise of the talisman master allows him not only to predict that alignment of the celestial configuration most propitious for his intended goal, but also to prepare sublunary matter appropriate for the reception of that influence; to remove any impediments

²²⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 8-9.

thereof; and to set in place preparatory procedures (*mu'iddāt*) that will ensure the full realization of the desired astral emanation:

Moreover, the elapsing of that suitable disposition (*fawāt dhālika al-tahayyu'*) is sometimes on account of the <sublunary> matter being inhibited by encumbrances whilst at other times on account of the fact that certain conditions have not been met. But if we have been primed with foreknowledge (*taqdimā al-ma'rifa*) of the nature of that configuration, the time of its occurrence, and the nature of those things which are to be considered in the generation of the sublunary matter which is receptive to that influence, then we would be able to prepare the matter to receive that influence; to hold in abeyance those encumbrances by which it would be inhibited; and to procure the equipment (*taḥṣil al-mu'iddāt*) for it such that the emanation reaches completion.²²¹

Thus the master of talismans has a consummate understanding of the fundamental nature of causality in the cosmos. This allows him to identify both the perfect agent (*al-fā'il al-tāmm*), in the form of a celestial configuration, to facilitate his terrestrial objective, and the perfect sublunary circumstances for the reception of its influence:

Since it is firmly established that when a perfect agent (*al-fā'il al-tāmm*) meets a perfect passive recipient (*al-munfa'il al-tāmm*) a perfect <resultant> action occurs, it is the master of talismans who knows – to

²²¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 9. As we will discover when we examine what *al-Sirr* says concerning the practical method of casting a talisman, these preparatory procedures take the form of astral ritual involving objects of planetary correspondence.

the furthest extent of human capability - the active heavenly forces, their simple and composite aspects; it is he who knows that which corresponds to each sublunary recipient and knows the correct preparatory procedures to prepare (*wa-ya'rifu al-mu'iddat li-yu'iddahā*), and the encumbrances to avoid.²²²

Recalling the initial definition of talisman, the account concludes that the man who has mastered this knowledge and craft:

... is able to generate that which breaches <the divinely mandated> convention of nature (*al-'āda*) to repel that which is consonant with it, by bringing the passive receiver into close proximity with the agent (*yakūn al-insān mumkinan min istiḥdāth mā yakruqu al-'āda wa-min daf'i mā yuwāfiqū-hā bi-taqrīb al-munfa'il min al-fā'il*). This is the meaning of the saying of Ptolemy that knowledge of the stars is from you and from them. This is the doctrine of the Sabians and the philosophers on the reality of talismans.²²³

4.4 *Al-Maṭālib* 7 – On Talismans

The account of talismans in *al-Sirr* is modified and adapted in the *al-Maṭālib*. But whilst, like the former, the latter concentrates on proving how heavenly active forces determine the generation and corruption of sublunary phenomena, it is nevertheless unconcerned with the discussion of the Necessarily Existent as the emanative source of those forces and as the ultimate cause of sublunary reality. Rather its point of departure is to ask what the proximate efficient cause of

²²² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 9.

²²³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 9.

change in the terrestrial world is. Thus it dismisses the possibility that this cause can be a pre-eternal, beginning-less existent (*mawjūd qadīm azalī*), for were this the case, then its efficient causal influence would either be: (1) dependent on a temporally originated condition, thus giving rise to an argument of infinite regress which merely begs the question; or (2) not so dependent, in which case, its effect would also be pre-eternal, which is obviously absurd. So the proximate efficient cause of change in the terrestrial world must also be temporally originated.²²⁴

This of course would lead to a beginning-less, infinite sequence of temporally originated causes.²²⁵ There are two ways in which this could occur. Firstly, it could occur by way of an eternal spiritual existent, other than God, which perpetually moves from object of intellection to object of intellection. The generation of terrestrial phenomena are the result of the cognitive activity of a number of such spiritual entities whose existence is of such a sublime ontological order. So to bring about contra-natural effects in this world, it is their aid which must be enlisted.²²⁶ Secondly, it could occur by way of

²²⁴ Rāzī, *Al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 151.

²²⁵ ‘This argument of infinite regress would occur on one of two grounds. One is that all causes and effects (*jami‘ al-asbāb wa’l-musabbabāt*) would occur in one instant (*daf‘atan wāhida*) and we have already made clear in the demonstration of the Necessarily Existent by virtue of its essence that this is impossible. The other (ground) is that each one would be preceded by another, without beginning (*lā ilā awwal*) – and this is the unavoidable truth.’ Rāzī, *Al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 149-150.

²²⁶ ‘Two possibilities might explain these temporally originated phenomena. One is that there should occur in reality a spiritual existent (*mawjūd rūḥānī*) which perpetually moves from one object of intellection to another (*yakūn dā‘īman muntaqilan min ma‘qūl ilā ma‘qūl*) and from perception to perception (*min idrāk ilā idrāk*), and (so) in accordance with those successive acts of perception and cohering acts of conceptualization (*bi-ḥasab tilka al-idrākāt al-muta‘āqiba wa’l-taṣawwūrāt al-mutalāṣiqā*) temporally originated phenomena come to be in this world. The spiritual existent must be eternal, without beginning or end, everlasting (*azalī abadī sarmadī*); and it must be other than God. Since it is established that the Necessarily Existent by virtue of its essence is necessarily existent in every respect (*min jami‘ jihātihi*) then it would be impossible for it to undergo change. So that which is possessed of these ever-changing perceptions must be something other than God – exalted is He. So it is established that it is necessary to maintain that the existence of lofty spirits (*arwāḥ ‘āliya*) which govern the conditions of this world; and in

everlasting, uninterrupted, circular corporeal motion, namely, that of the celestial spheres.²²⁷

Since these two ways in which this infinite chain of originated causes can be conceived are not mutually exclusive, Rāzī reports that the philosophers found it more credible to combine them, maintaining that it is through the celestial sphere, being driven by a governing soul, the conscious subject of endless acts of eternal intellection, that infinite circular motion is realized:

Then the philosophers said: It is more apt (*al-awlā*) to combine the first and second disjuncts, such that the substance of the celestial sphere is like the body, and the substance of that spirit is like the soul (*jawhar al-falak ka'l-badan wa jawhar dhālika al-rūḥ ka'l-nafs*), and the perpetual, moving acts of intellection which belong to that spiritual substance (*al-ta 'aqqulāt al-muntaqila al-dā'ima li-dhālika al-jawhar al-rūḥānī*) necessitate the motions of these corporeal spheres (*kurrāt jismāniyya*), their sum total (*majmū'*) being the causes (*asbāb*) of the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena in this world. So is it established by way of this

this way no attempt to bring in being contra-natural phenomenon (*gharīb*) can be successful except by seeking the aid of these spirits (*al-isti'āna bi-tilka al-arwāḥ*). Rāzī, *Al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 150.

²²⁷ As for the second disjunct [i.e. explaining the generation of temporally originated phenomena], it is that there should occur an everlasting perpetual corporeal motion (*ḥaraka jismāniyya sarmadiyya dā'ima*), free of beginning or interruption (*mubarra'a 'an al-mabda' wa'l-maqta'*). So we say: this motion is either rectilinear or circular (*mustaqīm aw mustadīr*). The first disjunct is false because either this motion would extend without end (*tamtadd ilā ghayr al-nihāya*) thus necessitating the existence of limitless dimensions without end – and that is absurd – or it would return <on itself> at which time there would occur between the end of the outgoing <motion> and the beginning of the returning <motion> a <moment> of stasis (*sukūn*). Since it is established that between the two motions there must be a <moment> of stasis, at which point, this motion is <no longer> perpetual, free of interruption, then so it is <also> established that every rectilinear motion is interrupted. So the motion must be circular. This demonstrates that the first proximate principle for the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena (*al-mabda' al-awwal al-qarīb li-ḥudūth al-hawādith*) in this world is the circular motion which obtains in the celestial bodies (*al-ajrām al-falakiyya*). Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 150-1.

explanation that the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena in this world is contingent and dependent (*manūṭ wa-marbūṭa*) on circular celestial motion, free of interruption and change.²²⁸

Like the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*, that in *al-Maṭālib* explains the incalculable variety which is to be found in sublunary reality in terms of the endlessly shifting geometric relations and applications between the planets, each of which, being centred in its own respective sphere, has a different nature and quiddity from its fellow heavenly wanderers:

...the celestial bodies are simplexes (*basā'it*) and the postulated parts of a simple sphere (*al-ajzā al-muftaraḍa fī al-kurra al-basīṭa*) are homogeneous in both nature and quiddity (*mutashābiha bi'l-ṭab' wa'l-māhiyya*); and causes which share similarity in nature and quiddity do not yield aught but knowledge items which resemble each other (*ma'lūmāt mutamāthila*). And so the temporally originated phenomena of this world would necessarily be the same (*mutasāwiya*) and that is false. Since this is false, there must, in the celestial bodies, occur bodies which are different in nature and quiddity – and those entities must be mobile such that, on account of their different motions, different <geometrical> relations arise; and those different <geometrical> relations are principles for the coming to be of the different temporally originated phenomena in the world of generation and corruption. And it is known that these different bodies which are bound by the substances of the celestial spheres (*markūza fī jawāhir al-aflāk*) are naught but the planets (*al-kawākib*). Thus

²²⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 151.

is it established with what we have mentioned: that the principles of the temporally originated phenomena which come to be in this world are naught but the different planetary applications (*al-ittiṣālāt al-kawkabiyya al-mukhtalifa*).²²⁹

To briefly sum up the account in *al-Maṭālib*, its explanation of talismans is largely dependent on that which is to be found in *al-Sirr*. However, its most important difference is its emphasis on the the ensouled nature of the celestial spheres and planets on whose ever-shifting geometric relations sublunary reality depends. Whilst this is a doctrine which the philosophers and Sabians, as they are represented in *al-Sirr*, espouse, it is not integrated into the account of talismans but is introduced only later when describing their general beliefs.²³⁰ Furthermore, the explanation of talismans in *al-Maṭālib* omits the account in *al-Sirr*, illustrated by the examples of the earthen clod's ascent and descent after it has been thrown in the air, and of the man walking to visit his friend, of how

²²⁹ Rāzī, *Al-Maṭālib*, 7, p. 151. Rāzī reports that this rational demonstration for active heavenly forces is supplemented by a rhetorical proof which infers the efficacy of the planets in causing sublunary phenomena from the observable fact that the sun determines the seasons and the alternation of the night and the day. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that knowledge of the stars has been maintained by human culture since time immemorial:

‘As for the second proof –which is the rhetorical proof – it is that they said: ‘we have mentioned many instances which show that the conditions <which obtain> in this world are dependent on the conditions of the Sun in the quality of its motion within the Zodiacal belt <minṭaqa al-burūj> for it is for this reason that the Sun sometimes becomes northerly and sometimes southerly and it is on account of this variation that the seasons occur; and it is by reason of them that conditions in this world vary. Moreover, it is by reason of the rising and the setting of the sun in the space of a day that the conditions of this world vary. This inductive reasoning is strong and a full explanation of the dependence (*istinād*) of the conditions of this world on the motions of the planets. This explanation finds corroboration in another, which is that since the beginning of time (*min qadīm al-dahr*) people assiduously applied themselves to knowledge of the stars and relied on them. For you observe that for every <field of> knowledge there is an inception and a man who is the first to penetrate it deeply, except <however> for metaphysics (*al-ilm al-ilāhī*) and knowledge of the stars. For you will never find <a single period in> history except that you see these two <fields> of knowledge existed before it. So were this knowledge false, then it would have been impossible for all the peoples of the world (*aḥl al-dunyā*) universally to have applied themselves assiduously to this (field of) knowledge, relying on its authority, from time immemorial (*min al-dahr al-dāhir*) up until this day. These considerations provide clear explanations of the truth of this knowledge and God knows best’ (Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 152).

²³⁰ Their beliefs are epitomized in eight doctrines which are treated in *al-Sirr* 4:1.

celestial motion can act as a cause of originated phenomena. To understand the significance of these two illustrations in configuring how celestial causation operates, we must turn to Rāzī's *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*.

4.5 *Al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*

The account of heavenly active forces in the general explanation of talismans in *al-Sirr* also appears in modified form in Rāzī's *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, in a chapter entitled: 'On circular motion as the cause of the coming to be of temporally originated phenomena.'²³¹ But whilst their respective proofs establishing celestial motion as the proximate efficient cause of sublunary phenomena, display the same structure, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* exhibits certain elaborations which will enrich our understanding of the explanation in *al-Sirr*.

So, having eliminated as logically possible the pre-eternal nature of the proximate efficient causes of sublunary phenomena, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* asserts that, like their terrestrial effects, they too must be originated in time.²³²

As such, an infinite chain of temporally originated causes and effects would thus ensue. Since the sum total of such an infinite chain could not occur in one

²³¹ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith* 1, pp. 627-629.

²³² 'The proximate causes of temporally originated phenomena (*ḥawādith*) must be temporally originated (*ḥāditha*) since if they were pre-eternal (*qadīma*) then their pre-eternity would be a necessary consequence of the pre-eternity of their causes. For if the causes <of the temporally originated phenomena> existed whilst they were non-existent, then by virtue of the existence of the causes, the existence of the effects (*al-musabbabāt*) would <merely> be possible (*mumkina*); so their existence, when they are brought into being, would require an extra cause – and <so their causes> would not then be causes. This is a contradiction. A fully detailed explanation of this point has already been presented to you in the Chapter on Causes (*bāb al-'ilal*). Thus it is established that the proximate cause of originated phenomena is <itself> originated' (Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 627.)

instant, it must be concluded that its occurrence proceeds sequentially, whereby each individual member of the chain is the effect of that which precedes it and the cause of that by which it is succeeded.²³³

Therefore, reasons the account in *al-Mabāḥith*, this infinite sequence of temporally originated phenomena, which act as the proximate efficient causes of sublunary originated phenomena, must occur either as:

- (1) disconnected instants of existence (*ḥawādith mutafāṣila āniya al-wujūd*)
- or (2) <as part of> a temporal continuum of existence (*zamāniyya al-wujūd*).²³⁴

Not only does the account find absurd the assertion of a continuous succession of disconnected, non-contiguous instants (*tatālī al-ānāt*) to which the acceptance of the first of these logical disjuncts would give rise, but it also dismisses the proposition on the grounds that it entails an impossible contradiction since:

... assuming such a continuous succession of instants, each instant would be disconnected <from the others> so the preceding <instant> would not necessarily end with the succeeding <instant> and so it would not be a cause for <the latter> - but it was indeed posited to be thus.²³⁵

Thus with elimination of the first of these logical disjuncts, the second, understood as entailing a continuous temporal flow, is affirmed. And so if the temporally originated causes of sublunary events occurred:

²³³ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 627.

²³⁴ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 627.

²³⁵ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 627.

...as a continuous temporal flow (*zamāniyya sayyāla*), then this would be motion. Thus is it established that originated phenomena do not come into being except by <means of> motion.²³⁶

The causal link between the temporally originated cause and the temporally originated sublunary effect is conceived of as a geometrical relationship between the former and the latter which, being geometric, is determined by space. And since the endless contiguous sequence of individual instances of the former determines continuity in the generation and corruption of instances of the latter, the constant flow of terrestrial reality is determined just as much by time. Thus:

...if something were to occur in a body which did not hitherto exist, then between the cause (*al-illa*) of that thing and the body <in which it has occurred> a relation (*nisba*) has arisen which did not previously exist. So, there must be a movement which necessitates <between the cause and the body a certain> proximity after <a certain> distance, or <a certain> distance after <a certain> proximity, or a juxtaposition or contiguity, by which is secured the continuity of originated phenomena (*ittiṣāl al-ḥawādith*).²³⁷

A temporally originated instance of motion brings about the geometric relationship between efficient cause and recipient cause appropriate to a certain effect in the latter. This geometric relationship is determined by the distance of the former from the latter, and its position in relation to it.

²³⁶ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 628.

²³⁷ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 628.

The account in *al-Mabāḥith* goes further than *al-Sirr* in elaborating on the nature of the temporally originated efficient cause which generates sublunary phenomena:

...the cause (*al-‘illa*) can either be a preparatory cause (*mu‘idda*) or one which exerts an influence (*mu‘aththira*). When a preparatory cause, it can precede the effect (*ma‘lūl*) because it is not exerting an influence on the effect; rather it brings the effect into proximity <to its cause> such that it can issue from the cause (*tuqarribu al-ma‘lūl ilā ḥaythu yumkinu ṣudūruhu ‘an al-‘illa*). When <acting as a cause which> exerts an influence then it must be linked to the effect (*yajib muqāranatuhā li’l-athar*).²³⁸

There are two types of efficient cause, the one preparatory (*mu‘idda*), the other influential (*mu‘aththira*). To bring about a certain effect, the former ‘prepares’ the material, or the receptive cause, to receive the influence (*ta’tḥīr*) of the latter. The distinction between the two kinds of efficient cause is that between the essentially ordered – or metaphysical efficient – cause, and the temporally ordered – or natural efficient cause. The former bestows forms by way of emanation on a material substrate which has been appropriately prepared by means of motion and change produced by natural efficient causes, to give specific existence to species forms.²³⁹

When the influencing metaphysical cause exists together with a suitably receptive material substrate, the effect must occur, without any delay. This is to be contrasted with the relation that exists between a temporally ordered, preparatory cause and its effect, such as the dependence of offspring on the

²³⁸ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 628.

²³⁹ *Avicenna*, Jon McGinnis, p. 193.

existence of its parents: ‘essentially ordered causes must exist simultaneously with their effect, whereas temporally ordered causes need not.’²⁴⁰

To illustrate the difference between the two kinds of efficient cause, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* deploys the same two examples we have already encountered in *al-Sirr* to explain how motion, whether natural or volitional, enables efficient causality. In *al-Mabāḥith*, the example adduced to illustrate how this might work with natural motion replaces the clod of earth with ‘the weighty object.’²⁴¹ And instead of visiting a friend as he does in *al-Sirr*, the pedestrian man in the *Mabāḥith*, who illustrates how volitional motion enables efficient causality, is engaged in the more pious activity of pilgrimage.

Brief consideration of these two examples will yield a degree of insight into the nature of the causal complex which generates an effect according to the Avicennan model which Rāzī is presenting. Turning to the example of the weighty object, it is the transition between its initial ascent and subsequent descent which commands our attention.²⁴² The effect of the descent is the product of two efficient causes, the one preparatory, namely the completion of the ascending motion, and the other which is influential (*mu’aththir*), namely the weight of the object. The completion of the ascending motion is a necessary prior condition for the efficacy of the object’s weight to exert its influence to produce the descending motion:

²⁴⁰ Avicenna, Jon McGinnis, p. 193.

²⁴¹ ‘A paradigm for that in natural motion is that the weighty object (*al-thaqīl*), by reason of its ipseity (*fi huwiyyatihi*), does not reach the furthest point of <a given> distance (*ḥadd min ḥudūd al-masāfa*) except that that completion <of the distance> becomes a cause (*sabab*) for its preparedness (*isti dāduhu*) to move from it to another point.’ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 628.

²⁴² The fact that the weighty object – or the clod of earth in *al-Sirr* – was initially propelled into the air by a volitional act is irrelevant, since the purpose of the example is to focus attention on the natural motion that determines the object’s subsequent trajectory.

That which exerts the influence <to produce> that <second> movement is in reality <its> weight. But were it not for the mobile's completion of the preceding movement up to that point, then the <second> movement would have been impossible. Since, before the completion <of the first movement> to that point, it would have been impossible for the weight <of the mobile> to move it from there. But when it moved to that point the weight became such that it could move <the mobile> from that point. Movement from that point would have been impossible to have issued forth <as an effect> from that object of weight, being distant from the cause. Then when issuing forth <as an effect> became possible, it came to be close <to its cause>, and that proximity after distance only occurred on account of the previous movement and that is what we mean when we say movement brings causes into proximity to their effects.²⁴³

Motion conveys causes to their effects, as Avicenna asserts in the *Metaphysics*:

...the principles of generation depend on the proximity or remoteness of causes, and this is by means of motion. Therefore, motion is preceded by motion, <the latter> motion conveying the causes to this motion. The two <motions> are, hence, like two contiguous <things>.²⁴⁴

As for volitional motion, as exemplified by the pilgrim on the road to Mecca, the completion of each preceding step is the preparatory cause for each succeeding step, the metaphysical influential cause of which is the particular, renewed instance of the pilgrim's intent, his universal volition being the metaphysical cause of the entire aggregate of steps taken along the pilgrimage route:

²⁴³ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 628.

²⁴⁴ Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, p. 301 (my adaptation of Marmura's translation).

And its paradigm in volitional movement is that he who wishes to go on ḥajj, then <his> universal volition (*irāda kulliyya*) is a cause (*sabab*) for the coming to be of particular, ordered acts of volition (*sabab li-ḥuduth irādāt juziyya mutarattiba*), each one of which has been brought into proximity with the other. For he does not reach the final point in the journey except that its completion at that point is a cause (*sabab*) for a particular intention (*qaṣd*) to arise from him such that he moves from that point to the point which succeeds it. And the influencing cause <which produces> the existence of those particular intentions, which follow one after the other, and which exert influence on particular successive movements is the universal intention which links all such originated events.²⁴⁵

So whilst in the example of natural motion, the preparatory efficient cause (*al-mu'idd*) is the completion of the weighty object's ascent, in volitional motion, the preparatory cause of any but the initial step is the completion of the preceding step; and the influential cause (*al-mu'aththir*) in the case of the former is the weight of the object, whilst in the case of the latter the influential cause of each step is a particular ordered act of volition.

Having established motion as the paradigmatic model for change, and introduced the distinction between preparatory and influential efficient causality, the account in *al-Mabāḥith* can now explain just how circular motion acts as the cause which produces temporally generated phenomena:

So once you know this, then we say: these originated phenomena have a pre-eternal cause which has no beginning (*sabab qadīm azalī*), namely the

²⁴⁵ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 628-629.

Giver of Forms (*al-wāhib li'l-ṣuwar*). But its emanation depends on matter becoming prepared for the reception of that emanation (*fayḍuhu mawqūfun 'alā ṣayrūrātu al-mādda musta'iddatan li-qabūl dhālika al-fayḍ*); and that <state of> preparedness (*dhālika al-isti'dād*), having previously not existed, only comes to be by means of motions and changes such that each preceding <phenomenon> acts as a cause (*'illa*) allowing matter to become prepared for the reception of the succeeding <phenomenon> (*innamā yakūnu bi-wāsiṭati al-ḥarakāt wa'l-taghayyurāt ḥattā yakūna kullu sābiqin 'illatan li-an tasta'idd al-mādda li-qabūl al-lāḥiq*).²⁴⁶

Successive planetary motions, which pursue their perpetual, circular courses, prepare sublunary material substrates such that they become receptive to substantial forms: these are bestowed by the Giver of Forms. Without this initial preparation by planetary motion, no form emanated by the Giver of Forms could come to inhere in a material substrate and give rise to a new sublunary phenomenon.²⁴⁷

4.6 Conclusion

The similarity between the account of talismans in *al-Sirr*, the equivalent in *al-Maṭālib*, and the explanation of celestial causation of temporally originated phenomena in *al-Mabāḥith*, reveals a striking continuity of thought. The philosophers and Sabians as depicted in *al-Maṭālib* deemed it more credible to

²⁴⁶ Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 629. For the Giver of Forms, see Janssens, 'The Notions of Wāhib al-Ṣuwar'.

²⁴⁷ 'So if nothing can come to be except by means of motion which brings the cause into proximity to the effect - and this motion is also originated - then it must be preceded by another motion. So motion with no beginning must exist. Rectilinear motion has a beginning, so <it> must be circular motion'. Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith*, 1, p. 629.

integrate, in the notion of ensouled celestial motion, the two possible explanations of how an infinite chain of originated causes of sublunary phenomena can occur, namely: the one that attributes their generation to the perpetual acts of intellection performed by spiritual beings; and the other which attributes it to eternal circular motion. This is reflected in *al-Mabāḥith* and *al-Sirr* with the examples of the walking man and the air-bound earthen clod, as illustrations of how causation through celestial motion operates. As for the presentation of these two examples in the latter work, we find concealed in the philosophical subtext a theory of celestial causation which is given explicit treatment only in *al-Mabāḥith* which divides efficient celestial causes between the preparatory (*mu'idda*) and the metaphysically influential (*mu'aththira*): the former prepares the sublunary material substrate to receive the form emanated by the latter, namely the Giver of Forms (*al-wāhib li'l-ṣuwar*). No such mention of the Giver of Forms is made in *al-Sirr*, where it is replaced by the starless sphere.²⁴⁸ Nevertheless, its use of the two examples of the walking man and the air-bound clod of earth indicates an implicit acknowledgement of the distinction between preparatory and metaphysical efficient causes.

However, as analogies illustrating celestial causation of sublunary phenomena, these two examples exhibit a structural flaw, an appreciation of which would afford us greater precision in problematizing the difficulties which Rāzī faced in constructing a coherent account of celestial forces and talismanic efficacy. The process of sublunary generation and corruption involves two kinds of temporally originated phenomena: individual planetary motion and the corresponding sublunary effect. The analogies in the *Mabāḥith* and *al-Sirr* only

²⁴⁸ *Al-Sirr* 3:1 does mention, however, *al-mu'ṭī al-muṭlaq* – the Absolute Giver, the nature of which we shall explore in the next chapter.

account for how the completion of one individual planetary motion can act as the preparatory cause of the next. Moreover, in both examples, the metaphysical cause of the succeeding phenomenon, of either planetary or pedestrian motion, is something which inheres in the very body that is the object of its influence. In other words, the same body is both the object and the substrate of preparatory and metaphysical efficient causes. While they might be successful as illustrations of self-perpetuating motion, the analogies lack the structure which integrates reference to the sublunary phenomenal effect, let alone the role of the practitioner of the Sabian talismanic craft whose ritualized actions can manipulate the celestial-sublunary nexus of causation.

Al-Sirr describes the talisman as: ‘the blending of <dynamically> active celestial forces with passive elemental forces’, and identifies as planetary configurations as ‘the principles for the occurrence of diverse originated phenomena in this world.’ It would appear they are their preparatory causes, preparing a sublunary material substrate to receive a new form from the metaphysical influential cause which, in this cosmological model, is not the Avicennan Giver of Forms but the starless sphere. This being the case, what is the role of the talismanic practitioner? For a clear answer, we must remind ourselves of Rāzī’s *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* where he comments:

Know that celestial forces do not affect preternatural events without the bringing together of passive receptive elemental forces (*al-quwā al-unṣuriyya al-qābila*) with earthly psychic forces (*al-quwā al-nafsāniya al-arḍiyya al-fā’iliyya*) and this is the talisman.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 664.

Both the celestial movements, and the preparations and psychic activity of the talismanic practitioner, act as causes, the former heavenly, the latter earthly, which prepare the sublunary material substrate of the talisman to receive a form from the starless sphere, the metaphysical cause of change.

One last observation must be made before we conclude. Reference to the talisman as 'blending' (*tamzīj*) would seem to suggest that the referent of the word *talisman* is a special kind of process. But as we shall now discover from *al-Sirr* 3:1, the referent for the word is a physical object, specifically a planetary idol or a ring, cast at the correct astrological time, for the purpose of serving the practitioner's objective of causing remotely a specific effect in the sublunary world. Moreover, how the talisman, whether it is a process or a physical object, facilitates this objective remains unclear. These questions will now inform our analysis of *al-Sirr* 3:1, which provides both further theory and practical instructions for the talismanic process, and of the concluding passage of *al-Sirr* 1:4, which describes a talismanic ritual involving a planetary idol and a dramatic enactment of the practitioner's intended effect.

Chapter 5: Making Talismans

5.1 Introduction

The foregoing exploration of the general theory of celestial causation and the talismanic craft, attributed in *al-Sirr* to the philosophers and Sabians, identifies three key problems in its account. Firstly, the account asserts: ‘...that the proximate principles of the coming-to-be of originated phenomena in the world of generation and corruption, are the planetary applications (*ittiṣālāt al-kawākib*).’²⁵⁰ Yet it is unclear how the planetary applications are to be understood in the context of its assumed division of efficient celestial causes between the preparatory (*mu’idda*) and the influential (*mu’aththira*). Secondly, how these planetary applications affect sublunary change remains unclear. And thirdly, whether the referent of the term *talisman* is a process, an object, or indeed both, is ambiguous. We shall now discover that, although it provides more information relating to the practicalities of the talismanic craft, *al-Sirr* 3:1 adds yet further layers of complication and inconsistency to this rather problematic and incomplete theory.²⁵¹

5.2 *Tamzīj*: the blending of celestial influence

²⁵⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 8.

²⁵¹ The description of how to forge a talismanic statue in *al-Sirr* 3:1 reappears in modified form in *al-Maṭālib* 8, pp. 179-180. Shahrastānī uses the word *talisman* primarily to refer to the astral ritual as a whole rather than the ring or idol which is manufactured as the physical product of the process. *Talisman* for him is thus primarily a process word. Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa’l-niḥal*, pp. 308-309.

The practical instructions for the forging of talismans in *al-Sirr* 3:1 treat the talisman as an object – a statue or a ring – rather than as a process. Thus far, we have explored the reality of the active heavenly and receptive terrestrial forces which the talismanic craft blends. However, neither *al-Sirr* nor *al-Maṭālib* provide a clear account of the precise nature of their ‘blending’ (*tamzīj*) which is so definitive of the craft. We must therefore work with the few allusions which they do supply. In this section, we shall discuss both this process and the four heavenly bodies, the influences of which are blended within a talisman.

Two of those bodies, namely Mercury and an ancillary planet which, we shall discover, is the Moon, facilitate the process of blending. The other two bodies are a fixed star, and the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) appropriate for the intended goal of the operation, such as Mars for an aggressive objective, Venus for an amorous aim.²⁵² Rāzī says:

...they have agreed that a talisman is not complete with just a fixed star alone. <Acting> on a complete talisman are one fixed star and three co-operating planets (*sayyārāt muta ‘āwina*) by reason of which the four natures occur. One of the planets must be Mercury, for these operations are firmly bound up with it (*hādhihi al-a ‘māl muta ‘allaqa bihā ta ‘alluqan shadīdan*). It is more apt (*al-awlā*) for the fixed star to be in the mid-heaven (*waṣṭ al-samā’*) and Mercury in the Fourth.²⁵³

²⁵² See next section for a discussion of which planets would be appropriate for different kinds of operations. The fixed stars are discussed in *al-Sirr* 2:12 (pp. 59-61). The debate as to whether the fixed stars or the wandering planets exert the greater influence in the sublunary world is discussed on p. 58. This discussion reappears in an expanded version in *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 157 and pp. 168-169.

²⁵³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.95.

Why Mercury is important for this process only becomes clear in *al-Maṭālib* where, reproducing the relevant passage from *al-Sirr* with slight adaptation, Rāzī writes:

...they have agreed that a talisman cannot be struck with a fixed star alone. Rather they have said it is only complete with a fixed star and three planets (*sayyārāt*), so that the four natures (*al-ṭabā'i' al-arba'a*) occur therein. One of the planets must be Mercury, for its nature is mixed (*ṭabī'atuhu mumtazija*) and facilitates the mixture of the natures and gives power to the mixture (*tufīd imtizāj tilka al-ṭabā'i' wa-tufīd quwwa dhālika al-imitzāj*). They said it is more apt if the fixed star is in the mid heaven and Mercury in the fourth <house>.²⁵⁴

Mercury, being of a “mixed nature” which facilitates the “blending” (*imitzāj*) of the natures (*ṭabā'i'*) of the other heavenly bodies, is thus crucial to the talismanic craft which then blends them with elemental passive forces. Just as crucial is the role of the Moon:

... the moon's motions are swift, its changes (*taghayyurāt*) many; as for the other planets, their motions are <but> slow. The transformations <which occur> in this world are many; and so the attribution of the

²⁵⁴ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 189. Summarizing Abu Ma'shar, Rāzī reports that those engaged in deep investigation asserted that whilst the essences of the celestial bodies are ‘free of’ (*mubarra'a*) the <four> qualities, they exert on the sublunary world the effects of heat, coldness, dryness and moistness by way of choice, since they are rational and living, possessed of volition (*aḥyā nāṭiqā mukhtāra*). (See *al-Sirr*, p. 43).

transformations of this world to <the cause of> the motions of the moon is more apt (*istinād taghayyurāt hādhā al- ‘ālam ilā ḥarakāt al-qamar awlā*).²⁵⁵

Moreover:

Because of its swift motions, the Moon blends the lights of some planets with the lights of the others and so it is beyond dispute that these ways of blending <planetary lights> are the principles behind the occurrence of contingent events in this world. So the Moon is the most proximate cause of change.²⁵⁶

Not only does the *al-Maṭālib* reinforce the connection in *al-Sirr* between motion and blending, but it also amplifies the association between heavenly forces and light:

...because of the swiftness of the moon’s motion, the lights of the planets are blended with the others (*tamtazij anwār al-kawākib ba ‘ḍuhā bi’l-ba ‘ḍ*), and in accordance with these blends, the states of the effects (*āthār*) which occur in this world differ.²⁵⁷

The talisman is thus the locus of where heavenly lights, facilitated by the mixed nature of Mercury and the swift motion of the Moon, are blended.

5.3 The operative planet

²⁵⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 25. The phrase ‘*ilā ḥarakāt al-qamar awlā*’ is missing in the Cairo lithograph but present in Oxford, Bodeleian, MS Marsh 125, f. 21v and Oxford, Bodleian, MS Selden Superius 66 f. 28v.

²⁵⁶ *Inna al-qamar bi-sabab sur ‘ati harakātihi yumazzij anwār ba ‘ḍ al-kawākib bi-anwār al-bāqī wa lā shakka anna imtizājātihā mabādi’ li-ḥudūth al-hawādīth fī hādhā al- ‘ālam fa-kāna al-qamar huwa al-mabda’ al-qarīb*. Present in MS Marsh 125, f.21v and MS Selden Superius f.28v, but missing from Cairo lithograph, where it should appear midway p. 25, l. 25.

²⁵⁷ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 170

The theoretical passage of *al-Sirr* 3:1 glosses over the issue of what the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥājja*) most effective for any given operation should be, reserving such detailed information for the following two chapters which treat respectively the talismans of Abū Dhātis and selections from *Kitāb Yawāqīt al-Mawāqīt*.²⁵⁸ So for a succinct overview of the kind of thing that is intended, we turn (once again) to the *al-Maṭālib*:

Know that each one of the actions sought in astral magic (*al-siḥr al-nujūmī*) must be connected with a specific planet (*lā budda wa an yakūn muḍāfan ilā kawkab mu'ayyin*). Thus sowing division and hatred (*al-farqa wa'l-bughd*) is to be connected to Saturn. So perform <the operation> (*fa-i'mal*) when Saturn is in one of its signs, <namely> Capricorn or Aquarius - Aquarius being stronger - or when in trine or sextile aspect with them; and <when> the Moon is applying to Saturn in any one of these positions, or in conjunction; [...] the ascendant sign (*tāli'*) should be one of the two signs of Saturn whilst Saturn is in it <at the same time>.²⁵⁹

Saturn is thus the operative planet required for the forging of any talisman by which is intended the sowing of division and hatred. For it to be effective, Saturn must either be in one of its signs or be favourably aspecting them. Ideally, Saturn should be in one of these signs as it, namely the sign, ascends from the horizon. Moreover, to effectively facilitate the process of blending the influence of the operative planet within the talisman, the Moon, being the most proximate celestial cause of terrestrial change, and acting as the ancillary planet, should either be applying to Saturn or conjunct.

²⁵⁸ For the Talismans of Abūdhātis al-Bābili, see *al-Sirr* 3:2, pp. 96-104; for selections from *Kitāb Yawāqīt al-Mawāqīt*, see *al-Sirr*, 3:3, pp. 105-9.

²⁵⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, pp. 187-8.

The objectives of securing a living or high esteem are best achieved, *mutatis mutandis*, under the equivalent conditions appropriate to Jupiter acting as the operative planet, with the Moon in application or conjunction, the rising sign being one of the signs of Jupiter, or of its exaltation. The same principles apply with respect to Mars if the objective is to gain domination over someone; to Venus if the aim is to inflame love. It follows then that talismanic operations which are intended to ignite a consuming and obsessive passion (*al-tahyjjāt*), being both aggressive and amatory, involve both Mars and Venus, when they are in conjunction with each other, and the Moon is in conjunction with both of them, or in strong aspect with them. Being associated with all things hidden, intellectual and psychological (*naḥsānī*), Mercury is the operative planet appropriate for the uncovering of buried treasure; attracting the favour of a scholar; or inflicting psychological – as opposed to bodily – harm. Crucially, for all these talismanic operations, the Moon must either be applying to or conjunct with the operative planet.²⁶⁰

So returning to *al-Sirr* 3:1, the influences of the four heavenly bodies involved in the process of forging a talisman are referred to as ‘*aṭāyā*, or “gifts,” the power of which vary in accordance with a number of factors. Explains Rāzī:

²⁶⁰ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 188. *Al-Maṭālib* organizes far more information than *al-Sirr* concerning the most appropriate position of the Moon when casting a talisman. The Moon should be free of malefics; it should be clear of being eclipsed by a margin of twelve degrees in either direction, for the ancients used to call the eclipse of the Moon the 'Moon's death'; it should not be in opposition to the Sun; it should not be in quartile aspect with the Sun, nor should it be halfway towards quartile aspect (*'alā al-anṣāf*) for quartile aspect is a relationship which is halfway towards opposition; it should neither be in the first nor the last degrees of the signs; it should not be in opposition to Saturn, or in conjunction or in quartile or the halfway points of the quartile aspect, since it is a malefic planet and weakens the operation; it should not be with the Head and Tail of the Dragon, because they are nodes. Of the two, the Tail is the more malevolent; it should neither be in opposition to Mercury nor in conjunction; it is disliked for the Moon to be in Libra or in Scorpio for in these signs the two luminaries are in detriment; it should not be in the sixth degrees of Leo or Gemini. (See *al-Maṭālib* 8, pp. 191-2.)

One <such factor> is proximity to and distance from the Absolute Giver (*al-mu ʿī al-muṭlaq*) <by which> I mean the starless sphere (*al-falak ghayr al-kawākib*). So whatever is closer to it, the greater its power in giving (*famā kāna aqrab kāna aqwā ʿalā al- ʿaṭāyā*). The second <factor relates> to size (*al-kibar waʿl-ṣighar*), for the largest <sphere> is more giving. The third relates to speed <*al-baṭīʿ waʿl-sarīʿ*>, for the slower it is, the more giving it is; and the higher perfects (*mukammil*) that which is below it.²⁶¹

Since the starless – or tropical – sphere marks the boundary between the celestial and the supracelestial realms, it serves as the interface between the pure forms of the intellects and the celestial souls which receive them. Thus, for example, its relative proximity to the tropical sphere; the slow speed of its rotation; and its size, confers on the sphere of Saturn a particularly powerful influence.

5.4 Images of the Planetary Degrees

Consideration of the starless sphere – the absolute giver – is necessary to determine in which degree of the zodiac the operative planet should be when rising on the eastern horizon at the moment when the molten metal of the talisman is poured into its mould. Rāzī discusses the degrees in detail in *al-Sirr* 2:14, entitled ‘On the images of the degrees (*darajāt*) of the planets (*fī ṣuwar darajāt al-kawākib*)’. It is to this chapter that we shall make a brief digression before we return to *al-Sirr* 3:1.

²⁶¹ Rāzī, *Al-Sirr*, p. 95. Compare, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 189. The passage from *al-Sirr* 3:1 then proceeds to state: ‘...the gifts of the planets are like things which bring perfection and the Absolute Giver is the Sun (*inna ʿaṭāyā al-kawākib yakūn kaʿl-mukammilāt waʿl-mu ʿī al-muṭlaq huwa al-shams*)’. This would appear to flatly contradict the previous statement that the Absolute Giver is the Tropical Sphere.

For his information on the images of the degrees, Rāzī relies on two versions of a work written by a certain Ṭumṭum al-Hindi.²⁶² He describes how associated with each degree (*daraja*) of the starless sphere (*al-falak*) is an image, knowledge of which is the privilege of an elite few.²⁶³ The chapter lists the thirty degrees of each sign together with the name of each degree's adjutant (*'awn*) and a description of: the effect that each can be called upon to exert in the sublunary world; its image; and the subfumigation used in its invocation.²⁶⁴ The effects of each of the degrees range widely and include such actions as killing one's enemies; increasing harvest yield; causing the milk of mothers to cease flowing; and inflicting a plague. The images are both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic. Deciding on the particular effect he wishes to bring about, the practitioner is to select the appropriate degree and deduce, considering a

²⁶² See *al-Sirr*, p. 81, for Rāzī's discussion of the various works on which he relied. He provides two differing lists of descriptions of images: the first is on pp. 71-81; the second on pp. 81-86. The reason for these two different lists is that, he asserts, he was relying on two versions of the work. Unfortunately, he lacked the drive (*lā maṭma'ā*) to analyse the versions and arrive at an informed opinion as to which was the more reliable. He points out that there are versions of the images of the degrees other than those described in the Ṭumṭum literature (*al-ṭumṭumiyyāt*). Three versions were related by Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Jalīl al-Sinjārī in his *Kitāb al-Jāmi' al-Shāhī*; another in the book *Tinkūlūshā* the Minor; and another version related by Abū Dhāṭis in his *Risāla fī al-ṭilsamāt* (see *al-Sirr*, p. 81). A version of Ṭumṭum, on which Rāzī may or may not have relied, is presumably extant in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ar. 2595, fol. 59r: 'the Book of Ṭumṭum al-Hindi on the knowledge of the degrees of the sphere and their images and talismans'. (see F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, p. 96, referred to by Burnett commenting on the reference to a certain 'Tomtom' in Adelard of Bath's translation of *Tābit*, *Liber Prestigiorum Thebedis*, in *Tābit Ibn Qurra the Harrānian on talismans and the spirits of the planets* p. 25.) The fullest account of the images of the degrees in the Latin tradition is to be found in a work originally produced for the library of Alfonso X of Castille. Unfortunately MS Vatican, Reg. lat. 1283a only treats of a third of the images, from Taurus to Leo inclusive. For a full study of this manuscript see: Alfonso X, *Astromagia*. A digital version of the manuscript can be viewed via the following link: http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Reg.lat.1283.pt.A. In relation to the use of the word Babylon to refer to Baghdad in astrological texts, Burnett comments: 'Bar Hebraeus calls Baghdad Babylon in his Syriac writings [...] and the consistent mention of 'Babylon' as the capital city in works of astrology suggests that the ancient city at least was a symbol of the medieval one'. (Burnett, 'Thābit Ibn Qurra', fn. 4, p. 15).

²⁶³ '...looking down in any <given> degree from the starless sphere (*al-falak*) is such-and-such (*yaṭṭali 'u fī al-daraja al-fulāniyya min al-falak kadhā wa-kadhā*). It is a mysterious allusion (*ramz*), its aim being that none should attain its knowledge except he who is possessed of complete understanding and an excellent natural talent (*qariḥa jayyida*)'. (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 70) Each image would appear to encode a mystery which none can decipher except the wise.

²⁶⁴ Compare *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 388, where Rāzī reports that the Masters of the Talismans averred that each of the three hundred and sixty degrees of the Zodiac has a specific spirit.

number of factors, including the term and decan in which it falls, which of the seven planets is associated with it in particular. He is then to draw the image of the degree and a zodiacal and a planetary diagram; then he is to perform the appropriate suffumigation and invoke the name of the spirit.²⁶⁵

Although it is not explicitly stated, the obvious intention is that the correct timing for the procedure is determined when the relevant planet enters the zodiacal degree of choice when it is in the ascendant.

5.5 Forging the talisman

The basic operation that Rāzī describes in *al-Sirr* 3:1, is the talismanic statue or a homunculus. His most probable source for this is Thābit Ibn Qurra's book on talismans which survives in two different Latin versions.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Rāzī reports on the authority of Abū Dhāṭis the Babylonian: 'If you want to perform an operation in accordance with this book, then should you act <in pursuit> of the need which you desire. So search for it within these degrees (*darajāt*). If you find the degree and know its subfumigation and the name of the adjutant (*al-'awn*) by which it is particularised, then determine which of the seven planets is specific to it, by <establishing> for example the lord of the term (*ṣāhib al-ḥadd*) of which that degree is a part; the decan (*al-wajh*); the triplicity; and the dodecatemoron (*al-ithnā 'ashariyya*); the exaltation (*al-sharaf*) and the sign (*al-bayt*). When you know the lord of the degree, then seek the day of that planet and the planet which is lord of that day (*ṣāhib min dhālika al-yawm*). And if that planet is feminine (*unthā*) then perform your action in the night that is specific to it, in the specific hour. Then produce an image of the degree on paper and write its name in Sanskrit (*hindīyya*) beneath it; and draw a mandala (*bi khaṭṭihi bi-sikkīn*) and write on it the names of the twelve zodiacal signs and the seven planets and their images in Sanskrit. When you have done this, you then begin to perform the subfumigations of that degree and you invoke (*da 'awta*) the lord of that degree by his name and you ask him to fulfil your need for he will indeed do so in the swiftest time. If it is delayed for three days, then repeat the operation three times such that nine days are completed, performing this operation at the beginning of each <block of> three days for that would be the furthest extent to which it would be delayed (*fa-innahā ghāyat al-ta'khīr*). Be wary lest you err in finding out the degree and its lord, for if you make a mistake, then this operation would avail you naught. Know this, for it is a most beneficial introduction (*muqaddima*) to this kind <of practice>. Know that knowledge of the natures of the degrees, together with a full understanding (*iḥāṭa*) of this introduction is mighty indeed.' Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 71.

²⁶⁶ The translations by Adelard of Bath and John of Seville and Limia are described and analysed by Burnett in 'Thābit Ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian'. Unlike the account in *al-Sirr*, Thābit's work

To ensure successful *tamzīj*, the weights and measures of the elements which are constitutive of the metal from which the talisman is to be forged, must balance the celestial forces acting on it at the moment that it is cast:

It is necessary to know the weights and measures of the four elements in the raw material in the lower world (*awzān ṭabā'i ' al-mādda al-sufliyya wa maqādirihā*) in accordance with the planetary forces (*bi-ḥasab quwā al-kawākib*) so that the recipient balances the active agent (*ḥattā yakūn al-qābil muwāziyan li'l-fā 'il*).²⁶⁷

Rāzī unfortunately declines to expound on the alchemy required to ascertain the correct measure of the metal to be used such that the four elements contained therein balance the celestial forces acting on it. Nor does he explain precisely how planetary forces are to be measured, calculated and quantified. Be that as it may, the principle which determines the general timing for the forging of a talisman is nevertheless clear. Each talismanic objective is characterised by one of the four elements and so the talisman must be forged in the season appropriate to that element. Moreover, if the objective is characterized by an extreme of the element by which it is characterised, then mid-season would be the most appropriate time for the casting of the talisman:

It is necessary to observe appropriate timing (*yajib ri'āyatu al-zamān al-munāsib*) for if the aim of the talisman is to bring about an effect connected to heat and dryness, then <the time of its casting> should be selected for the summer. So if the heat and dryness <of the action> are

describes in detail the necessary astrological conditions for the carving out of each part of homunculus in its mould into which the molten metal is eventually poured.

²⁶⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 95.

extreme (*fī al-ghāya*) then <the time of its casting> should be selected for mid-summer (*al-qayz*); if <they are not extreme>, then either at the beginning or end of the summer season. The same reasoning applies by way of analogy to the other seasons (*wa-qis 'alayhi sār al-fuṣūl*).²⁶⁸

When the general timing is decided, the specific moment is to be selected in light of the following considerations:

...if you wish to make a talisman, then ensure that: the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) is in the cardine of the ascendant (*fī watad al-ṭāli*) at the beginning <of the process> of making the talisman; the rest of the planets assisting (*al-kawākib al-mu'āwina*) in the operation are in the three remaining cardines; and anything which might cause corruption to the ascendant planet is cadent (*wa asqit 'an al-kawkab alladhī fī al-ṭāli mā yufsiduhu*). If the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) enters its term (*ḥadd*), its decan (*wajh*), and its triplicity (*muthallath*) and the rest of its shares (*sār ḥuḏūzihi*), then the operation will be more complete (*atamm*).²⁶⁹

For any given objective, the correct astrological circumstances for casting the talismanic statue must be carefully selected and will be rare indeed. Ideally, the operative planet will be in the cardine of the ascendant; the appropriate fixed star in the mid-heaven:²⁷⁰ Mercury, preferably in the fourth house, and the

²⁶⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 95. See *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 196 for Rāzī's classification of all such procedures under the four elements.

²⁶⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.96. Compare *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 189: '...if you wish to make a talisman, then ensure that: the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) is in the cardine of the ascendant (*fī watad al-ṭāli*) at the beginning <of the process> of making the talisman; and the rest of the planets assisting (*al-kawākib al-mu'āwina*) in the operation are in the three remaining cardines. If it occurs (*in ittafaqa*) that the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*) enters its term (*ḥadd*), its decan (*wajh*), and its triplicity (*muthallath*) and the rest of its shares (*sār ḥuḏūzihi*), then the operation will be more perfect (*akmal*).

²⁷⁰ The closer the fixed star is to zenith, the more powerful its effect (Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 58).

Moon, other than in opposition to the Sun or Saturn, in the remaining cardine. Yet further precision of timing is demanded by the requirement, as previously discussed, that the practitioner waits for the operative planet to be in the appropriate degree of the zodiac as it rises above the eastern horizon.²⁷¹ When the perfect moment arrives, the operator, who has already carved the mould into the correct form, pours into it the metal appropriate to the operative planet. The casting of a talisman is a solitary activity, for no-one else should be in the operator's company. As he pours the metal into the mould, he is to perform those subfumigations which correspond with the operative planet. Alternatively, instead of casting a talismanic statue, he can forge a ring, the stone of which should correspond to the operative planet.²⁷²

Whilst performing this operation, the practitioner should maintain complete mental focus on his objective:

Let your heart and your mind be entirely submerged in that goal (*wa'l-yakun qalbuka wa-khāṭiruka mustaghriqan fī dhālika al-maṭlūb*), and if you

²⁷¹ Space does not allow for a close analysis of the planetary degrees and their images, treated in *al-Sirr* 2:14, pp. 70-86.

²⁷² 'he who wants to cast talismans should consider the aim for which he wants to strike a talisman. If it is for one of the aims which the Sun indicates, or one of the aims signified by the other planets as we have already mentioned, then let him seek a time in which that planet enters one of the degrees appropriate for that aim, which should also be the ascendant degree. Then he should take at that moment a statue (*timthāl*) of the kind appropriate to that planet, <wrought> of one of the seven metals (*al-aṣṣād al-sab'a*) which we detailed earlier. He should exert his utmost in its construction, in the most correct and most perfect way possible, but without exceeding, in this action, the time during which the planet is in that degree which corresponds to the horizon of the ascendant. The way to do this is to have the crucible (*ālat al-tafrīgh wa idhābatu al-jasad*) before you, and when the appropriate time arrives, empty it into the mould (*al-qālab*) which has been prepared for it if it is something which is needed <for making> the statue in particular, such as the things which a man needs to have around him such that they are present. When making it, let him be alone in the place, there being no one else with him; and let him burn aromatics, specific to the planet; and let him exert his utmost to ensure that the rest of the planets, which are assisting the operative planet (*kawkab al-ḥāja*), are in the cardine of the ascendant, or aspecting it, and that the hostile planets should be cadent from it. And if your operation is <to forge> a ring, then its stone (*faṣṣ*) should be of the substance (*jawhar*) of that planet, and from that which has a specific occult power in attaining that goal'. Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96.

utter at that time its name and description then would its <success> be more sure. For the starless sphere assumes a form in accordance with the intention (*fā-inna al-falak yatashakkalu bi-ḥasab al-niyya*).²⁷³

Crucial to the success of the operation is the ability of the practitioner to maintain a fixed, one-pointed concentration on his goal. Rāzī leaves unexplained the mysterious assertion that the starless sphere – or the Absolute Giver – assumes a form in accordance with the intention.

As an illustration of such an operation, Rāzī furnishes his account with the example of a Saturnine talisman, the aim of which is to bring harm to an intended target:

And if you want to create a talisman to cause affliction to a man or to cause him illness, then seek out the entering of Saturn into one of the degrees which indicate that, and you should have taken a statue resembling a man, and at that moment you should undertake to cause harm to one of its limbs/organs and a place on its body, for when you do this the limb/organ of that man would be corrupted.²⁷⁴

So the practitioner is required, not only to forge the anthropomorphic talismanic statue at the precise astrological moment, but also to perform on the statue a ritualized mimesis of the effect he intends to bring about in his target. This is summarized neatly in *al-Sirr* 1:5:

Know that the more these acts are performed in concert, the stronger their effect. This is dependent on knowledge of the planets, the zodiacal

²⁷³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96.

²⁷⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96.

signs, the mansions of the moon, and the natures of the degrees. The planet corresponding to the magical operation is sought, whilst the rest of the assisting planets should be making strong applications. Then everything which is corresponding to that planet including tastes, colours and so forth are to be gathered. Then a doll in the image of the man <who is being targeted> is fashioned from a material that is corresponding to the planet; then you smear the organ that you want affected by this operation with a potion sympathetic to the operation; then you wrap it and place it inside the image and smear it with potions corresponding to that aim, then suffumigate it with corresponding aromatics and perform the astral ritual (*tunajjim*) with respect to the planet appropriate to that operation. When this is done then the result is assured.²⁷⁵

5.6 Conclusion

In the terms of the model of celestial causation which emerged from our previous discussion of the general physics of talismans, it would appear that the *mu'aththira* – or metaphysical influential cause – which acts on the talisman to give it its power is that degree of the starless sphere which is in the ascendant at the point when the metal is poured into its mould. At this moment, the four planets which ideally would be occupying the four cardines, and moreover the

²⁷⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. Compare *al-Maṭālib* 8, pp. 182-3: 'When you have cast the statue and want to inflict an illness on the target's brain, then you daub the inside of the statue's head with opium and mandrake. If you want to afflict him with heat, daub the place of his heart with hot, burning paint, or write a spell ('*azīma*) on a metal sheet and throw it onto fire, or write the spell on paper and throw it into a vial. When you perform these actions with your heart completely focused, and you strengthen the phantasm (*al-khayāl*) in your mind, and you visualize the effect on the organ of that man, and when the strong celestial influences and the magician's strong psychic power concentrate their action on the passive object in the lower world, then the desired effect will be attained.'

actions of the practitioner and his mental focus, act as causes which prepare the material substrate of the molten metal to receive its potency from the degree of the starless sphere.

But, leaving several questions unanswered, the foregoing account falls short of providing a full explanatory model for how the talisman works. These unanswered questions relate to the three ontological levels which the craft coordinates: the supralunar; the talismanic; and the psychological.

On the supralunar level, it is by now apparent that, in the thought of Rāzī's Sabians and talisman masters, the starless sphere, as the Absolute Giver, is the first principle of sublunary change – the equivalent of Avicenna's *dator formarum*. This notion is initially suggested in *al-Sirr* 1:5 where Rāzī reports:

Of the <foundational> premises of this knowledge is that the Masters of Talismans are in agreement that each form in this world has its celestial archetype (*kull sūra fi hādhā al- 'ālam fa-lahā mithāl fi al-falak*) and that the earthly forms (*al-ṣuwar al-suflīya muṭī'a li'l-ṣuwar al- 'alawīya*) are subject to heavenly forms: serpents to Draco; scorpions to Scorpio; predatory animals to Leo and so on.²⁷⁶

However the relationship between the images associated with the Zodiacal signs here mentioned and those of the three hundred and sixty degrees of the entire starless sphere is ambiguous. Just as unclear is how the relevant degree of the

²⁷⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.18. The fact that Thābit asserts the same in his work on talismans provides at least circumstantial evidence that Rāzī enjoyed access either to his work on talismans or works which relied on it. In Adelard of Bath's version, Thābit attributes to Ptolemy the belief that: '...the images of this composite world obey the images on the firmament—no doubt meaning by this that the images of individuals suffering corruption and regeneration under the lunar circle obey the images on the celestial circle. For example: an individual lion obeys the zodiacal Leo, and also an individual scorpion or serpent obeys the celestial Scorpius or Serpent.' (See Burnett 'Art of Talismans').

starless sphere influences the effect rendered by the operative planet at the moment when the talisman is forged. Furthermore, the account leaves the reader uncertain of the following issues: the ontological status of the images which ‘look down’ from the degrees of the starless sphere; the quiddity of the ‘gifts’ (‘aṭāyā) of the ‘lesser’ planetary ‘givers’ and their relationship to light; the meaning of Mercury’s ‘blending’ of the natures of the planets and the Moon’s blending of their lights.

On the level of the physical talisman itself, the method by which the four elements, which constitute the metal from which it is forged, are to be calculated and balanced against the celestial forces which act on it at the moment of its creation, is not delineated. Furthermore, the actual form of the talismanic statue, or image with which the talismanic ring is engraved, remains obscure. So for instance, the talismans of Abū Dhāṭīs in *al-Sirr* 3:2, are said to: ‘be based on the images of the degrees.’²⁷⁷ The first of these is a talisman to gain status and reputation and to command the awe of men. Its operative planet is the Sun, which must be in the ascendant degree at the moment when the talisman – this time a ring – is forged. Any one of twenty-five separate degrees, unevenly distributed across all the signs, except Virgo, Sagittarius and Aquarius, can serve as the appropriate ascendant degree. Each of these degrees of course, has its own individual image, as described in *al-Sirr* 2:16. Nevertheless, Abū Dhāṭīs instructs that the ring is to be engraved with the following image: a man, seated on a throne, wearing a crown, around which is entwined a serpent; his right hand holds a spear and the index finger of his left hand is placed over his

²⁷⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 96.

mouth.²⁷⁸ Thus the relationship between the image of the enthroned man and the images of the twenty-five different degrees which can potentially serve as the ascendant is obscure.²⁷⁹

Moving to the ontological level of the psychological, the relationship between operator's soul and the talisman and their agency in ensuring the success of the operation is obscure. The practitioner is required to sustain simultaneously a firm connection with the spirit of the operative planet together with complete focus on the objective of his ritual. Intense and sustained mental concentration would seem to be just as important as the appropriate celestial configuration and the diligent crafting of the talismanic homunculus which represents the locus where macrocosm and microcosm meet:

he who would apply himself to this craft ought not to omit anything that relates to the senses, thought (*fikr*), imagination (*khayāl*), activity of the estimative faculty (*wahm*), intellect and soul except that he makes it connect (*ya'alliqhu*) either to the spirit of the heavenly body the aid of which he is invoking in his act, or to that which has a connection to that heavenly body. The stronger the connection, the more complete is the realization of the goal. Know that just as it is necessary for he who would apply himself to these acts to make all his powers of perception connect (*ta'līq*) to the celestial spirit, so it is also necessary to connect the estimative faculty (*ta'alluq al-wahm*) to the effect that he wishes to bring about.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 96-7. The resemblance of this description to the Hindu deity Siva supports the notion of an Indic provenance.

²⁷⁹ A full analysis of the images of the degrees is a desideratum which might help to substantiate or indeed refute their purported Indian provenance.

²⁸⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 16-17. Rāzī says in the *al-Maṭālib*:

Rāzī continues in explanation:

For instance, if he wishes to strike a man with obsessive ardour (*tahyīj*) or to afflict him with an illness, then he should fashion a statue (*timthāl*) which he makes to correspond with the man (*yu‘arriḍu-hu dhālika al-inṣan*) and makes his estimative faculty connect with it (*yu‘alliq wahma-hu ‘alayhi*) and on the limb which he specially wants to effect by this operation. If he wants to strike a man with obsessive ardour (*tahyīj*) then he heats up the limb of that statue with heat in actuality such as fire; or if he wishes to kill him, then he should he plunge needles into its limbs and wrap it up in a scrap of shroud and place it in an old cemetery; if he wants to afflict him with paralysis then he should smear it with cold potions and drugs and suffumigate it with potions that cause extreme coldness or cast it somewhere filthy and remote. These actions are required because when you bring together the raw materials which receive the special influence of the planet from which a certain effect is sought, and you bind your heart and estimative faculty to it, then the influence of that planet will inevitably flow towards that person.²⁸¹

‘There are those who object to this kind of action (the talismanic craft) saying it is mere idle play (*‘abath*) <affording> no benefit. Rather, appropriate celestial correspondences (*al-munāsabāt al-nujūmiyya*) and the psychic activity of the estimative faculty (*al-awhām al-nafsāniyya*) are all that is required. Jābir Ibn ‘Abdullah bin Ḥayyān said: ‘This objection is mistaken because the coming to be of this form at the time of the planet’s rising proceeds in the same way as the birth of a child at the time of a planet’s rising. For just as the power of the rising planet and the <power of> the rising degree suffuses that child (*tasrī quwwatu al-kawkab al-ṭāli‘ wa’l-daraja al-ṭāli‘a fī dhālika al-mawlūd*), so in the same way they both suffuse that carved image and cast statue. Know that when that idol (*ṣanm*) is being cast into its mould (*al-qālab*); and when the carving is being done to that stone, the practitioner (*al-‘āmil*) must wear attire corresponding to that planet, gathering around him all the effects appropriate to that planet, uttering praises appropriate to the planet, his heart being present to all the effects appropriate to the planet. When this happens, the desired effect will be strong.’ Rāzī, *al-Matālib* 8, pp. 180-181.

²⁸¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 17. That Rāzī is now speaking of plunging a needle into a statue would suggest that it is not made from metal.

Once the practitioner's soul is firmly bound with that of the operative planet, whilst simultaneously focusing on the target of his operation, ritualized action ensures that the special influence of the former flows to the latter in accordance with his intention. It is the practitioner's will which intervenes in the general emanation of the planet's influence and directs it to a specific end:

The furthest reach of investigation reveals that it is established that here is a general principle that emanation flows to all forms such that receptive matter does not receive certain forms to the exclusion of other forms without something which makes that eventuality more preponderant (*illā li-murajjih*). Since all elemental bodies are receptive to all forms which resist being substituted for each other (*al-mutaḍāda li'l-badl*), the emanation of these forms from the First Emanating Principle is no more apt than others. If, however, the talismanic practitioner's psychic connection with the celestial spirits is strong, then a specific emanation will preponderate, and God knows best.²⁸²

All three ontological levels of the supralunar, the talismanic, and the psychological thus act in consort. Whilst the practitioner is sedulous in choosing the correct celestial configuration; in balancing the forces of the heavenly bodies with the elements of the raw material that makes the talisman; in performing the correct suffumigations and the correct ritualized action, the success of the operation lies in the mysterious connection which he establishes with the spirit of the operative planet by means of his estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). Thus to understand what the Sabian heresiological category means for Rāzī, not only must we understand the cosmology and celestial causation that

²⁸² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 17.

informs it, but we must also attempt to construct the theory of cognition and perception in which it is grounded.

Part Three: Sabian Psychology

Chapter 6: Sabian Spiritual Discipline and Avicennan Cognition theory

6:1 Introduction

It will be recalled from chapter 1 that according to the Avicennan naturalistic theory the prophet exerts occult power by means of an internal sense called the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). Whilst all humans possess this faculty, the prophet's is innately powerful. In *al-Maṭālib* 8, Rāzī objects that whilst this explanation is merely probable (*muḥtamal*), it does not commend itself over and above a range of other equally as plausible explanations. This being the case, the Avicennists have effectively relativized the prophetic ability. One such plausible account is that ordinary humans might train the estimative faculty using spiritual techniques in order to strengthen its occult power. This is the purpose of Sabian spiritual discipline and the focus of this chapter.

Entitled 'On magic based on the purification of the soul and the connecting of the estimative faculty (*ta'liq al-wahm*)', *al-Sirr* 1:4 represents the psychological core of the theory of occult practice proposed by Rāzī.²⁸³ It reveals that the purpose of the spiritual discipline required by magical training is to establish and consolidate a firm connection with the celestial spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-falakiyya*); it is by means of this connection that the adept may realize the occult power with which only a few souls have innately been imbued. Spiritual austerities purify the soul (*taṣfiyat al-nafs*) of its preoccupations with corporeal

²⁸³ I shall henceforth refer to *al-Sirr* 1:4 as 'The Psychology of *al-Sirr*'.

being, allowing the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*), the most important of the internal faculties, which mediates between the corporeal and immaterial worlds, to facilitate connection with the celestial spirits. No explanation of the nature of this mysterious faculty is provided: such knowledge is assumed of the reader.

Al-Sirr 1:4 consists of five sections:

- (1) Ten proofs that the soul's estimative faculty can affect the physical world;
- (2) A discussion on the soul innately possessed of occult power;
- (3) On the acquisition of occult power which is not innately possessed:
 - (a) On the astrological natal conditions of the one who would acquire occult power;
 - (b) On the spiritual austerities and disposition of soul required for the acquisition of occult power:
 - (i) Asceticism;
 - (ii) Purging of superfluous thoughts and humoural excesses;
 - (iii) Vegan diet and reduction of food intake to the barest minimum;
 - (iv) Fortification of the brain with fragrance, colour and music;
 - (v) Abjuring all sensory objects of desire;
 - (vi) Sabian idolatry and connection with the celestial spirit by means of the estimative faculty;
- (4) On the soul that has perfected occult power;

(5) On operative magic.

In summary the argument proceeds as follows. Section (1) adduces ten proofs to establish the fact that the soul, and in particular its estimative faculty, can exert a powerful effect on the corporeal world. This conclusion then provides the basis on which to surmise that if the power of some souls whose occult power to act on the corporeal world is weak, then logic admits the possibility of souls whose occult power is strong. Now, this power is either innate, or it can be acquired. The ensuing discussion in section (2) as to whether or not innate occult power is a function of the soul's quiddity or humoral temperament distracts little from the broad structure of the general argument which proceeds to section (3) and the main purpose of the chapter: the discussion of how the soul might acquire occult power. This method is encapsulated in the title of *al-Sirr* 1:4: 'the purification of the soul and the connecting of the estimative faculty' (*taṣfiyat al-naḥs wa-ta'liq al-wahm*) to the celestial spirits. Both the physical aspects of the soul's purification, as well as the ascetic disposition it is required to adopt, facilitate but one aim: to strip the soul of all which could distract it from establishing a connection with the celestial spirits. It is by means of this connection that occult power is acquired. If the soul's powers are divided between numerous tasks, its success at performing them will be diluted: if they are all focused on but one aim, the likelihood of its realization would be greatly enhanced. The soul's preoccupation with digestion is an example of just such a dilution. The adept is therefore required to adopt an uncompromisingly ascetic attitude and thus sharpen his ambition (*himma*) for the spiritual world, enabling

him to develop the strength of mental focus (*al-tafakkur*) by which is achieved the very aim of magical training, namely connection with the celestial spirits.

Section (3)(b)(vi) merits particular attention. It introduces the estimative faculty as crucial for the establishment of this connection. And since the soul is subject to the senses, the planetary idol (*ṣanam*) becomes a necessary tool in this process: once the senses connect with the idol, they are followed by the imagination and estimative faculty. The soul is then drawn, by means of the idol, to the celestial spirit. With consistent practice, the connection becomes a stabilized disposition (*malaka*) of the adept's soul and he reaches a level close in rank to the soul innately possessed of occult power. Section (4), which describes the semi-divine powers of the one who has fully developed his occult power, represents the dramatic denouement of *al-Sirr* 1:4. For he who has yet to achieve this perfection, section (5) provides instructions on how, having stabilized his connection with the celestial spirits, the adept might produce transitive magic, by connecting his estimative faculty to the outcome that he desires.

6.2 The Internal Senses: *al-Ishārāt* 3:9

In constructing his theory of Sabian magic, Rāzī consistently highlights the crucial roles played by the estimative faculty and the imagination in *al-Sirr*. However he omits a description of their nature and activity which is essential to our understanding of his theory. His allusions to the internal faculties draw on the psychology of Avicenna and so it is *al-Ishārāt* 3:9 and Rāzī's commentary

thereon that we shall consult for a particularly succinct statement concerning them.

Avicenna's account of perception is deeply informed by Aristotelian hylomorphism whereby either the forms of sense data or mental objects are impressed (*inṭaba'a*) or inscribed (*irtasama*) by agent faculties into receptive faculties. He begins his account of the internal faculties with the common sense (*al-hiss al-mushtarak*) since its sphere of activity is the closest to the external senses, and its existence is the most evident and the least controversial. The common sense receives sensible data or forms (*ṣuwar*) from the five external senses and combines them to form an integrated experience of extra-mental reality. Sometimes, however, this activity can produce an experience which does not strictly accord with the extra-mental reality from which the sense data derive. Thus a raindrop as it falls appears as a straight line; a dot painted on a rapidly rotating circle itself appears to the observer as a circle, on account of the rapidity of its circular motion. Neither the line of the raindrop, nor the circle of the rotating dot, is a visual experience produced by the vision, a faculty in which only the form of that which directly presents itself to it is represented (*al-baṣr innamā tartasimu fīhi ṣūra al-muqābil*).²⁸⁴ Rather it is produced by the common sense which combines sense data that it receives and apprehends them (*tajtami' al-maḥsūsāt wa-tudriku-hā*), generating the perception to which the soul (*mushāhada*).

²⁸⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 248.

Rāzī expounds on Avicenna’s account of the common sense in the following way. He says the two examples of the rain drop and the rotating point illustrate the activity of the common sense which integrates the forms of sense data received by the external senses (*al-quwwa allatī tajtami ‘ fihā ṣuwar al-mahsūsāt bi’l-hawāss al-khamsa*). In the case of these two examples, the observer experiences the perception (*mushāhada*) of forms which describe a descending line and a rotating circle respectively. They are not in themselves sensible forms since neither exists in actuality in the extra-mental world. The question therefore arises as to where these forms come to be imprinted: the locus of their imprinting cannot be the external sense faculty of the vision, which only perceives objects which do in fact exist in the extra-mental world; nor can it be the substance of the soul which, being non-corporeal, cannot serve as the locus of corporeal forms. Their locus must therefore be an internal corporeal faculty: the common sense. This sense ‘sees’ the ‘shape of a line’ (*shakl al-khatt*) because the raindrop, when at point₁, leaves the imprint of its form, having been received by the external sense faculty of the vision, in the common sense; but before this imprint can vanish from the common sense, the raindrop leaves yet another imprint of its form when it has reached point₂; these forms are combined in the common sense which, as a result of this combination, perceives a continuous line between these two points.²⁸⁵ Working in concert with the common sense is a second faculty, the sensible memory (*al-khayāl*), which Avicenna also names the representational power (*al-muṣawwira*): this faculty acts as a storage facility which retains the images of sense data.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 248.

²⁸⁶ Literally ‘*al-khayāl*’ means ‘the imagination’. However, for the sake of clarity, I shall translate it as ‘the sensible memory’ since in Avicenna’s psychology it refers to the faculty which stores forms (*ṣuwar*) of sensible objects (*maḥsūsāt*): it is a memory store for a particular kind of percept.

Whilst the common sense receives and apprehends sense data (*ṣuwar*) from the external senses, a third faculty called the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*), which is also possessed by higher animals, receives and apprehends a fundamentally different percept: the ‘intention’ (*ma‘nā*). This percept is non-sensible but inheres in sensible objects. An example of such a percept is that which the sheep apprehends from the wolf, or that which the ram apprehends from the ewe. Thus, with the first example, whilst the sheep perceives the wolf’s snarl and bared teeth with its external senses, which convey these data to the common sense, it is with the estimative faculty that the sheep perceives the wolf’s predatory intentions. Such intentions are conveyed for storage in a fourth separate faculty called *al-dhākira* – or the estimative memory.²⁸⁷

Since it has the closest interaction with the external senses, the common sense is located at the front of the brain; the sensible memory is situated in the interior cavity (*al-baṭn al-muqaddam*); and whilst the locus of estimative faculty is to be found further to the back of the brain in the middle cavity (*al-tajwīf al-awsaṭ*), it employs the entire brain as its instrument (*ālātu-hā al-dimāgh kullu-hu*). The estimative faculty is served by a fifth faculty, the locus of which is the front part of the middle cavity. Its activity involves splitting apart and recombining forms taken from the common sense and intentions perceived by the estimative

When the soul recollects a physical form, it draws on *al-khayāl* – the sensible memory, which is not to be confused with the faculty of the *mutakhayyila*, a word deriving from the same root as *khayāl*. The *mutakhayyila* actively draws on forms stored in the sensible memory (*al-khayāl*) and can compose (*tarkīb*) them to produce a fantastical image such as a winged horse. Since this activity is much closer to how we conceive of ‘the imagination’, I shall reserve this word to translate *al-mutakhayyila*. The reader, however, must note the following: both Avicenna and Rāzī, confusingly, often use the word *al-khayal* to refer to the imagination. I shall draw the reader’s attention to this fact whenever this occurs.

²⁸⁷ ‘*Dhākira*’ literally means ‘the memory’. I shall translate it as ‘the estimative memory’ to avoid any confusion with the ‘sensible memory’.

faculty. Moreover, it combines forms with intentions as well as separating the former from the latter (*turakkīb ayḍan al-ṣuwar bi'l-ma'ānī wa-tufaṣṣilu-hā 'an-hā*). Thus Avicenna describes this power as '*mutaṣarrifa*' – or 'acting without restriction' – on the two different kinds of percepts which the soul perceives and stores. Its activity takes place in one of three modes: (1) autonomously; (2) under the control of the estimative faculty; (3) under the direction of the intellect. Strictly speaking, since it inheres in a physical substrate, the immaterial intellect cannot act directly upon it. Thus the imagination can only directly serve the estimative faculty. When it does so, then according to Rāzī's commentary to *Ishārāt* 3:9, it is called the imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*). However, it can also serve the intellect (*al-'aql*), but only – and this is crucial – through the mediation of its immediate master, the estimative faculty. When serving the intellect thus, it is called the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*). The close relationship between the estimative faculty and the imagination is reflected by the fact that they share the middle cavity of the brain.²⁸⁸

On the basis of Rāzī's commentary to *al-Ishārāt* 3:9, the attribution of the cogitative and imaginative modalities of the *mutaṣarrifa* to its control, either by

²⁸⁸ According to Lane's *Lexicon*, *ṭaṣarrafa* means: (1) "to be employed in more than one way"; (2) being synonymous with *taqallaba*, "he acted in whatsoever way he pleased, according to his own judgement or discretion or free will, or as a free agent". This first meaning reflects the dual use of this faculty as *al-mutakhayyila* and *al-mufakkira*. When employed neither by the estimative faculty alone nor by the intellect through the estimative faculty's mediation, it acts as a free agent, combining forms with other forms and intentions according to its own will. As we shall notice in the second part of this chapter, neither Avicenna nor Rāzī offer any speculation as to what determines the course of its activity when it acts autonomously. For the sake of clarity and precision, when I wish to discuss this faculty neutrally, neither as the imagination nor the cogitative to the faculty, I shall refer to it as the *mutaṣarrifa*. It should be borne in mind that whilst Avicenna describes this faculty as such, he does not use this word as a formal term of designation.

the estimative faculty or by the intellect (by means of the estimative faculty), seems straightforward. However Rāzī's commentary to *Ishārāt* 10:14, where he suggests the cogitative faculty can operate in service of either one or the other, gives us reason to be cautious of such an overhasty conclusion. Discussing the two obstacles which prevent the imagination from impressing the forms of dreams and visions in the common sense, Rāzī says:

the second obstacle relates to the agent [i.e. the imagination which impresses the dream into the common sense] for when the intellect or the estimation uses the cogitative faculty, which becomes preoccupied with the service of one of them, it is not free to perform its own special actions.²⁸⁹

It would appear therefore that the estimative faculty also engages in cogitative activity using the *mutaṣarrifa*. What the objects of its cogitation are we shall discuss in the next section.

But to conclude our overview of the internal senses, Deborah Black identifies three epistemological principles by which Avicenna adduces these five internal faculties:

- (i) Being percepts of a fundamentally different nature, sensible forms (*ṣuwar*) and intentions (*ma'ānī*) require different faculties to be perceived;
- (ii) The same faculty cannot be both active (manipulating percepts in some way) and passive (receiving percepts as impressions);

²⁸⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 647.

- (iii) The same faculty cannot be both receptive and retentive, receiving the impressions of percepts as well as retaining them, since the former activity requires a malleable substrate whilst the latter activity requires a more stable substrate.²⁹⁰

It is in mindfulness of rules (i) and (iii), points out Black, that Avicenna posits two pairs of receptive-retentive faculties: the common sense and the sensible memory to receive and retain sensible forms respectively; and the estimative faculty and the estimative memory to receive and retain intentions. Rule (ii) gives rise to the need for the imagination as a separate faculty which acts on percepts, dividing and reuniting sensible forms and intentions in different combinations. It never ceases from action. So when it is neither serving the estimative faculty alone, nor the intellect by way of the estimative faculty's direction, it continues its activity autonomously.

6.3 The Estimative Faculty

Having gained this overview of the five internal senses, I shall now explore further the estimative faculty and its close relationship with the imagination in order to present a deeper understanding of their role in Rāzī's conceptualization of Sabian worship and their use of idols in establishing noetic connection with the celestial spirits.

²⁹⁰ See Black, 'Imagination and Estimation'.

The relationship between the estimation and its percepts is modelled in close analogy to the external senses and sense data.²⁹¹ The estimation is the analogue of reason in the animal soul.²⁹² Its percepts are:

...non-sense-perceptible ‘intentions’ which exist in particular sense-perceptible objects; like the faculty existing in sheep judging that this wolf is something to flee from and that this child is something to have affection for. It is likely that this faculty is also responsible for combining and separating the forms <stored in the faculty> of the imagination.²⁹³

This passage reveals four aspects of the nature of the estimative faculty’s percepts or ‘intentions.’ Firstly, they cannot be perceived by the external senses. Secondly, they are particular. Thirdly, they inhere in sense-perceptible objects. Fourthly, their existence is independent of the estimative faculty perceiving them. The passage also reveals three aspects of the estimative faculty. Firstly, it is the faculty which perceives ‘intentions’. Secondly, the estimative faculty reacts to them in some way. And thirdly, the estimative faculty separates and combines them with forms stored in the sensible memory.

In *al-Shifā*, Avicenna includes in his category of intentions, together with non-sensible percepts such as the hostility of wolves, ostensibly sensible percepts associated with a form, such as the sweetness of yellow honey when it is ‘seen’ as being sweet rather than being judged as such by means of direct taste.²⁹⁴ In

²⁹¹ Hasse, *Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West*.

²⁹² For a general exploration of this point see Black, ‘Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna’.

²⁹³ Avicenna, *De Anima*, (Arabic Text), p. 45, line 6, translated in Hasse *Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West*. What is here translated as ‘imagination’, I would render ‘sensible memory’.

²⁹⁴ ‘Then we may judge concerning the sensibles through intentions which we do not sense, which are either not sensibles in their natures at all, or which are sensibles, but we do not sense

this case, the sweetness of the honey is perceived neither by the external sense of vision, nor by the external sense most appropriate to apprehending sweetness, namely the sense of taste. Rather, Black argues, given its inclusion as an intention, the sweetness of the honey is being perceived other than as a sensible percept.

In other circumstances of course, such as when I lick my finger having dipped it into the honey pot, the sweetness of the honey would be a sensible form, not an intention. Whilst some objects of perception, such as the hostility of wolves, will always be intentions, the status of others as such will depend on the nature of the perception between subject and object.

What, therefore, does Avicenna imagine is the link between wolfish hostility and honey-sweetness in the context we have discussed? Black argues that the link is in memory. If in the past the perceiver has tasted something sweet that is yellow, he may come to associate yellow things with honey. Similarly, the dog repeatedly beaten by the stick will come to fear the stick. Having previously been repeatedly thrashed by a stick, the dog's estimation draws on the estimative memory (*dhikr*), evokes the intentions stored from those previous beatings and combines them with the form of a new stick. Black says: 'images must be associated with the intentions that make them icons²⁹⁵ of particular, concrete individuals.'²⁹⁶

them at the time of the judgement. . . . As for those which are sensibles, we see, for example, something yellow, and we judge that it is honey and sweet. For the sense does not convey this to it at this moment, though it is of the genus of the sensible, even if the judgement itself does not take place through anything sensible at all. . . .' Healing: Psychology, 4.1, p. 166; Van Riet, Vol. 2, pp. 6-7, quoted and translated in Black in *Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna*.

²⁹⁵ Black's use of the word 'icon', drawing on Aristotle's use of the Greek word 'eikon' in his *De Memoria* 1.450a22-451a14, is particularly significant for the purpose of understanding how Rāzī

Since the estimative memory and the sensible memory are retentive and thus passive in nature, a third faculty is required to make links actively between immediately perceived intentions and those stored from previous experiences. This faculty is the imagination, acting under the control of the estimative faculty. But this would appear to defy the principle previously stated that activity and passivity cannot obtain in the same faculty. Mercurial in nature, the estimative faculty seems to be playing both active and passive roles in the process of cognition.

This apparent contradiction can perhaps be resolved by examining more closely the principle which the estimative faculty apparently offends. The principle maintains that an internal sense faculty cannot be both active in relation to its sense objects (somehow manipulating them) and passive in relation to them (i.e. being impressed upon by their percepts). The apparent contradictory role of the estimative faculty can thus be resolved in one of two ways. One way is to modify this principle with the qualification that an internal sense faculty cannot act both actively and passively in any one given moment. Thus it may alternate between active and passive modes of behaviour in different moments. A second way to resolve the contradiction is to maintain that whilst an internal sense faculty cannot both receive impressions from percepts passively as well as manipulate them actively, it is not precluded from the ability to receive percepts whilst at the same time actively to manipulate a second internal faculty, such as the imagination, which acts on those percepts directly, linking them to similar percepts stored in the estimative memory. A third way is to

portrays the use of idols as talismans in astral magic. (See Black, 'Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna' p.228)

²⁹⁶ Black, 'Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna', p.227.

maintain that whilst the estimative faculty cannot act on any intention it is receiving in the present time, it can act on those which have already been stored in the memory (*dhikr*). This third approach, however, leaves the imagination redundant. Of these possible approaches, it is the second which fits most congruently within Avicenna's structure of the internal sense faculties.

The estimative faculty does not only perceive intentions but it also reacts to them. As Hasse points out, this becomes clear in a passage from Avicenna's *De Anima* concerning the estimation's reactions to the past and the future:

Sometimes in the course of remembering, some grief, anger and sorrow arises which resembles the state <of the soul> at the time when the <remembered> thing was present; for the only reason of grief, anger and sorrow about the past is the imprinting of this form in the interior of the senses. If the form returns, it produces this <disposition> or something similar. Wishes and expectation also produce this. Expectation is different from wishing because expectation is the imagination of something with the judgement or opinion that it probably will happen, while wishing is the imagination of something and desire for it and the judgement that joy will ensue if it takes place. Fear is the opposite of expectation in the way of contradiction; despair is its absence. These are all judgements of estimation.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ Hasse, 'Avicenna's *De Anima* in the Latin West', p. 133 translating Avicenna's *De Anima*, IV, 3, ed. Rahman, p. 187. Whether or not the estimative faculty's reaction to an intention amounts to a 'judgement' must be treated with caution. In his study of the estimative faculty in Avicenna's psychology, Robert E. Hall observes: 'Judging (along with other words from the base form *h-k-m*) is greatly overused by Avicenna in connection with the *wahm*. The meaning shifts from 'discriminating' or 'distinguishing' to making judgements about what to do or what to believe, that is, to "directing" or 'controlling'. As a term in a language of analysis it has little value unless it is clearly qualified each time.' Robert E. Hall, 'the *Wahm* in Avicenna's Psychology'.

Sorrow, for example, about a past event, is the result of a judgement that the estimation produces when it links a retained form stored with a stored intention. A similar process occurs when an actual object is perceived in present time, such as when the sheep encounters the wolf.²⁹⁸

Thus not only does the estimative faculty perceive intentions, but it also combines them with forms to create the perception of an integrated experience. For Avicenna, it is the governing critical faculty in the animal soul.²⁹⁹ The reactions or judgements which it produces such as fear or desire provide the impulse which harnesses the body and propels it into action. Moreover it can harness the imagination (*al-fikr* or *al-quwwa al-mufakkira*) to produce composite images without references to external images.³⁰⁰ We have already encountered in the illustration of the dog and the stick an example of the estimative faculty directing the imagination which draws on the estimative memory (*dhikr*) and the sensible memory (*khayal*), to combine form with intention, which induces the estimation to produce a judgement that results in the dog's fear and hence aversion to the stick. This is a process which takes place within the animal soul of a dog. It is a process which also takes place within the human. But within the human, the estimative faculty can also harness the imagination to create fictional images, such as a phoenix: 'creative imagination, then, presents us with an activity of human estimation which opens up the possibility of interaction between estimation and intellect, even if its results are merely vain ideas'.³⁰¹ In such a role, the estimative faculty functions as a kind of mediator between the intellect and the world of sensibles.

²⁹⁸ Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West*, p. 134.

²⁹⁹ Black, 'Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna', p. 227.

³⁰⁰ Black, 'Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna', p. 227.

³⁰¹ Black, 'Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna', p. 227.

Such is the degree of agency with which the estimative faculty operates in the human soul, that it can even override the intellect and deny the intelligibles it perceives. Whilst the estimative faculty's percepts are not essentially material, they are nevertheless inherent in sensible objects. Whilst it perceives non-material objects, as governor of the animal soul, it possesses a physical substrate. Insofar as this is the case, the estimative faculty only understands things to the extent that they are rooted in a material reality. Thus it applies its judgement to non-sensible matters in the same way that it applies it to matters which have a sensible reality, giving rise to false propositions. Unlike the intellect, the estimative faculty is not possessed of self-awareness, and is thus incapable of realizing its own limitation and restraining itself from leading the soul into error.³⁰² Indeed such is the strength of the estimative faculty, that it can impel the soul to accept judgements that the intellect knows to be false, such as the judgement of the uncleanliness of honey on account of its resemblance to yellow bile. It is awareness of this reality that induces Rāzī, when describing the reasoning that underlies idolatry and astral magic in *al-Sirr*, to state: 'The soul has been created obedient to the activities of the estimative faculty'. This is a striking statement which underscores the central role played by the estimative faculty in the process of cognition.

Indeed its range of activity does not cease there. As Robert E. Hall observes, it is by means of the agent estimative faculty (*al-wahm al- 'āmil*) that the thaumaturgy

³⁰² Black points out that, according to Avicenna, for many the estimation overrides the intellect in its insistence that a thing must occupy space and have position, inducing them to apply the same assumption to God, thus leading them to anthropomorphism. Thus did Avicenna explain the widespread and persistent phenomenon of materialism in human culture. (Black, 'Estimation (Wahm) in Avicenna', p. 228). See Adamson, 'Fakhr al-Dīn On Place' on Rāzī, and his attitude to thought experiments and the role of *wahm* in reason.

of prophets, saints and sorcerers is performed. The emotional responses with which it reacts to certain stimuli can produce heat and cooling effects within the body as well as the expansion of the sexual organ due to the perception of a form generated by the imagination. Medical healing is accomplished when the form of health is transmitted directly from the estimative faculty of the physician to the patient. Furthermore, notes Hall:

a powerful soul can go beyond its own body and through direct action establish new forms in the external corporeal world (in the natural, sub-lunar realm), that is to say, act directly on other bodies; in this connection Avicenna mentions the ‘evil eye’ and the ‘operant wahm’. In acting on the natural world in supernatural ways, such a soul must operate in accordance with the intelligible structure of the world (*bi-ḥasab al-wājib al-‘aqlī*); it acts directly as soul, however without following the processes of Aristotelian science, where bodies that change must be in contact and act and be acted upon through the primary natural qualities of hot and cold, moist and dry. The production of miraculous actions as a distance by Prophets (and certain others) involves the whole soul *qua* practical (*i.e.*, the conative moving powers in the animal level of the soul; *al-quwwa al-ḥayawāniyya al-muḥarrika al-ijmā‘iyya*); these, as we have seen, are under the direction of the *wahm*, here the operant *wahm*.³⁰³

We have seen therefore that the estimation is a faculty of the soul that mediates between the sensible world and the world of the intellect. Although it has a physical substrate in the middle cavity, which it shares with the *mutaṣarrifa*, the

³⁰³ Hall, ‘the Wahm in Avicenna’s Psychology’, p. 544. See Avicenna’s *al-Shifā: Nafs*, IV.4, p. 200 line 11-p. 201 line 9.

entire physical brain represents its field of operation. It commands the *mutaṣarrifa* in both its cogitative as well as its imaginative activities and thus effectively governs the animal soul. Whilst the objects of its perception are not essentially material, they nevertheless inhere in sensible objects. Under its direction, the imagination can construct fantastical images without reference to anything extra-mental. And whilst it lacks the self-awareness of the intellect, and often extends its judgements into areas it cannot possibly understand, it plays a crucial role in delivering the sensible world to the intellect for analysis. Finally, its activity is not restricted to cognition but extends to direct action on the corporeal world.

6.4 Ten proofs of the soul's occult power to affect the physical world

With this knowledge of the internal senses, we are now better equipped to understand Rāzī's construction of Sabian magic. The purpose of the opening passage of the *Psychology of al-Sirr* is to establish the hypothetical reality of the human soul possessed of occult power insofar as such a reality cannot be denied or dismissed as impossible (*lā yab'ud*). This proposition rests on two premises: (1) the soul's estimative faculty can affect the physical world; and (2) if it were admitted that there are souls whose power to affect the physical world is weak then the reverse, namely the existence of souls whose power to affect the physical world is strong, remains at the least a logical possibility. In this section I shall present the first of these premises in detail; the second requires no

further examination other than the observation which I shall make at the conclusion of this section.

The first premise is supported by ten observations which carry a number of implications which require attention. The soul's occult power is grounded in two processes: 'the purification of the soul and the connection³⁰⁴ of the activities of the estimative faculty³⁰⁵ (*taṣfiyat al-nafs wa-ta'liq al-awhām*)'. The ten observations adduced to support the reality of the occult power that lies in potential in the soul's estimative faculty emphasize the second of these two processes.³⁰⁶ Here they are in summary:

(i) When an archer wants to shoot an arrow at a specific target, he will be unable to do so unless he focuses his heart (*jama'a al-qalb*): then will he strike his target (*tajrī al-iṣāba*).

(ii) When the mountain goat wants to descend from lofty peaks then it forms an intention to reach a smaller peak (*'amadat ilā qillat al-jabal*), the height of which is but two or three miles; it then mentally focuses on a safe landing (*tafakkarat fī al-salāma fikran ṣaḥīhan*); and then it hurls itself towards the small peak, landing safely on its horns. Were it not for its visualization of safety (*law lā taṣawwuru-hā li'l-salāma*) then it would perish.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Connection is my translation of *ta'liq* which is a doubly transitive verb meaning 'to make something attach or connect with something else'; its second direct object (which is not mentioned in this case) is governed by the preposition *'alā*. For the efficacy of magical ritual, therefore, that to which the estimative faculty is made to connect is of crucial importance.

³⁰⁵ *wahm* can refer both to the estimative faculty itself as well as its activity; its plural *awhām*, used here refers to the faculties activities.

³⁰⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 11-12.

³⁰⁷ Being deprived of an intellect, the faculty with which the mountain goat visualizes the non-material, particular object of safety must be its estimative faculty. The mountain-goat engages in

- (iii) Both reason and scripture (*al-‘aql wa’l-naql*) concur that the Evil Eye is a reality, and this can only be due to psychic influence (*ta’thīr nafsānī*).
- (iv) Walking over a bridge near the ground would not constitute any difficulty; however, if it were situated on high ground, an man’s with imagination of falling (*takhayyul al-suqūṭ*) might send him over the edge.
- (v) If imaginative visualizations can act as the causes (*asbāb*) for the powers in the limbs to become principles for action, having merely existed as principles in potentiality, then it is not impossible for them to act directly on other bodies.
- (vi) Experience and reason (*al-tajriba wa’l-qiyās*) testify that visualizations can be principles for the generation of qualities in bodies (*mabādi’ li-ḥudūth al-kayfiyāt fī al-abdān*): for example, intense anger can give rise to very intense heat.³⁰⁸
- (vii) There is consensus that the one suffering from a nose bleed (*al-mar ‘ūf*) should be prevented from looking at red objects and the epileptic should be prevented from looking at excessively bright or rotating objects, for fear of inducing a seizure.
- (viii) When a hen imitates a rooster in its cry and aggressiveness, its legs grow spurs like that of a rooster and this shows that bodily conditions are subject to psychic conditions (*al-aḥwāl al-nafsāniya*).

a form of ‘*tafakkur*’ or thought; this must be produced by *al-mutaṣṣarifa*, directed by the estimative faculty the governing faculty in the animal soul. Of course, the mountain goat has no intellect, so I refer to the faculty which produces its ‘thought’ with the neutral label ‘*al-mutaṣarriḥa*’.

³⁰⁸ The humorous illustrative example that Rāzī adduces is as follows: ‘It has been related that a king was once afflicted by hemiplegia, the treatment of which the physicians were incapable. So one astute individual of their number unexpectedly assailed him with violent verbal abuse; his anger inflamed, the king leapt from the place where he was lying to strike his abuser and so the blockages were flushed away (*fā indafa ‘at al-mawād*) on account of the heat of anger and so this strong illness ceased’, Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 12.

(ix) Variety in visualization exerts an effect on the body. Because of their proximity to humans, domestic animals have greater sensitivity than wild animals and have a wider imaginal range. As a result, there is, apparently, greater physical variety amongst species of domestic animals.

(x) A man's voice and demeanour change in accordance with his mood and visualizations (*taṣawwurātu-hu al-nafsāniya*).

From these ten illustrations, four themes emerge which anticipate subsequent discussions on the soul's purification and the process of making the estimative faculty connect with an intended goal. They will remain centrally important to the psychology of *al-Sirr*. Firstly, the illustrations of the archer aiming at his target in (i), and the mountain goat focusing on a safe landing in (ii), underscore the fact that the measure of the soul's ability to divest itself of all distractions other than its aim, is the measure of its ability to achieve that aim which, in both cases, involves changing physical external reality. As we shall discover later in this chapter, purification divests the soul of those character traits and humoral imbalances which distract it from focusing on its purpose. Secondly the soul's potential to affect the physical world extends not just to the body which it inhabits, as illustrated in (vi), (viii), (ix) and (x), but also to external bodies as indicated by (v) and (iii). Thirdly the soul's activities of visualization (*taṣawwur*), mental focus (*tafakkur*), and imagining (*takhayyul*) are crucial to the exercise of its occult power as illustrated by (ii), (iv), (ix) and (x): all three of these cognate activities are generated by the imagination closely directed by the estimative faculty. And fourthly, intense emotion, as exemplified by the fear of the man walking over the chasm in (iv), and the rage of the verbally abused king in (vi),

greatly magnify occult power and the effect of the soul's visualization and imagination. Circumstances can be manipulated such that intense emotion can be generated in order to bring about the desired result, as in the case of the enterprising physician curing the king's hemiplegia by means of verbal abuse. This is of crucial significance for the arrangement of the planetary rituals of *al-Sirr*.

The fourth illustration of the man walking over the wooden bridge suspended over a deep chasm derives from Avicenna's *al-Shifa*.³⁰⁹ It demonstrates the extent to which the soul is subject to the external senses. It raises an interesting question which goes to the heart of his conception of the estimative faculty's cognitive process. The assessment of peril by the estimative faculty, leading to its reaction – or judgement – of fear, derives initially from its perception of the danger inherent in the situation. What role does the intention play in this process? It would appear that the estimative faculty extracts the intention of peril from the sensory data that the common sense receives, in much the same way that the sheep extracts the intention of danger from the hungry wolf. Both of these examples seem to illustrate an instinctual response to a situation, as opposed to the reaction of the dog which has learnt through painful experience to be wary of the man wielding the stick. Thus, having extracted the intention of peril from the situation, the estimative faculty of our weak-kneed bridge walker judges the danger accordingly, giving rise to fear, prompting his imagination to generate the vertiginous feeling of falling which ultimately translates into reality.

³⁰⁹ See Avicenna, *De Anima*, p. 200, lines 1-4.

The illustration is also to be found in *al-Ishārāt* 10:26 where Avicenna says:

the estimative imagining of the man walking across a tree stump which traverses empty space (*wahm al-māshī ‘alā jadhi ‘ma ‘rūd fawq faḍā*) affects his loss of footing in a way that a similar estimative imagining does not, were the tree stump resting on firm ground.³¹⁰

The estimative imagining of falling is occasioned by the walker’s vertiginous awareness of his circumstances and the fear thereby induced. That the immediate cause of the man’s loss of footing is his imagination of falling (*takhayyul al-suqūt*) is made more explicit in Rāzī’s version of this illustration in *al-Sirr*. Reading each version of the illustration in light of the other underscores the close link between the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*) and the imagination (*al-takhayyul*). Avicenna adduces this example in *Ishārāt* 10:26 in order to illustrate his assertion that:

the disposition of belief which is consolidated (in the soul), and whatever corollaries arise from it, can flow to the body despite the fact that (the soul) is separate from it in essence.³¹¹

Commenting on this passage in his commentary to the *Ishārāt*, Rāzī says:

psychic dispositions (*al-hay’āt al-nafsāniya*) can act as the principle causes for the coming to be of things which come to be in bodies (*mabādi li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādith fī al-abdān*) despite the fact that souls are separate from them (*ma ‘a kawn al-nufūs mubāyina lahā*).³¹²

Avicenna, explains Rāzī, supports this assertion with four arguments. The first three are of concern to us here:

³¹⁰ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 657.

³¹¹ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.657.

³¹² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.658.

the first is that a man can walk on a plank of wood (*khashaba*) which has been placed on the ground but were this plank of wood placed on the edge of a wall then his foot would not be so sure (*lamma tamakkana min al-mashī 'alayhā*) and this is for no other reason than that the estimative imagination of falling necessitates falling (*tawahhum al-suqūṭ yūjib al-suqūṭ*). The second is that the humoral balances (*amziya*) of men change according to changes within their psychic states, with respect to anger, grief, fear and joy: that is known self-evidently (*ma lūm bi'l-ḍurūra*). The third is that the intense focus of the estimative faculty (*at-tawahhum al-shadīd*) on illness or health may cause that very state; this is known by way of both anecdote and induction (*al-ikhtibār wa'l-istiqrā*).³¹³

The ability of intense emotional states such as 'anger, grief, fear and joy' to transform the humoral balance, and thus of the soul to transform the physical world is once again highlighted, resonating with the illustration of the king's rage in *al-Sirr*.

This is anticipated in *al-Ishārāt* 10:6 which discusses the ability of the man possessed of gnosis (*'arif*) to perform acts with a power which far exceeds normal human capacity. Avicenna reasons in the following way: in a state of emotional equilibrium, an individual will have a limited power to act; when overcome by certain emotional states such as fear or grief, this power to act is reduced to one tenth of its usual capacity; when overcome by other states such as joy or rage, his usual capacity to act is greatly magnified. Concerning this passage, Rāzī comments:

³¹³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 658.

The upshot of this reasoning is that we see <the soul's> power varying in strength and weakness in accordance with the variation in psychic states (*aḥwāl nafsānīya*). So it is not impossible for he who is possessed of gnosis to have a state of soul that is the cause of the intensification of his power to the extent that he can perform an act which breaches the usual course of events (*khāriq li'l- 'āda*). This reasoning is similar to what they say in order to prove saintly power (*quwwa qudsiyya*), which is that we see people's states of understanding vary: there are those who are average; those who are above average; and those who are below. Therefore since we see the furthest extreme of deficiency (*al-nuqṣān*) ends with those who have no understanding except but a little, then it is not impossible (*lā yustab 'ad*) that the opposite extreme of extraordinary <capacity> (*al-ziyāda*) ends with those who are able to perform supernatural feats.³¹⁴

Four issues of note emerge from this commentary. Firstly, while Avicenna merely alludes to acts performed with an extraordinary capacity, Rāzī explicitly identifies them acts which breach the usual course of events (*khāriq li'l- 'āda*). Secondly, Rāzī couches his commentary on this passage in the language of deficiency (*al-nuqṣān*) and extraordinary capacity (*al-ziyāda*); this resonates very deliberately with the language of human perfection with which he expresses his ideas concerning prophethood and sainthood that appear in his discussion of prophethood *al-Maṭālib*. Thirdly, by contrasting the deficiency of understanding of those at one end of the human spectrum with the extraordinary capacity of those who are able to perform supernatural feats at the other extreme, Rāzī highlights the close connection between knowledge and power that is

³¹⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 637.

emphasized in the introduction to *al-Sirr*. And fourthly, he ends his commentary on this passage by citing the (albeit inconclusive) proof for the logical possibility of saintly power which reasons that if the existence of one extreme of human ignorance were admitted, then the existence of its opposite cannot be dismissed. Rāzī deploys the very same proof to close the opening section of the psychology of *al-Sirr* in order to establish the reality of the soul possessed of occult power as the main subject of the chapter's inquiry. Treating the ability of the soul to affect change in the corporeal world, he says:

...we observe that these effects differ in their strength and weakness. For, just as we see that this kind of influence can be weak in one man, it is not impossible (*lā yab'ud*) that there can be a man in whom this kind of influence is powerful such that he is capable of performing that which others are powerless to perform.³¹⁵

6.5 Innate Occult Power

Having grounded the soul's occult power (*quwwat al-nafs 'alā al-ityān bi'l-fi'l al-khāriq li'l- 'āda*) in the processes of purification and the focusing of the estimative power, Rāzī examines the logical possibilities that such power can either be innate (*naẓariyya*) or acquired (*kasbiyya*). Before he expounds on acquired occult power, the main focus of the *Psychology of al-Sirr*, he presents two alternative philosophical positions to explain the reality of the soul innately possessed of occult power: the first proposes that the human soul is a self-subsisting

³¹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 12

substance; the second, that the soul is identical to the humoral temperament. If this first position were accepted, then the logical possibility of a soul which differs from all other souls, by virtue of its self-subsisting substance, must be accepted; such a soul can be characterized by a unique power which enables it to perform feats which are beyond the abilities of other human souls. This is the position which Rāzī himself adopts:

The supporting proof establishing its in-born nature rests on a premise, namely whether it is a self-subsisting substance (*jawhar qā'im bi-dhāti-hi*) or merely equivalent to the unique humoral temperament (*'ibāra 'an hādihā al-mizāj al-makhṣūṣ*). If we accept the first disjunct then it is not impossible (*lā yamtani*) that one man's soul can differ in quiddity from all other souls; furthermore, by virtue of its unique quiddity (*al-māhiya al-makhṣūṣa*), it is characterized by a power (*qudra*) which does not obtain in other souls; so it follows that this soul is able to perform acts of which others are incapable. Such is the case were we to aver that human souls differ in their quiddity - which is the truth.³¹⁶

The second position by way of contrast maintains that: human souls are in fact equal and one in their quiddity; the soul is identical to the humoral temperament; the differences between souls arise from variations in their humoral temperaments; and the power to perform supernatural acts derives from a unique humoral temperament. Rāzī says:

If we were to say that they are one in their quiddity then there can be no doubt that they differ on account of their bodily tools (*al-ālāt al-badaniya*) and the accidents of their souls (*al-a' rāḍ al-nafsāniya*). So it is not unlikely

³¹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 12-13.

(*lā yab ‘ud*) that some souls (*ba ‘d al-anfus*) can be especially characterized by a special humoral temperament (*mizāj makḥṣūṣ*) which functions as its tool for the performance of acts which breach the usual course of events (*al-af‘āl al-khāriqa li’l- ‘āda*) or that some psychic accidents, by which they are specially characterized, empower them to perform these breaches (*al-khawāriq*); for when the light of the unseen world becomes manifest to these souls (*idhā tajallā li-tilka al-nufūs nūr ‘ālam al-ghayb*), they become empowered to perform that which other souls cannot perform. [...] If we assert that the soul is naught but this special humoral temperament then there is no doubt that humoral temperaments vary. So it is not unlikely (*lā yab ‘ud*) that there can be a wondrous humoral temperament which empowers the one possessed of it to perform that which others cannot perform. So it is established from what we have mentioned that that cannot be deemed unlikely (*lā istib ‘āda fī dhālika*).³¹⁷

Thus on the basis of two competing philosophical positions on the nature of the human soul, Rāzī constructs two alternative theories to explain the nature of the soul innately possessed of occult power. Whilst he clearly indicates his preference for the first over the second, he provides no refutation of the latter. This is because his main purpose is to construct a theory of magic which explains how occult power might be acquired. The internal coherence of the theory which he constructs is unaffected by which particular doctrine on the soul is to be preferred. The existence of the soul innately possessed of occult power is couched in hypothetical language: neither argument represents proofs

³¹⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 13.

of the actual but rather the possible existence of such souls. Only empirical proof could sustain the positive assertion of their actual existence:

As for the definite assertion of its reality it is something that cannot be known unless it is witnessed (*amā al-jazm bi-wuqū 'ihi fa-min ma lā yu 'raf illā bi'l-mushāhada*). All this discussion applies in the case of when the soul's power to breach (natural law) is innate (*fiṭriyya*).³¹⁸

This minor and limited digression into the nature of the soul arises from the need to place the subsequent discussion on the nature of the soul's acquisition of occult power within a broader philosophical framework. A brief outline of that framework, as presented in *al-Maṭālib*, would serve to contextualize this short discussion in *al-Sirr*.³¹⁹ Here he lists three general positions which identify the nature of self³²⁰ as: (1) the body; (2) an accident which inheres in the body (*'araḍ sārī fī jism*); (3) an abstracted substance (*jawhar mujarrad*). Since for Rāzī it is self-evident (*ḍurūrī*) that the soul is a substance (*jawhar*) as opposed to an accident (*'araḍ*), he immediately eliminates the second of these three disjuncts.³²¹ The two remaining disjuncts reflect the two competing philosophical positions on the nature of the human soul which are presented in *al-Sirr*. In *al-Maṭālib*, Rāzī divides the first of the two remaining disjuncts into two competing positions, which alternatively identify the self with: (1a) the body or; (1b) a body within the body (*jism mushābik li'l-badn*). The first of these, (1a), is the position adopted by the *mutakallimūn* and the majority of people (*jumhūr al-nās*);

³¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 13.

³¹⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 33-138.

³²⁰ Literally the *anā*, or the "I".

³²¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 37-8.

the second, (1b) comprises eight competing positions, each of which respectively identifies the self as:

- (i) The four humours (*al-akhlāṭ al-arba‘ā*);
- (ii) The blood;
- (iii) The subtle blood produced in the left side of the heart;
- (iv) The spirit (*rūḥ*) which rises from the heart to the brain;
- (v) An indivisible part of the heart;
- (vi) A subtle, luminous, lofty body (*jism nūrānī ‘alawī khafīf*) which has a completely different quiddity (*māhiya*) from the physical body;
- (vii) A part of the physical body that endures throughout a lifespan;
- (viii) The chief organs which do not endure after death.³²²

In *al-Sirr*, the eight competing positions of (1b) are reduced to just one, the temperament (*mizāj*), which is equivalent to the first of these eight, namely the four humours. Moreover, the conventional position of (1a) adopted by the *mutakallimūn*, namely that the self is equivalent to the body, does not feature in *al-Sirr* as a viable account of the soul innately possessed of occult power, discussion of which is expedited by confining the reader’s attention to the simple dichotomy of the soul as a self-subsisting substance or as equivalent to a special temperament.

In a related passage in the *al-Ishārāt*, of which Rāzī must have been mindful when writing this passage in *al-Sirr*, Ibn Sīnā asserts that the soul’s occult power derives from its temperament (*mizāj*).³²³ Such power can arise from the temperament in one of three ways: (1) it can be primordial (*aṣli*), characterizing

³²² Rāzī, *al-Maṭalib* 7, pp. 37-8.

³²³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 660.

the soul from its very incipience; (2) it can occur to the soul at a later stage in its career, through no effort of its own; and (3) it can be acquired. Commenting on this passage, Rāzī observes that since Avicenna asserts that human souls are equal in their quiddity (*mutasāwiya fī tammām al-māhiya*)³²⁴ then special occult power must arise in a way that is not essential (*dhātī*) but accidental (*‘araḍī*): it is for this reason that Avicenna identifies occult power with the soul’s temperament. Expounding on the third way in which occult power obtains in the soul, Rāzī says:

The third is that this power obtains by way of acquisition and exertion in spiritual discipline and purification of the soul (*al-kasb wa’l-ijtihād fī al-riyāda wa taṣfiya al-nafs*), just as it obtains in the pious friends of God.³²⁵

This leads us now to examine the main focus of the *Psychology* of *al-Sirr*: the acquisition of occult power. Rāzī’s polemical strategy is to amplify, using Avicennan psychology, the ability of ordinary human souls to develop the level of occult power only displayed by prophets.

6.6 Acquired Occult Power

Replicating the dichotomy between souls innately possessed of occult power and those who possess such power by way of acquisition, the conditions which must be fulfilled in the case of the latter are similarly divided between those

³²⁴ Rāzī grumbles that in none of his works does Avicenna provide any proof for this position, which lies in contrast to the position that the soul is a self-subsisting substance which may therefore differ in its quiddity from other human souls, as highlighted in *al-Sirr* (Rāzī *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.660).

³²⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 661.

which are in-born (*ghayr muktasab*)³²⁶ and those which can be fulfilled by means of the aspirant's exertion. Those conditions which are in-born relate to the astrological conditions which obtain at the moment of his birth: these determine his potential for success in this endeavour. The second category of conditions, by way of contrast, can be fulfilled by the aspirant's efforts: they relate to the observance of the correct spiritual austerities that enable the soul to connect with the celestial spirits which empower him to perform magic. They divide into those which relate to the management of the physical body and those which relate to the disposition that the adept is required to inculcate within his soul. In both content and arrangement, this section prefigures Rāzī's commentary on *Ishārāt* 9:8 which treats of the conditions for successful spiritual purification, dividing them into those which are in-born (*ghayr muktasab*) and those which can be fulfilled by means of spiritual exertion; this latter category is similarly divided between the management of the body and the disposition which the spiritual aspirant is encouraged to foster in his soul.³²⁷

I shall now turn to how *al-Sirr* treats the acquisition of occult power, discussing those conditions for magical self-realization which the adept can attempt to fulfil by means of his own exertion. I shall divide them between: (1) the spiritual

³²⁶ Literally meaning 'that which cannot be acquired'.

³²⁷ In *al-Ishārāt* 9:8, Avicenna says: 'The (knower) needs spiritual discipline (*riyāda*): this spiritual discipline is aimed at three goals. The first is to remove from the path of choice that which is other than the Truth; the second is to make the commanding soul obedient to the tranquil soul (*al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*) so that the imaginative and estimative faculties are drawn towards estimative activities (*al-tawahhumāt*) that correspond to the state of sanctity (*al-amr al-quḍṣī*), avoiding those imaginative activities which correspond to the lowly state (*al-amr al-sufī*); the third is to make the innermost essence subtly sensitive to mindful receptivity (*taltīf al-sirr li'l-tannabuh*). Genuine asceticism assists (the realization) of the first. A number of matters assist in (the realization of) the second: worship mediated by contemplation (*al-ibāda al-mashfū'a bi-l'fikra*), tunes which are used on the faculties of the soul which have been composed to accompany discourse (*kalām*) such as are appealing to the imaginative faculty (*al-awhām*); such didactic discourse is to be uttered by someone who is pure, whose turn of phrase is eloquent, whose tune is sweet, containing the best guidance. <The realization of the third> is assisted by subtle thought, pure love, the state of which is determined by the qualities of the beloved, not by the rule of the appetite'. (Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 605).

austerities which relate to the physical management of the body, highlighting close affinities with Rāzī's commentary on *Ishārāt* 9:8; and (2) the disposition of the soul which the adept is required to nurture.³²⁸

6.7 On the means by which occult power is acquired

The fulfilment of those conditions relating to the management of the body and those relating to the soul's disposition serves but one aim: to remove all distractions which may arrest the soul's attention so that it can focus on connection with the celestial spirits. Before examining the required disposition of the soul, I shall examine the physical austerities prescribed for the adept.

6.7.1 Physical austerities

The adept is required to carefully monitor the quality of his diet. An imbalanced diet would impair his ability to connect with the celestial spirits for a number of reasons: if any one of the four humours gained preponderance in the body, the nature of his thoughts and imaginings would adopt the hue of the dominant humour and thus resist focusing on the connection he is trying to achieve:

Just as he must purify his heart from base, superfluous thoughts (*kamā wajaba 'alayhi tanqīya al-qalb 'an fuḍūl al-afkār al-radīya*) he must also purify his body from base superfluous humours (*fuḍūl al-akhlāṭ al-radīya*).

For, if he is dominated by one of the four humours, then his imaginings

³²⁸ Since my analysis divides them into the physical and the mental, I shall not deal with these conditions in the order that they appear in *al-Sirr*.

and thoughts (*takhayyulātu-hu wa-tafakkurātu-hu*) will accord with that humour, and the purpose will not be fulfilled.³²⁹

Whilst humoral imbalance thwarts the soul's noetic connection, the celestial spirits are averse to connection with a human soul that has been nourished on food derived from anything that possesses a spirit: strict veganism therefore becomes a necessity during the period in which the adept is attempting noetic connection.³³⁰ On account of their propensity to 'corrupt' the brain, the Sabians, according to Rāzī, avoided all smoked foods and beans.³³¹ Similarly, they avoided excessive eating which, being inevitably accompanied by excessive drinking, produces noxious vapours which confuse and debilitate the brain. Of course, such an understanding of the effect of nourishment on the body demands medical expertise. Rāzī remarks:

And so from this it becomes apparent that the practitioner of this craft must possess knowledge of medicine and he must also use everything which fortifies the brain and heart and which purifies them from stain and dirt.³³²

This strict diet is understood as purifying the brain and heart, which is necessary for the soul's purification. The adept is also required to reduce his amount of consumption since the soul's preoccupation with digestion diverts its attention away from employing the higher faculties:

Careful attention must be paid to one's diet with respect to both quantity and quality. As for quantity, this involves its reduction for preoccupation with eating is a great distraction preventing the soul from engaging in

³²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14

³³⁰ Why the celestial souls should disdain the non-vegan is not explained.

³³¹ This is reminiscent of the Pythagorean prohibition against beans.

³³² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14.

any other task for seldom is a man capable of perception and movement, let alone thought (*fikr*) and remembrance of God (*dhikr*) after excessive eating. This is the case because the soul cannot combine management of eating, with perception and movement, and so it relinquishes management of perception and movement so that it is able to manage the digestive process which prevents it from managing perception and movement despite the fact that the soul is very familiar with both – so what would you suppose would happen with respect to thought and focusing on the World of the Unseen (*inṣirāf ilā ‘ālam al-ghayb*) when the soul is unfamiliar with that?³³³

Digestion therefore distracts the soul from engaging its higher faculties; thus, if the adept trained his soul to subsist on the barest minimum it needed to survive, the aim of connecting with the celestial intellects would be facilitated.

The ability to subsist on but little nourishment is viewed by Avicenna as one of the characteristics of those possessed of divine gnosis (*‘ārifīn*). In his *Ishārāt* he provides a naturalistic account of how this is possible.³³⁴ He observes how fear can lead to the collapse of a man’s desire; cause the malfunctioning of his digestion; and render void his ability to perform actions of which he is otherwise entirely capable. This represents evidence that the soul’s state can affect the body. Commenting on this reasoning, Rāzī says:

If such is the case, then it is not impossible (*fa-lā imtinā ‘a*) that the immersion of the gnostic’s soul in the love of God the exalted, and its complete release from corporeal ties can be a cause for the descent into

³³³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 14.

³³⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 782 -786.

the <bodily> natural powers (*al-quwā al-ṭabī'īyya*) dispositions appropriate to that disposition, with the result that the <natural powers> do not engage in the dissolution of original nourishment (*al-ajzā al-aṣḥīya*) and hunger does not arise.³³⁵

In his commentary to *al-Ishārāt* 10:4, Rāzī explains that when the bodily powers are disciplined by the rational soul the former become attracted to the latter; when this attraction becomes powerful, they no longer engage in their usual activity of digestion. Since physical nourishment is not dissolved by the bodily powers, which have been drawn towards the rational soul, the one possessed of gnosis can survive on but little food.³³⁶

The importance of reducing consumption explains the forty days' fast to establish this noetic connection which Rāzī attributes to the Sabians. He reports:

They said it is necessary that, at the beginning <of the period> of fasting they break their fast with <an amount> similar to that which they are accustomed to eating; then they should reduce it each night, regularly and in increments, bit by bit, until finally by the end they break their fast on the barest minimum needed to stay alive. As for the quality, they have said that it is necessary to avoid eating anything that derives from something possessed of a spirit; indeed the food must consist of seeds, olive oil, and if not then of sesame oil and if they want to mix these seeds with herbs which people traditionally cook with these seeds, then there is no problem with that. Once the forty days have been completed in this way then their souls have become pure, and their spirits immaculate;

³³⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 784.

³³⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 633-5.

they become master of the occult sciences (*ghawāmiḍ al- 'ulūm*); and they are empowered to strike healthy bodies with disease and the reverse.³³⁷

Strict diet and fasting thus purifies the human soul, releasing it from bodily preoccupations to connect with the celestial spirits from which it receives two things: occult knowledge and power.

6.7.2 Fortification of the brain and the heart: *al-Sirr*

The effect of such a dramatic reduction in food intake would no doubt be debilitating, causing deficiencies in the heart and the brain: this imbalance would thus thwart connection with the celestial spirits just as much as the excessive consumption of food. Rāzī lists three means of correcting this imbalance and fortifying the soul, which are available to the adept observing this spiritual regimen. The first involves:

fortifying <the soul> by means of perfume. For fragrant scent greatly fortifies the heart and mind in such a way that the soul is not required to manage it in the same way that it is required to manage eating, so the fortification occurs without distraction.³³⁸

The second stratagem involves the use of 'mple, bright joyful visuals' (*al-mubṣarāt al-basīṭa al-muḍī'a al-bahija*) that uplift the spirit. They must not however be so attractive as to distract the soul from its focus. They must therefore be simple in their arrangement and cannot involve intricate patterns:

³³⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.14.

³³⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.14.

they must be simple. For, were the wall of a house painted with intricate patterns of many colours then souls would be distracted by their contemplation and would be cut off from their objective. For this reason it is prohibited to place a man afflicted by delirium in a painted house.³³⁹

They must employ bright colours which, deriving from light, provide the soul respite from its privations:

The second condition is that they must be bright and that is because by its very nature, light is beloved, whilst darkness is something which frightens the soul; for this reason, he who is struck by melancholia is always in a state of fear; when the soul sees light it relaxes (*insharaḥat*), is strengthened, and finds rest.³⁴⁰

Moreover, they should be as joyful as they are bright:

...since colours are of two types: illuminating and bright (*mushriqa wa muḍīʿa*) like pure white, yellow, pink, and green; and dark (*muḥlīma*) such as black, ambergris, and grey. Gazing on bright colours imbues the heart with joy and since the colour closest to light and simplicity is white, the Prophet, on whom be peace, said: 'the best clothes are white'.³⁴¹

But so that the use of a visual object does not defeat the purpose of fortifying the soul and maintaining its focus on the matter at hand, it is stipulated that:

yearning for something else should not be consequent on gazing upon it for were that the case then the soul would be distracted with that

³³⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 14-15.

³⁴⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

³⁴¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

consequence just as when the gaze falls upon the form of a beautiful human, the desire is stirred; or just as when the gaze falls upon gold and silver and fine clothes, then covetousness is stimulated.³⁴²

The third stratagem involves:

Fortifying the soul through music (*samā`*): this is because sound in itself cannot be described as pleasant or ugly. For, were any sound just to be extended just as it is, no pleasantness would there be in it: rather delight arises only when it moves from high to low (*al-intiqāl min ḥādd ilā thaqīl*) and vice versa. For pleasantness in reality arises from how it occurs to the soul when it compares some sounds to others; this pleasantness only arises when the soul is engaged and we have already explained that the human soul is innately disposed towards love of perception (*majbūl `alā ḥubb al-idrāk*). So when it hears comely sounds, the two phenomena occur to it and the attainment of that which is beloved is delightful. So it follows that music is a principle for the purification of the heart and brain. Know, moreover, that these matters only bring benefit in the course of spiritual discipline if <used> sparingly, like salt in food. Were they employed excessively such that the soul becomes distracted by them, then they would be an obstacle in the way of the goal. Thus is the discourse on how to abstract the soul and strip it away from its customary preoccupations (*al-ma`lūfāt*); and let that be a gradual, not an excessive, process or the soul will be unable to endure it.³⁴³

³⁴² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

³⁴³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

The description in *al-Sirr* of the methods for the soul's fortification during this period of fasting anticipates Rāzī's commentary on *al-Ishārāt* 9:8. The content however has been differently arranged. As in *al-Sirr*, Rāzī divides those requirements which must be fulfilled to ensure the success of spiritual discipline into those which cannot and those which can be secured by the aspirant's individual efforts.³⁴⁴ The requirements which fall into the latter category, as in *al-Sirr*, are further divided into those which relate to the physical regulation of the body and those which relate to the disposition which the aspirant must nurture in his soul. It is to the description of physical regulation that we now turn our attention.

Physical regulation involves the 'relinquishing of superfluities and the correction of necessary things (*tark al-fuḍūl wa iṣlāḥ al-ḍurūriyāt*)'.³⁴⁵ The former entails the exercise of self-restraint towards the acquisition of objects of desire such as wealth, reputation, power and knowledge of the kind which does not avail the soul propinquity to God. The realization of this station (*maqām*) is difficult for such pleasures are immediately present whilst the pleasure of the intellect is not (*ghā'ib*); the former pleasures are familiar to us whilst the latter are unfamiliar; and the former, with which we are intimately familiar, must be sacrificed if the latter are to be realized.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ In contrast with the astrological conditions relating to the adept's natal chart, Rāzī's commentary on *Ishārāt* 9:8 stipulates that the aspirant's 'soul is suitably receptive and suited to the task (*musta'idda li-hadhā al-ḥadīth mulā'ima lahu*) for were it not, then spiritual discipline would be of no avail because its effect is but to remove obstacles, to raise veils and curtains; the removal of obstacles does not suffice for the realization of the goal; rather there must be someone to receive who has the correct receptivity (*qābil musta'idd*). If the soul does not have the correct receptivity then spiritual discipline will not provide any felicity at all. It will, however, provide peace, for when bodily ties reduce and are weakened, the soul will not be tormented after it has left, craving the body.' Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 605-606.

³⁴⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.607.

³⁴⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.607

The 'necessary things' which are to be corrected relate to those things which feed stimuli to the five external senses. He treats sensory objects in the following order: taste, sight, hearing, smell and touch. All are to be modified and controlled in the pursuit of the disciplining of the soul. The objects of taste (*al-madhūqāt*) are given priority only insofar as the equilibrium of the body, and thus of the soul, is profoundly affected by the physical nourishment on which it depends: the state of the stomach often determines the soul's sensitivity or coarseness. The soul's preoccupation with the digestion of large amounts of food constitutes an impediment to its engagement with the intellectual world, 'the original direction of prayer' (*al-qibla al-aṣliyya*). Conversely, if the stomach is empty for any length of time, the major organs become enfeebled and imbalanced; the soul becomes confused; thought agitated; and the intellect loses its equilibrium. With respect to nourishment therefore, a diet which comprises small portions of high quality food is recommended. The careful selection of high quality food targets the needs of the body's major organs, freeing the soul from the imbalances of malnourishment and the sloth of excessive consumption.³⁴⁷

Objects of vision (*al-muḃṣarāt*) are divided into colours and bodies and are discussed firstly in terms of the general effects they exert on the soul, and then specifically as visual foci of contemplation. Colours are divided into those which are bright (*mushraq*), a category which includes pure green, red, yellow and

³⁴⁷ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.607

white; and those which are dark (*muzlama*) such as black and brown.³⁴⁸ Gazing at bright colours:

...gives succour to the spirit; gladdens the heart; and delights the soul for light is the object of the spirit's love and desire. And gazing at dark colours disturbs the spirit and aggrieves the heart.³⁴⁹

The adept (*al-murīd*) must therefore ensure his abode and his clothing are of those colours which fortify the spirit, compensating for the privations it must endure as a consequence of spiritual discipline. Complex patterns of variegated colours (*nuqūsh daqīqa mukhtaliṭa*) are to be avoided:

...since the soul becomes preoccupied with their contemplation, and increases in exhaustion. It is for this reason that doctors prevent those struck by delirium (*al-musarsamīn*) from gazing at patterns (*nuqūsh*).³⁵⁰

As a general rule:

when a colour is closest to simplicity and purity, then it is the most apt. And that (colour) is pure white. It is for this reason that the most beloved of garments to the Messenger of God was white.³⁵¹

Bodies are divided into those whose contemplation inculcates nothing but yearning for divine gnosis; and those whose contemplation, whilst according some advantage in the mystical pursuit often entail the unfortunate consequence of inflaming carnal desire (*shahwa*). Bodies which fall into the first category include scenes of natural beauty, contemplation of which fosters

³⁴⁸ Of course, these words could be read as *mushriqa* and *muzlima* meaning 'illuminating' and 'darkening' respectively.

³⁴⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.608.

³⁵⁰ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.608.

³⁵¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.608.

wonder at the divine wisdom of their creation; the second category includes ships, palaces and servant-boys (*ghilmān*).³⁵²

In relation to audible objects, Rāzī focuses on the capacity of poetry, when accompanied by music, to inflame the soul's ardour for the object of its love, isolating it from all other preoccupations. As for objects of olfaction, two observations are offered. Firstly, seeing that the quality of air is one of the six factors which influence change in the constitution of the body, the aspirant is advised to make his abode in the desert where the air is consistently clean and pure; and secondly, the use of fragrance (*ṭīb*) provides support for the major organs. Finally, Rāzī uses the sense category of touch to advocate the use of fasting as a means of curtailing carnal desire, marriage merely being a concession to those who find such a practice too arduous.³⁵³

6.7.3 Disposition of the soul

We return to the *Psychology of al-Sirr*. The physical regimen to which the adept must subject himself must be accompanied by an ascetic attitude which involves a:

rejection of the material world as a refuge (for the soul), disavowing any desire for it and its pursuit (*tark al-iltifāt ilayhā wa ilā ṭalabi-hā*). For, once he abandons it, then the cares of the world and preoccupation with the joy to be found therein fall from his heart; at that point, his heart becomes pure and his spiritual ambition soars and his innermost being is

³⁵² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 608.

³⁵³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 609-10.

voided of all but his goal (*ta 'lū himmatu-hu wa yakhlū sirru-hu 'an kulli mā siwā hādhā al-maṭlūb*); at that point he is able to focus mentally on anything he wants (*yaqdir 'alā al-tafakkur fī mā yurīdu-hu*) and so reach his goal.³⁵⁴

Denial of the world is less of a virtue, more of a practical measure, the adoption of which facilitates connection with the celestial spirits. Preoccupations (*al-shawāghil*), whatever their nature, are impediments which frustrate this purpose. The most stubborn of these impediments are sensory objects, to which the soul before the age of forty is naturally attracted:

the soul's predilection (*ilf*) for sensible objects is very strong because the intellectual faculty (*al-quwwa al-'āqila*) does not reach maturity until after the age of forty. Before that age, the soul is distracted by sensible things, is intent on them, making towards them; such obsession causes the generation of dispositions (*kathrat al-muzāwala sabab li-ḥudūth al-malakāt*). So it follows that the soul, on account of its excessive distraction by sensible objects, develops a disposition for sensible objects and for being attracted towards them. And since engagement with thought does not emerge unless sensible objects are abjured, then the measure of the soul's predilection for sensible objects and the delight it derives from them is <the measure of> its aversion to and dislike of thought. If such were the case then, right from the outset, with sensible objects present, it would be impossible for the soul to abjure them and direct its attention towards thought. So it follows that he who desires that the connection (*'alāqa*) between him and the Higher Spirits becomes firm then he must,

³⁵⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

from the outset, flee from external distractions to the utmost of his capacity.³⁵⁵

Furthermore, as was illustrated earlier by the example of the mountain goat casting itself down from a lofty peak, when the soul is focused on but one task, its ability to accomplish its goal is greatly enhanced:

when one faculty (of the soul) is entirely employed in one task then it will no doubt be more powerful than if it were divided between numerous tasks for not every task, nor every part of a task, makes equal demands on the faculty.³⁵⁶

Moreover, the soul never ceases from activity. Whether engaged by the intellect, or the estimative faculty, or neither, its cogitative or imaginative faculty is constantly at work, constructing and deconstructing arguments and images, travelling by way of all manner of mental associations in various directions.³⁵⁷ Were this activity harnessed in devotion to one task, it would be accomplished in the most complete way:

God the Exalted created the rational soul such that it never ceases from activity. As for the theoretical faculty (*al-quwwa al-naẓariyya*), it is always cogitating on something and imagining something, either by way of composition or deconstruction (*wa immā bi'l-tarkīb wa immā bi'l-taḥlīl*) such that it is said that man draws analogies by his very nature (*al-insān qayās bi'l-ṭab*). As for the practical faculty, Man is seldom capable of

³⁵⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.15.

³⁵⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.15.

³⁵⁷ We shall explore the workings of the internal faculties of the soul later in chapter 7 and thereby make better sense of Rāzī's frequent allusion to the intellect, the estimative, the cogitative and imaginative faculties.

spending any extended period of time without doing something or making some movement such that if no particular task occurs to him, then he will play with his beard or move one of his limbs – all this because he is unable to remain (still) devoid of action: for this reason it is said that Man is by nature a doer. If he is thus, and then he devotes himself to one task and one action, then he will perform this action in the most complete way.³⁵⁸

The man of complete mental focus is he who has reached the centre point of meditation (*markaz al-fikr*), described by Ṭumṭum, whose concentration allows him to commune with the celestial spirits and to control the elements in the sublunary world.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 15.

³⁵⁹ See chapter 2.

Chapter 7: Sabian Perfected Man and the Avicennan Theory of Prophethood

7:1 Introduction

The planetary ascent ritual of *al-Sirr*, which establishes noetic connection with the celestial souls, represents the perfection of human knowledge and power. Epistemologically, it is the perfection of the knowledge of particulars which are apprehended by the practical, as opposed to the theoretical, intellect: it illuminates the soul with knowledge of hidden things and future events. Practically, it is the consummate realization of the power to act throughout the sublunary world in ways which breach the customary course of events. Since *al-Sirr* refrains from providing a convenient term with which to refer to the individual who has achieved such realization by way of the planetary ascent ritual I shall for the sake of convenience refer to him as the perfected man. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the intellectual background against which Rāzī has projected the image of the perfected Sabian adept possessed of complete occult knowledge and power.

These two aspects of perfection, which we encountered in the introduction to *al-Sirr*, correspond very closely to the first and the last of the three properties which characterize Avicenna's theory of prophethood. As stated in his *Aḥwāl al-Nafs* ('States of the soul'), these are: (1) imaginal prophethood by means of connection with the celestial souls; (2) the extraordinary ability to intuit, by means of connection with the Active Intellect, the middle terms of syllogisms; (3) the ability to perform acts which breach the natural course of events by

means of the *muḥarrīka* or *motive faculty*. Prophets do not have a unique claim on these properties: any human can either possess any one of these properties innately or indeed develop them.³⁶⁰

The Avicennan account of imaginal prophethood is central to Rāzī's construction of Sabian practice. Now, it should be borne in mind that this account is distinct and separate from that which explains the occult power that is wielded by prophets: the former is achieved by celestial soul noesis; the latter is achieved purely by means of a powerful estimative faculty (*al-wahm*). I shall argue that, observing the importance of the estimative faculty in the process of celestial soul noesis, Rāzī fuses the Avicennan accounts of imaginal prophethood and prophetic occult power to produce a new synthesis which explains how the Sabian might, through ritualized connection with the celestial soul, acquire both occult power and knowledge. This chapter will therefore examine: (1) Rāzī's understanding of the Avicennan theory of celestial soul noesis and the role of the estimative faculty; (2) the role of the estimative faculty in Sabian astral ritual; (3) the Avicennan background against which Rāzī projects his image of the Sabian perfected man.

7.2 Context of Celestial Soul Noesis in *al-Ishārāt* 10

³⁶⁰ See Afifi al-Akiti's study of the reception of Avicenna's doctrine in the works of al-Ghazali, in 'The Three Properties of Prophethood'. See also Marmura, 'Avicenna's theory of prophecy' and 'Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy'; Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West*; Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*; Toufiq, 'Nubuwwa', *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition; Griffel, 'al-Ghazālī's concept of prophecy'; Morris, 'The Philosopher-Prophet'; Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes*; Azadpur, *Reason Unbound*; Shihadeh, 'Aspects of the Reception of Avicenna's Theory of Prophecy'.

To gain a deeper insight into Rāzī's strategic synthesis of Avicennan ideas to produce his account of Sabian acquisition of occult knowledge and power, I shall turn to his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* and the account of celestial soul noesis. Given his reliance on *namaṭ* 3 of Avicenna's *Ishārāt* to construct Sabian cosmology, the close parallels between key passages in *al-Sirr* 1:4 and his commentary on *namaṭ* 9 of *al-Ishārāt*; and Rāzī's reliance, in *al-Maṭālib* 8, on *Ishārāt* 10 for his summary of the Avicennan account of imaginational prophethood, I shall in the following sections turn to *al-Ishārāt* 10 to gain a deeper insight into the Avicennan background to the celestial noetics that is at the heart of Sabian practice.

In *al-Ishārāt* 10 Avicenna asserts that there are four signs (*āyāt*) which indicate the station of one possessed of divine gnosis. These signs are displays of occult power for which he provides naturalistic explanations:

The tenth *namaṭ* deals with the four 'causes of preternatural acts' (*asbāb al-khawāriq*): (1) on the cause of being empowered to forsake nourishment for an extended period of time (*sabab al-tamakkun min tark al-ghidhā muddatan madīda*) (2) on the cause of being empowered to perform tremendous acts (*sabab al-tamakkun min al-af'āl al-shāqqa*) (3) on the cause of being empowered to receive knowledge of the unseen world (*sabab al-tamakkun min al-ikhbār 'an al-ghuyūb*) (4) on the cause of being empowered to act on the elements (*sabab al-tamakkun min al-taṣṣaruf fī al-'anāṣir*).³⁶¹

³⁶¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.631.

We have already examined the first two of these issues. *Al-Ishārāt* 10 devotes most attention to the third.³⁶² In short, since events in the sublunary world are determined by the motions of the heavenly spheres, and since they are cognizant of themselves and their effects, they thus possess knowledge of past and future events in the sublunary world and all that is hidden therein (*ikhbār ‘an al-ghayb*). It is therefore by means of connection with the celestial souls that knowledge of the unseen world is gained.

In his commentary, Rāzī breaks down Avicenna’s exposition of the issue in the following way. After introducing the topic in chapters 7-8, he establishes the two premises on which his account of noesis rests: firstly, the assertion that the heavenly sphere possesses a rational soul which is perceptive of the effects of the celestial motions, namely the entirety of particulars in the sublunary world; and secondly that the human soul can connect with the celestial rational soul and thus be afforded occult knowledge. The first premise, the grounds of which have already been established in *al-Ishārāt* 3, is treated in chapter 9; the second premise, which entails a much more involved argument drawing on the presentation of the human soul’s internal faculties in *al-Ishārāt* 3, is discussed in chapters 10-17. The noetic process itself is described in chapters 18-24.

Avicenna embarks on the discussion by establishing the reality of occult and preternaturally prescient knowledge; that it can be derived from dreams; and that if it can be attained in the dream state, then there exists no obstacle precluding it from occurring during the waking state. Rāzī remarks that Avicenna’s assertion that such knowledge can be received whilst in a dream state ‘is supported by experience and anecdotal evidence (*al-tajriba wa’l-*

tasāmu ʾ).’ Experience, asserts Rāzī interpreting Avicenna, teaches that a man can sometimes see something in his sleep which comes to pass in actuality, either literally in accordance with the dream or in accordance with some interpretation thereof. This he says is supported by the considerable weight of anecdotal evidence. Indeed, he says its occurrence during sleep is so frequent that its reality cannot be dismissed; and so if knowledge of unseen things is possible in sleep, then it is more apt (*awlā*) that it should occur in a waking state.³⁶³ Exercising his characteristic epistemological rigour, Rāzī comments that whilst the second premise cannot definitely be inferred (*al-istidlāl bi’l-qaṭʿ*) from the first it can at least be inferred to the extent that its possibility cannot be ruled out; indeed the assertion of its possibility is the more probable and apt (*al-akhlāq wa’l-ahrā*) inference that can be drawn.³⁶⁴

7.3 Celestial Souls and their complete knowledge of sublunary phenomena

And so we turn to Rāzī’s exposition of the first of the premises on which Avicenna’s account of noesis relies: that the heavenly spheres possess souls perceptive of all particulars in the sublunary world.³⁶⁵ Associated with each

³⁶³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 474.

³⁶⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 639.

³⁶⁵ Avicenna says: ‘You have learned earlier that particulars are engraved (*manqūsha*) in the intellectual world in a universal way. Then your attention was drawn to the fact that the celestial bodies have souls that possess particular perceptions (*idrākāt juzʾiyya*) and particular wills (*irādāt juzʾiyya*) which issue from a particular opinion (*raʾy juzʾī*). There is nothing that prevents these souls from conceiving the particular concomitants, which pertain to their particular movements, and from which arise the existing things in the elemental world. Furthermore, if that to which a certain kind of reflection alludes in a way that is veiled, except to those who are rooted in the august wisdom, is true <namely> that they [i.e. the celestial bodies] possess, after the separate intellects which function for them like principles, rational souls that are not imprinted in their matters but rather possess a certain relation to them, just

heavenly sphere is an 'abstracted' (*mujarrad*) or 'separated' (*mufāraq*) intellect ('*aq*l), so called because it is abstracted and separated from space and time and thus can neither inhere in nor have any relation to a body. By way of contrast, the celestial sphere possesses a soul which acts as a bodily power, perceptive of particular phenomena which exist within space and time (*li'l-falak nafsān hīya quwwa jismānīya wa-hīya mudrika li'l-juz'iyāt*). This soul produces motion in the celestial sphere: it is the motions of the celestial spheres and the resultant geometrical relationships between the heavenly bodies which produce the myriad particular phenomena that we witness in the sublunary world. Knowing itself, the celestial bodily soul possesses knowledge of itself as a proximate cause of the celestial motion which is in turn the proximate cause of coming-into-being in the sublunary world. Thus the celestial soul possesses knowledge of all that comes to be:

the abstracted intellects possess knowledge of all particulars in a universal way because all particulars lead to them by means of a chain of dependency (*muntahiya ilayhā salsala al-hāja*) and knowledge of the cause necessarily entails knowledge of the effect; and we have demonstrated also that the celestial sphere possesses a soul, which is a bodily power which perceives particulars; and we have demonstrated that the things which come to be in this world depend on the movements of the spheres;

as our souls have with regard to our bodies, and that by means of this relation, they <the celestial bodies> attain some real perfection – then the celestial bodies come to have an additional significance in this, such that they manifest a particular opinion and another universal one. You gather from what we have pointed out that particulars in the intelligible world possess an engraving (*naqsh*) in a universal manner but in the psychic world they possess an engraving in a particular manner, perceptive of time, or they possess both simultaneously'. Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 639. I have heavily adapted this translation from that of Inati to be found in *Ibn Sina and Mysticism* pp.95-6. Subsequent translations from *al-Ishārāt* 10 will be similar adaptations.

and we have demonstrated that the proximate cause of these movements is the (celestial) soul, and you already know that knowledge of the cause necessarily entails knowledge of the effect; and so it follows from all these premises that the celestial soul possesses knowledge of all that occurs in this world by way of particulars.³⁶⁶

Whilst the abstracted intellect is beyond space and time, the celestial soul governs a bodily reality, namely the heavenly sphere; whilst the knowledge of the former comprises universals (*kulliyāt*), that of the latter includes particulars. There would thus appear to be a gap in ‘the chain of dependency’ that links particulars in the sublunary world with the abstracted intellect; this gap leaves unanswered how the universals of the abstracted intellect are transformed into the particulars of the celestial bodily soul. Avicenna fills this gap by positing the existence of the celestial rational soul which links the former with the latter. Being neither a body nor bodily in its essence the celestial rational soul nevertheless has a relation with the celestial sphere on account of which, explains Rāzī, the former:

...receives renewed perfections (*kamālāt mutajaddida*) just as our own rational soul, though it is not a body nor is it bodily, has a certain relation with our bodies, by reason of which it is able to acquire intellectual perfections (*kamālāt ‘aqliyya*).³⁶⁷

In completing the ‘chain of dependency’ by positing a celestial rational soul, it is safe for Avicenna to conclude that: “all particulars that occur in this world are

³⁶⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 640.

³⁶⁷ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.640.

known to the separated intellect (*al-‘aql al-mufāraq*), the rational soul and the bodily soul.³⁶⁸

As Rāzī points out, hylomorphism deeply informs Avicenna’s account of knowledge in the celestial spheres. Thus, when Avicenna says particulars are ‘engraved’ (*manqūsha*) in the intelligible world, ‘engraving’ denotes knowledge.³⁶⁹ As it receives knowledge from the abstracted intellect, being engraved with different universal objects of intellection, the celestial rational soul undergoes change; this change induces the celestial bodily soul, which is forever subject to the rational soul, to produce motion in the heavenly sphere. Rāzī expounds on Avicenna’s theory in the following way:

if <the sphere> has a soul which perceives particulars and another soul which perceives universals, and this rational soul undergoes change as it moves from one object of intellection to the next (*mutaghayyira mutanaqqila min ma ‘qūl ilā ma ‘qūl*) then the celestial motions would arise as a result of the combination of two opinions (*ṣādīra ‘an majmū ‘ra’yain*), one being the universal opinion which belongs to the rational soul, and the other being particular which belongs to the celestial bodily soul; and so then these movements proceed in a manner that is analogous to human actions (*tilka al-ḥarakāt ḥīna’idhin jāriyatun majrā al-af‘āl al-insāniyya*). For that which first begins with intellection (*al-ta‘aqqul*) and then imagination (*al-takhayyul*) is nobler than that which begins in pure imagination.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.640.

³⁶⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p.640-1.

³⁷⁰ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 641.

Rāzī here draws a close analogy between Avicenna's conceptions of the celestial rational-bodily soul complex and the human rational-animal soul complex. When the imagination in the human soul is not governed by the intellect, its activities either proceed autonomously, with no direction or purpose, or they proceed according to the direction of the estimative faculty, the governing faculty of the animal soul. What is produced therefore has limited epistemological value. Such a situation is to be contrasted with that of the rational human soul in which the estimative faculty directs the imagination in service of the intellect. Thus, when functioning as the rational soul, the human is in mimetic concord with the harmony that exists in the celestial rational-bodily soul complex; when the estimative faculty usurps the government of the intellect, the contrary situation obtains. A significant implication of this analogy I would argue, which Rāzī leaves unsaid, is that if the former situation is analogous to the activity of the celestial rational-bodily soul complex, then it would appear that the celestial bodily soul is the analogue of the human soul as governed by the estimative faculty in service of the intellect. And just as the celestial bodily soul drives the motion of the heavenly sphere which is the proximate cause of particular phenomena in the sublunary world, so the estimative faculty of the human soul possessed of occult power can be the cause of change which runs contrary to the natural course of events in this world of generation and corruption.

Since the celestial rational-bodily soul complex receives universals from the abstracted intellect, whilst simultaneously acting as the proximate cause of particulars in the sublunary world, its knowledge is both universal and particular and is possessed eternally, since its knowledge of its own essence is

eternal. Therefore, if the human rational soul were to connect with the celestial soul, then the former could be engraved by the latter with knowledge of future sublunary events:

rational souls can connect with those principles (*al-nufūs al-nāṭiqa yumkinuhā al-ittiṣāl bi-tilka al-mabādi'*); and since those principles have knowledge of all these particulars, then these (human) rational souls can be engraved with their knowledge such that they (come) to perceive that which will come to pass before they occur. So then, they gain command over knowledge of the unseen (*ikhbār al-ghuyūb*).³⁷¹

This reasoning, explains Rāzī, prepares the way for the second major premise on which Avicenna's account of noetic connection with the celestial souls relies: the fact that the human soul can connect with the celestial souls and thereby receive knowledge of the unseen world (*'ālam al-ghayb*) by way of veridical dreams and waking visions.³⁷²

7.4 The ability of the human soul to connect with the celestial souls

Avicenna's naturalistic account of veridical dreams and waking visions is as sophisticated as it is nuanced, allowing as it does -- in the case of dreams -- for degrees of purity in the way in which they are experienced and retained. These degrees are determined by both the intensity of the original "spiritual trace"

³⁷¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 642.

³⁷² Avicenna succinctly states the second premise in the tenth chapter of *al-Ishārāt* 10: 'Your soul can be engraved with the engraving of that [i.e. the intelligible] world in accordance with its receptiveness (*isti'dād*) and the elimination of that which impedes. You have already learned this, so do not deny that some of the unseen can be engraved in your soul from that world. I shall surely increase your insight.' Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 642. See Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, p.96.

(*athar rūḥānī*) which the human soul receives and the extent to which the imagination then proceeds to distort it. He also distinguishes them from normal dreams which his account explains as merely the product of the unfettered and unceasing activity of the autonomous *mutaṣarrifa* when acting as the imagination during sleep. Dreams are thus of two kinds: those which are solely the product of the imagination and those which are the result of connection with the celestial souls. In this section we shall discuss both in that order, and touch briefly on waking visions. But before we proceed, we must first examine two principles which govern the behaviour of the internal sense faculties in producing such cognitive phenomena which have no connection to the external senses.

The first relates to the fact that the soul's preoccupation (*ishtighāl*) with one goal will prevent it from the effective pursuit of another; it is the psychological principle which explains the prescription in *al-Sirr* that, as a prerequisite of magical training and establishing connection with the celestial spirits, the adept must abjure all material desire and sensory distraction.³⁷³ Commenting on Avicenna's discussion of this principle, Rāzī explains that the soul cannot be gripped by both the irascible and the appetitive powers at the same time. And if the soul requires the bodily power to perform some vigorous action, then it will

³⁷³Says Avicenna: 'the powers of the soul are mutually attractive and mutually repellent. Thus when anger is roused, it distracts the soul from the appetite, and vice versa. If the internal sense devotes itself exclusively to perform its function, it distracts (the soul) from the external sense thus it hardly hears or sees, and vice versa. Hence, if the internal sense is drawn to the external sense, its instrument will make the intellect incline such that it disperses (*inbaththa*), falling short of the cogitative movement which it frequently needs as its instrument. Another thing will also happen which is that the soul will also be drawn to the side of the strong movement and it will abandon the acts that solely belong to it. If the soul has the power to control the internal sense under its management, the external senses will also be weakened and will not provide the soul with that with which it equips itself.' Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 643; also see Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, pp. 96-97.

relinquish its activities in order to assist it. Moreover, if the internal senses are preoccupied with stimuli received by the external senses, then the intellect will be unable to engage the *mutaṣarrifa* as the cogitative power (*al-mufakkira*). By way of contrast:

...when the soul uses the internal senses, the external senses are bewildered, that is, they weaken. And so for this reason, when a man is immersed in the act of imagination or contemplation (*takhayyul aw tafakkur*), perhaps a strongly visible or audible phenomenon may present itself to him but, despite the fact that his external sense may be sound, he does not perceive it at all.³⁷⁴

The second principle which governs the operation of the soul's internal senses in the production of such cognitive phenomena relates to the state of receptivity of the common sense. Sensory experience can be occasioned either by the perception of an external object or by an internal factor which bears no relation to any external object of perception. Avicenna enigmatically alludes to this latter type of engraving as occurring:

...in the tablet [i.e. of the common sense] for a reason other than the sensible object – if this were possible.³⁷⁵

Rāzī brings clarity to this enigmatic allusion in the following way:

Know that forms which are imprinted in the common sense have four levels <in the way in which> they are sensed. The first is when external sensible objects come to be witnessed as soon as they are imprinted in

³⁷⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 644.

³⁷⁵ Avicenna in *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 644. See Inati *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, p. 97.

the common sense; the second is when they continue to be sensed together with the sensible objects remaining in the external world; the third is when they continue to be sensed even after the external sensible object no longer remains; and the fourth is when they are sensed even though there is no sensible object in the external world. When you know this then we say: the examples of the descending line and the revolving point provide evidence of the first three of these levels. The fourth requires its own evidence.³⁷⁶

We have already encountered Rāzī's explanation of Avicenna's examples of the raindrop and the dot painted on a rotating circle in our introductory discussion on the internal senses. The cause of engravings which fall into this fourth category is internal to the soul and requires a separate supporting proof, evidence for which Avicenna finds in the visual experiences of those struck by illness and bilious imbalance (*al-marḍā wa'l-mamrūrīn*). The cause of such engravings in the common sense, he reasons, must be internal. Moreover, just as forms from the common sense can be engraved in the imagination, so too can forms from the imagination be engraved in the common sense.³⁷⁷

Avicenna's supporting proof is compact: Rāzī expands it to reveal fully the structure of the argument which it implies. Those afflicted in this way see forms

³⁷⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 644-645.

³⁷⁷ 'A group of ill and bilious people may witness sensible forms that are clear and present but that have no relation to an external sensible object. Thus, the engraving (*intiḳāsh*) of these forms is due to an internal (*bāṭin*) cause or to a cause influencing an internal cause. The common sense may also be engraved upon (*yantaqish*) by forms that arise in the mine of the imagination and the estimation (*al-ṣuwar al-ḥā'ila fī ma'dīn al-takhayyul wa'l-tawahhum*), just as these forms are also engraved in the mine of the imagination and estimation from the tablet of the common sense, in a manner similar to that between facing mirrors', Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 645. Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, p. 97.

which others do not see: therefore these forms must either be non-existent (*ma'dūma*) or existent (*mawjūd*). They cannot be non-existent because this would entail absolute negation, and that which is characterized by absolute negation can never be witnessed. Therefore, their existence must be affirmed. Now, this existence is either extra-mental or it is internal to the witness's soul. The fact that no-one else possessed of sound external senses witnesses these forms negates the first of these disjuncts; they cannot be extra-mental. Therefore their existence must be internal to the soul of the witness. This being the case, they must either exist in the rational soul or in a bodily faculty (*quwwa jismāniya*). The first disjunct is false because the rational soul cannot perceive particulars; nor can it be inscribed with the forms of sensible things (*lā tartasimu fī-hā ṣuwar al-maḥsūsāt*). Therefore they must be inscribed (*murtasima*) in a bodily faculty capable of perceiving visible things. This bodily faculty cannot be the vision (*al-quwwa al-bāṣira*) which only perceives that which exists externally. Moreover, these kinds of visual experiences are also reported by blind people. Thus are we led to the conclusion that it must be the common sense that perceives these forms; and since it is established that these forms do not occur to the common sense from the outside, their source must be internal. This source can therefore be one of two internal faculties: the sensible memory (*al-khayāl*) from which stored forms migrate to the common sense, where they are inscribed and witnessed; or the imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*) which composes forms which are inscribed in the common sense.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁸ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 645-6.

When inscribing the common sense thus, the *mutaṣarrifa*, operating as the imagination, acts autonomously, directed neither by the estimative faculty nor by the intellect by way of the estimative faculty's mediation. Two preoccupying factors (*shāghilān*) prevent the *mutaṣarrifa* qua imagination from operating in this way. Firstly, if the common sense is preoccupied (*mashgūl*) with forms which are presented to it from the external senses, it is unable to encompass (*lam yattasi*) other forms, and the *mutaṣarrifa* qua imagination will not be able to inscribe the forms which it has composed. The second preoccupying factor merits close scrutiny. Avicenna describes it as:

...either internal <pertaining to> the intellect, or internal <pertaining to> the estimative faculty (‘*aqlī bāṭin aw wahmī bāṭin*’); it seizes control of the imagination (*al-takhayyul*), preventing it from acting autonomously on it <the common sense> with that which assists it [i.e. either the intellect or the estimative faculty]. And so it [i.e. the imagination], by yielding to its control, is preoccupied from <acting on> the common sense and it is not able to engrave in it, because the movement <of the imagination> is weak, since it is subject and is not subjected to (*li’anna-hā tābi’a lā matbū’a*). If one of the two preoccupying factors is at rest whilst the other remains, then it may be that <the latter> might be incapable of holding <it> under control, so the imagination prevails over the common sense in which it imprints (*lawwaḥa*) a form as something which is sensed and witnessed.³⁷⁹

Rāzī comments on Avicenna’s account of this second preoccupying factor as follows:

³⁷⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 645-6.

As for the second obstacle, it relates to the agent: for when either the intellect or the estimative faculty employ the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*), and the cogitative faculty becomes preoccupied in the service of either one of them (*wa šārat al-mufakkira mashghūlatan bi-khidmati aḥadi-himā*) it is no longer free to perform its own particular actions (*lam tatafarragh li-af'āli nafsi-hā khāṣatan*) and it is no longer able to compose, deconstruct and generate simulacra of forms. And when those forms do not exist, they cannot flow to the common sense.³⁸⁰

It is curious that whilst Avicenna alludes to the control exerted either by the intellect or the estimative faculty on the imagination, Rāzī refers instead to the control exerted by either on the cogitative faculty. Rāzī may be entitled to do so since the imaginative and the cogitative faculties are merely different modalities of the same internal sense organ which, for the sake of clarity, is best referred to as the *mutašarrifa*. But he surely confuses these modalities when he explains that, under the control of either the intellect or the estimative faculty, the cogitative faculty is ‘no longer free to perform its own particular actions’, namely composing, deconstructing, and generating simulacra of forms: such activity would normally be expected of the imagination. Be that as it may, Avicenna makes a very deliberate distinction between the control exerted by the intellect, and the control exerted by the estimative faculty, over the *mutašarrifa* in preventing it from engraving in the common sense.

If however the imagination is free to act autonomously, whilst at the same time the common sense is free of preoccupation with forms received from the external senses, the former can act on the latter, inscribing forms which come

³⁸⁰ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 646-8.

to be witnessed. This is the situation in which normal dreams occur. Explaining Avicenna's account of this process, Rāzī says that during sleep, since it is preoccupied with assisting the digestive power in the process of digestion, the rational soul does not engage the imagination:

Know that there is no doubt that sleep is an obstacle for the external senses in the performance of their functions; it is also an obstacle for the rational soul in the performance of its functions. This is because when the rational soul is preoccupied with assisting the digestive power with processing nourishment, and because we have shown that when the <rational> soul is engaged with those functions over which it uniquely exercises control (*al-a 'māl allatī lahā bi'l-istibdād*), whilst <at the same time> nature (*al-ṭabī'a*) is engaged with digestion, then digestion will not be finished and completed. Indeed it will be deficient and weak. And so for this reason it is correct that the soul is drawn towards assisting nature when it is engaged in digestion. Furthermore, sleep is more similar to illness than to health.³⁸¹

Thus, with the release of the rational soul's grip, the imagination operates as an independent active faculty, working on the receptive faculty of the common sense which is undistracted by external stimuli:

When you know this, then we say that during sleep, both the active <faculty> and receptive <faculty> are present to these simulacra (*ḥaṣala*

³⁸¹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 648-9. How the rational soul assists the digestive process is not made clear. Rāzī clarifies the way in which sleep resembles illness in the following way: 'In the case of an illness, the cause of the witnessing of these images is but one thing: it is that the soul, on account of the fact that it is engaged in the body's repair, is too weak to administer the imaginative faculty (*al-mutakhayyila*) and so the imaginative faculty takes control and is empowered to create simulacra (*tashbih*) and so these simulacra are imprinted in the tablet of the common sense (*fā-lāḥat tilka al-ashbāḥ fī lawḥ al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*).' Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 649.

al-fā`il li-hādhihi al-ashbāḥ wa`l-qābil lahā). As for the active faculty, it is because the soul is engaged in administering the body and assisting the digestive power, and so it is not free to administer the imaginative faculty (*al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila*); the imaginative faculty thus becomes autonomous (*mustaqilla bi-nafsihā*), empowered to create simulacra (*tashbih*) and imprints (*talwīḥ*) in whatever way it so wills and desires, without any impediment. As for the receptive faculty, it is because the tablet of the common sense is free of the engravings (*nuqūsh*) which derive from the external senses. When the active and receptive faculties operate in a perfect and complete manner (*matā ḥaṣala al-fā`il wa`l-qābil bi`l-kamāl wa`l-tamām*) then this activity (*fi`l*) inevitably takes place. Thus it follows that these forms appear in sleep and become phenomena that are witnessed.³⁸²

So far Avicenna has been speaking very generally about normal dreams, produced when the imagination is acting purely autonomously, having been released from the grip of the rational soul and freed to inscribe forms in the common sense which is undistracted by the impression of forms from the external senses. But in the case of dreams induced by contact with the celestial spheres, the soul must possess sufficient strength to retain the essence of what it perceives therein if it is to benefit from the experience. Were it to lack such strength then the imagination, acting autonomously, would begin to generate a series of images by way of imaginative association (*muḥākā*). Each image is connected with its predecessor by way of a certain resemblance: by the end of the process, an image is produced which bears no resemblance whatsoever to

³⁸² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 648-9.

the original. Rāzī expounds on Avicenna's account of imaginative association by saying:

when the soul is strong, it is empowered to retain the essence of that which it perceives (*qawiyat 'alā ḥifẓ 'ayn mā adrakat-hu*) and it does not move on from it to that which resembles it (*mā yuḥākīhi*). If the soul is weak, then it is too weak to retain perceptions (*al-mudrakāt*) and so it may travel from one thing to that which it imitates it and with which it shares similarities in certain aspects; and then <it may travel> from that to something which imitates it in turn; and so it may continue to travel from one thing to another which imitates it until it arrives at something which bears no relation to the first perception (*al-mudrak al-awwal*) in any respect. This phenomenon (*ma 'nā*) only occurs when the imaginative faculty assumes control and the soul is too weak to reform and discipline it.³⁸³

Not only does the strength of the soul, nurtured by spiritual discipline, fix the insight of the original image produced in a veridical dream, but it also enables the soul to administer the body without any loss of connection with the intellectual world (*al- 'ālam al- 'aqlī*). Thus, says Rāzī, interpreting Avicenna:

In general the strong soul suffices for both domains (*wāfiya li-jānibayn*), namely the domain of the intellect and the domain of the body (*al-jānib al- 'aqlī wa'l-jānib al-badanī*), and the direction of its attention to one of these domains is no impediment to its attention being directed to the other. Moreover, if these souls, together with their power, have

³⁸³ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 649-650.

undergone spiritual discipline (*murtāda*), then its ability to abjure things which negate spiritual discipline and to perform that which is sympathetic (*yunāsib*) to it is stronger.³⁸⁴

For the average human soul, which falls short of the ranks of the prophets and those possessed of divine gnosis, the states of either sleep or illness afford fleeting opportunities in which it can find deliverance from the distraction of the imagination and connect with the ‘realm of sanctity’ (*jānib al-quds*) by which it is engraved with forms; it then commands the imagination to engrave in the common sense imaginative forms which correspond to those objects of intellection: thus do they come to be witnessed in a particular, sensory way. Such a situation arises during sleep since the external senses are shut down, freeing the common sense to be engraved by the imagination; during illness or indeed vigorous movement, the pneuma of the imagination suffers dissolution and the imagination consequently becomes inert. With the imagination thus weakened, the rational soul is no longer burdened by the task of maintaining control of it, and it is attracted to the ‘realm of sanctity’. Rāzī explains the process thus:

When the imaginative faculty experiences weakness, either on account of an illness by which it has been struck, or due to the dissolution of the pneuma (*taḥallul al-rūḥ*) which serves as its tool, which occurs because of vigorous movement and activity, it <the imaginative faculty> inclines towards calmness and inertia; thus the rational soul is freed from its administration and disciplining to connect with the intellectual world

³⁸⁴ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 649-50.

and there occurs to it something which derives from the intellectual souls (*al-nufūs al-‘aqliyya*) and the holy realities (*al-jalāyā al-qudsiyya*). When this happens the imaginative faculty is roused towards generating a simulacrum (*tashbīh*) of the universal meaning in a particular form.³⁸⁵

We should note at this point that which Rāzī omits to state explicitly but which is clearly intended, namely that the ‘rational soul’ here means the soul under the government of the practical intellect which, being immaterial, is unable to exert control over the material *mutaṣarrifa* qua imagination without the mediation of the estimative faculty. Having enjoyed some respite and recovered from the dissolution of its pneuma, the imagination returns to its habitual activity of generating and imprinting simulacra and, marshalled by the rational soul, it:

...is roused to compose particular forms which correspond to that universal psychic meaning (*al-ma ‘nā al-kullī al-nafsānī*). And when these forms flow to the common sense they come to be witnessed.³⁸⁶

However the soul which enjoys a stronger substance need not rely on the opportunities provided by sleep or illness in order to slip away to the intellectual realm. Rather, whilst awake it can simultaneously engage with both the higher world of the celestial souls and the lower world of its own body, such that management of the latter does not thwart connection with the former. It then marshals the imagination to compose forms which correspond to those intellections (*ta ‘aqqulāt*); these are then imprinted in the tablet of the common

³⁸⁵ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 651.

³⁸⁶ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 651.

sense to be witnessed in a sensory way (*ṣārat mushāhadatan maḥsūsatan*). At this point visual perception of form and aural perception of speech occur, even though these phenomena in of themselves have no extra-mental existence.³⁸⁷

7.5 Image Association and the Modus Operandi of the Imagination

The traces which the human soul receives from the celestial souls, whether during sleep or the waking state, must be translated by the imagination into particular forms which are imprinted in the common sense if they are to be witnessed as sensory experiences. Therefore the activity of the imagination to a large extent determines the degree to which the human soul can derive insight and benefit from what was in origin a pure celestial form.

Avicenna provides a fuller description of the autonomous activity of the imagination in the twentieth chapter of *al-Ishārāt* 10.³⁸⁸ Its innate function (*jibilla*), comments Rāzī, is to move unceasingly from one meaning (*ma'nā*) to another on the principle of similarity or antithesis between the former and the latter. What he seems to be alluding to is a kind of free association of ideas or

³⁸⁷ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 652.

³⁸⁸ 'The imaginative faculty is constituted such that it imitates any succeeding intellectual or temperamental disposition and moves quickly from one thing to its like or to its opposite – in general, to whatever derives from it by reason of a cause (*bi'l-jumla ilā mā huwa min-hu bi-sababin*); without a doubt the specification <of that which is derived> has particular causes (*asbāb juz'īya*), though we might not discern them in their essences (*in lam nuḥaṣṣil-hā naḥnu bi'a'yāni-hā*). If the imaginative faculty were not constituted with such a disposition (*al-jibilla*) then we would not possess that on which we can rely (*nasta'īnu bihi*) with respect to: (1) the movement of thought, which searches for middle terms <of syllogisms> and whatever resembles them in a certain way, and (2) the recollection of things which have been forgotten; and (3) other benefits. This faculty is either roused to movement by each thing which occurs (*kull sāniḥ*) or it is placed under control (*tuḍbaṭ*). This control is exercised either by power of the soul's opposition <to the movement of the imaginative faculty> or by the intensity of the clarity of the form that is engraved in it such that it is received in a way that is intensely lucid and firmly represented: that deters its meandering and wavering, and holds in place the imagination (*al-khayāl*) such that it makes a representation as powerful as that which the external senses generate', Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 652; see Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*: p. 101.

images. Thus, when a certain image or idea is present to the imagination, it then generates a second within a presumably limited range of images or ideas that are either similar or antithetical to the original cognitive object. A third is then generated from the second, a fourth from the third, and so on, for however long the process lasts. Therefore, between each object of imaginative cognition and that which precedes it is a relationship either of similarity or antithesis. Avicenna does not speculate on what determines the nature of this relationship at each stage of image or idea production; nor indeed does he identify what drives the imagination to generate one particular cognitive object out of a range of possibilities, whether that range comprises possibilities which are similar or antithetical to its predecessor.

This activity of association, which Avicenna calls *muḥākāt*, springs from the spontaneous nature (*gharīza*) of the *mutaṣarrifa* which is thus disposed in order to allow the cogitative process to hit on the middle terms of syllogisms and to recollect things stored in the memory. The ‘movements’ of this activity never cease unless impeded by one of two obstacles. As Rāzī explains:

One is when the rational soul seizes control (*istilā*) of it, impeding it from its movements (*intiḳālāt*), and disciplining it (*tathqīfihā*). The second is when the forms which are engraved (*munaqqasha*) in it are powerful and clear (*qawīya jalīya*): then by reason of their clarity and power, they prevent <the imaginative faculty> from moving away from them to other forms: this is due to what you already know from of his explanation that bodily powers have no perception (*shu ‘ūr*) of dimly perceptible objects

(*al-mudrakāt al-ḍa'ifa*) when they are perceiving powerfully perceptible objects (*al-mudrakāt al-qawīya*).³⁸⁹

Having expounded on his idea of imaginative and cogitative association, Avicenna describes how this cognitive process might affect the degree to which a 'spiritual trace' (*athar rūḥānī*) which occurs to the human soul from one of the celestial souls might be accurately retained. He envisages three general grades of intensity, each comprising varying degrees. The first grade comprises traces which are so weak that they leave no enduring impression. The second comprises those which are sufficiently strong as to stir the imagination which, however, continues in its movement to generate new images by way of association such that only the imagination's associated images, rather than the original trace, are retained. And the third grade comprises those traces of such intensity and power that they are clearly imprinted in the imagination and stored in the memory undefiled by the confusion of associated images.³⁹⁰

Although the purity of the original "spiritual trace" from the celestial souls is vitiated in the second of these grades, its original state can be recovered or reconstituted from the distortions of the imagination's associated images by means of interpretation (*ta'wīl* or *ta'bīr*). Avicenna says that a number of considerations would inform the hermeneutics of this process including those relating to the personal disposition of the recipient, time and custom. Unfortunately he does not elaborate further – nor for that matter does Rāzī.³⁹¹

³⁸⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 652.

³⁹⁰ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 654.

³⁹¹ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 655.

7.6 Deliberate induction of noetic connection with the celestial souls

So as we have explored, when received from the celestial realms during sleep, the ‘spiritual trace’ is experienced as a veridical dream; when received during waking hours, it is experienced as a vision. This kind of noetic connection with the celestial souls can be established through very deliberate physical means which affect the internal sense faculties, rooted as they are in the physical substrate of the brain.³⁹² As an example of such a practice, Avicenna provides an intriguing description of a Turkic divinatory procedure. When the tribe (*qawm*) requires knowledge from the supernal realm (*taqdimā ma ‘rifa*) in order to make a certain decision, they consult their diviner. He launches himself into an intense sprint (*fazi‘a huwa ilā shaddi ḥathīth jiddan*) during which he pants so heavily (*yalhath*) that he faints. In this state of delirium, his imagination is set to work (*yukhayyal ilayhi*) and those around him listen to what he utters, committing it to memory: then they decide their affairs accordingly. Physical procedures such as these cause bewilderment (*ḥayra*) to the common sense and bring a halt to the incessant movement of the imagination for as we have already learnt, intense physical movement can cause the dissolution of the imagination’s pneuma, rendering the faculty inert and perfectly receptive to influxes from the unseen world, the supernal realm of the celestial souls. Moreover, the estimative faculty has already been primed for a particular purpose, namely the pressing concern that occupies the tribe. Says Avicenna:

³⁹² Avicenna’s account of deliberate methods for such induction appears in chapter 23 of *Ishārāt* 10. On this chapter, Rāzī provides no commentary. See Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 655-6.

some natures (*ṭabā'i'*) may have recourse to activities, on account of which, the <common> sense is bewildered and the imagination arrested, such that the faculty which is receptive to the unseen becomes primed for sound reception, and the estimative faculty <*al-wahm*> is directed towards a <particular> purpose which specifically determines its reception <of the unseen> (*fā-yatakhaṣṣaṣ bi-dhālika qabūlu-hu*).³⁹³

Close scrutiny of this passage reveals a more detailed account of the noetic process. 'The faculty which is receptive to the unseen' is the *mutaṣarrifa* qua imagination which, having been arrested is primed for reception from the unseen world. And yet, since it inheres in a physical substrate and belongs to the animal soul, the imagination cannot be the means by which the human soul directly interfaces with the celestial realm to receive from it the spiritual trace. That function, as Dimitri Gutas argues, could only be performed by the practical intellect.³⁹⁴ In contrast with the theoretical intellect which only apprehends universals, the practical intellect is capable of receiving from the celestial realm knowledge of particulars in the sublunary world: in performing this function, it is served by the estimative faculty and the imagination.³⁹⁵ The crucial role of the estimative faculty here has two aspects. Firstly, as has already been discussed, the intellect can only engage the imagination by means of the estimative faculty. And secondly, as is evident from this passage, the estimative faculty, mediating the transmission of the trace from the practical intellect to the imagination, somehow specifies it, thus determining the way in which it is received by the imagination. This specificity is determined by the purpose

³⁹³ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 655. See Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, p. 103.

³⁹⁴ Gutas, 'Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge', p. 343.

³⁹⁵ Gutas, 'Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge', pp. 343-4.

(*gharaḍ*) with which the estimative faculty has been primed – in this case, the pressing issue with which the tribe is concerned. This process of noesis therefore proceeds along a hierarchy of different aspects of the soul: the practical intellect, having received the trace from the celestial soul, conveys it to the estimative faculty, the intent of which specifies it accordingly, before it is then conveyed to the imagination.

Such physical means are employed to distract the common sense and stupefy the imagination, allowing the practical intellect to slip away to achieve noetic connection with the celestial souls. Other examples of such methods require the diviner, or scryer, to focus on a transparent or glittering object, or one with wavy patterns, so that his common sense and imagination might be bewildered. Like the diviner of the Turkic tribe, the raw data received by way of noetic connection is conveyed by means of inspired speech which he utters whilst in the grip of the experience. Those who attend him, who are usually the very ones who requested the act of divination in the first instance, record and retain what he utters:

...those who seek to induce inspired speech (*yastantiq*) in such a manner by focusing (*ta'ammul*) either on something transparent which makes the vision tremble by means of its tremulous quality (*bi-rajrajatihi*); or on something which causes stupefaction on account of its transparency; or on such as that which causes distraction such as a patch of shiny black; or objects which glitter or which have a wavy pattern. All of that preoccupies the common sense with a kind of bewilderment and stirs the imagination (*khayāl*) in a way that occasions bewilderment as though it

were coerced, not natural. In the bewilderment <of the common sense and the imagination> is to be found the aforementioned opportunity <for the practical intellect> to slip away.³⁹⁶

There appears to be however, a qualitative difference between the practice of the diviner of the Turkic tribe and those who rely on scrying. The function of the rapid sprint of the Turkic diviner is to induce a state of hyperventilation which dissolves the pneuma of the imagination, rendering it still and inert, whilst perplexing the common sense. Bewilderment, however, can be induced in the scryer, who being usually young and gullible, is easily led into a state of bewilderment through the power of suggestion:

...(these means) are most effective in one whose nature is most prone to stupefaction and most suited to accepting dubious stories (*al-aḥādīth al-mukhtaliṭa*) such as simple-minded youth. Sometimes this is facilitated by lengthy, confused speech (*al-ishāb fī al-kalām al-mukhtalaṭ*) and falsely suggesting the influence of jinn (*al-ihām lli-masīs al-jinn*) and everything <which involves> bewilderment and stupefaction. If the estimative faculty takes upon itself the pursuit of this aim, the <noetic> connection (*ittiṣāl*) would not take long to be established.³⁹⁷

What Avicenna meant by ‘confused speech’ (*al-kalām al-mukhtalaṭ*) is not clear; nor does Rāzī’s commentary assist us. However if we consult *al-Sirr*, a clearer picture of what, at the very least, Rāzī thought Avicenna may have meant

³⁹⁶ Avicenna quoted in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 655. See Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, p. 103.

³⁹⁷ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 655. See Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, p.103. It is uncertain whether Avicenna affirmed the existence of the jinn. Fazlur Rahman doubts that he did. (See Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, fn.78, p. 86.)

emerges. Discussing the effect of reciting incantations in unknown languages during magical ritual, Rāzī says:

...when the soul hears these incantations, whilst understanding or comprehending nothing of them, then is it overwhelmed by bewilderment and stupefaction; and on account of this bewilderment, its ties to the corporeal world are severed and its connection with the world of unseen is established.³⁹⁸

In this passage from *al-Sirr*, Rāzī is manifestly drawing on chapter 23 of Avicenna's *Ishārat* 10, which continues:

Sometimes the flash of the unseen (*lamḥan al-ghayb*) will take the form of a powerful belief (*ẓann qawī*); at other times it may resemble the speech of jinn or a call from someone absent (*hutāf min ghā'ib*); and at other times it may take the form of something absent <but which nevertheless> can be witnessed despite the fact that its distance from the vision would <normally> prevent it from being so witnessed.³⁹⁹

The eventual form which the diviner's imagination inscribes in his common sense, to generate a direct witnessed experience, will be the product of the process of *muḥakat*, or imitation. This will depend to a large degree on his culture, the context of his immediate surroundings, and his personal experiences and beliefs.⁴⁰⁰

Avicenna's theory of cognition enables him to explain dreams and visions as the product of the individual imagination, informed by culture and belief, whilst

³⁹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18.

³⁹⁹ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 655. For Inati's translation *Ibn Sina and Mysticism*, p. 103.

⁴⁰⁰ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 655.

simultaneously affirming their extra-mental and ontologically independent cause. The veridical dream or vision is experienced irrespective of whether the recipient affirms or denies the reality of their celestial cause and regardless of his religion or confession. From prophets and those possessed of divine gnosis, to diviners of Turkic tribes, to dull-witted and suggestible youths: noetic connection with the celestial souls can be established by all.

What distinguishes prophets and those possessed of divine gnosis from the rest of humanity is that they need not rely on sleep or illness or physical techniques to attain this state: whilst awake they can engage with the realm of the celestial souls and the lower corporeal world of the internal sense faculties such that management of the latter does not thwart connection with the former. Possessed of mastery of his soul, the prophet or *'arīf* can then marshal the imagination to compose forms which correspond to those traces left by the celestial souls, imprinting them on the common sense.

Those outside their elite ranks must rely on physical means to cause the bewilderment of the common sense and the imagination, freeing the higher function of the soul, namely the practical intellect, to connect with the celestial souls. Since they are incapable of simultaneously engaging with the celestial realm and directing the faculties of the animal soul, they must rely on those around them to listen to and retain the purport of what they utter. Whilst the imagination plays the crucial role of imprinting forms in the common sense, produced in imitation of the spiritual trace which the practical intellect receives from the celestial soul, the estimative faculty, being primed with a particular purpose and intent, specifies the trace accordingly before transmitting it to the

imagination. Both the estimative faculty and the imagination are thus crucial to the noetic process.

7.7 Correspondence and noetic connection

We have yet to form, however, a clearer picture of how the noetic connection is established between the celestial and human rational souls. Dimitri Gutas identifies an early formulation in Avicenna's *al-Mabda' wa'l-Ma'ād* (*Provenance and Destination*). He translates the relevant passage as follows:

As for the reason for the knowledge of <future> events (*al-kā'ināt*), it is the contact of the human soul with the souls of the celestial bodies which [...] know what happens in the world of the elements [...] For the most part, these <human> souls come into contact with them <the souls of the celestial spheres> by virtue precisely of a congeneric similarity (*mujānasa*) between them. The congeneric similarity is that thing (*al-ma'nā*) which, there <in the heavens>, is close to the concerns of these <human souls>. So most of what is seen <by the human souls> of what is to be found there <in the heavens> is congeneric to the states of the bodies of these <human> souls or to the states of one who is close to these bodies. And although the contact <of the human souls with the celestial souls> is total, the majority of the influence they receive from them is for the most part close to just their <own> concerns. This contact

comes about on the part (*min jiha*) of the estimation and imagination (*al-khayāl*) and through their use, and concerns particular things.⁴⁰¹

Gutas observes how the concept of congeneric similarity (*mujānasa*) in the *Provenance and Destination* is expressed in the *Healing* as a relation – or *nisba* -- between celestial and human souls. He says:

...for this knowledge to be transmitted, there must come about a necessary relation or connection (*nisba*) between the source of this knowledge, the supernal world, and its recipient, the rational soul and the imagination as a unit, and also, since this knowledge manifests itself through the imagination, between the rational soul and the imagination. In other words, what in the *Provenance and Destination* had been a congeneric similarity between the upper world and the human soul here [i.e. in *al-Shifā'*] is expressed as a connection or relation between the two.⁴⁰²

It is evident from *al-Sirr* that the occult *munāṣabāt* of Sabian astral ritual are crucial in establishing the *mujānasa* between the operant's soul and the celestial soul that he invokes. The resulting noetic connection enables the reception of both knowledge of the unseen and power to affect change in the sublunary world. To understand how, we must explore in greater detail the central role of the estimative faculty in the occult ritual described in *al-Sirr*. This will be the task of the next section.

⁴⁰¹ Gutas, 'Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge', p. 339. As discussed earlier, Gutas later explains the roles of the estimation and the imagination in this process as being subordinate to the practical intellect which is that function of the human rational soul which makes the noetic contact.

⁴⁰² Gutas, 'Imagination and Transcendental Knowledge in Avicenna', p. 348.

7.8 The Estimative Faculty and Sabian Astral Ritual

Rāzī cites Ibn Waḥshīya who says the Sabian method of establishing noetic connection with the celestial spirits entails the worship of the idols of the Sun and Mercury:

Of the concerns of the practitioner is to make firm his connection with the celestial spirits: this is the main aim (*al-maqṣūd al-muhimm*). Said Ibn Waḥshiyya may God have mercy on him: “it is necessary, each morning of these forty days, to come and praise the idols of the Sun and Mercury (*ṣanam al-shams wa ‘uṭārid*); to pray to them, burning for them aromatics which are appropriate, devoting himself to them, calling on their assistance in the attainment of that <main> aim.⁴⁰³

Ibn Waḥshīya is not a philosopher: he does not theorize about the contribution made by each of the soul’s internal faculties to this noetic process. So drawing on Avicenna’s psychology, Rāzī speculates about what must be going on and in so doing he formulates a theory on how astrolatrous idolatry works:

And I say: this craft is not accomplished unless thought and the estimative faculty are made to connect with the spirit of the assisting heavenly body (*ta’līq al-fikr wa’l-wahm bi-rūḥ dhālika al-kawkab al-mu’īn*) such that that becomes a stabilized disposition (*milka mustaqarra*). Moreover, we have explained that souls are created subservient to the activities of the estimative faculty, in most matters, subject to the senses (*khuliqat al-nufūs muṭī‘atan li’l-awhām wa-tābi‘atan li’l-ḥawāss*). So it is

⁴⁰³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 16.

necessary to take statues for these celestial spirits (*lā buddā min ittikhādh tamāthīl li-tilka al-arwāḥ al-falakiyya*) and to place them before the eye so that the senses connect with them, followed by the imagination (*al-khayāl*) and the estimative faculty (*al-wahm*) which is drawn powerfully towards it. For, the faculties act more powerfully when they act in concert (*fā-inna al-quwā idhā taṭābaqat kānat aqwā 'alā al-fi'l*).⁴⁰⁴

The following justification for astrolatrous idolatry thus emerges from this account. The human soul connects with the celestial spirit by means of its estimative faculty. Since the estimative faculty only understands things to the extent that they are rooted in a material reality; and given that meteorological, diurnal and nocturnal conditions disqualify the planetary bodies as reliable foci for adoration, the Sabians wrought idols to facilitate the connection between the estimative faculty and the planetary spirit. Consistent worship during the forty day period of fasting stabilizes this connection within the soul. So since the soul is subject to the senses; and since wherever they focus the imagination and estimative faculty follow, planetary idols and litanies in adoration of the heavenly bodies, become central to this worship. When the noetic connection becomes stabilized, special occult knowledge and power is acquired. It is for this reason that the Sabians:

... took idols (*aṣnām*) for these heavenly bodies for every purpose that could be sought such as love, hate, sickness, health, ill-fortune and good-luck. And they turned themselves in their worship and they occupied their eyes with gazing at those statues; their tongues with the recitation of incantations which comprised mention of their attributes and

⁴⁰⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 16.

influence until the forms <of the statues> reached their souls twice; for a man cannot describe something with his tongue unless its meaning occurs to his mind; then when he expresses it with his tongue, that sound reaches his ear and the soul understands the meaning of that speech, so he perceives that object of description once more. So the remembrance of the tongue is preserved by two conceptualizations (*al-dhikr al-lisānī maḥfūẓan bi-taṣawwurayn*) – one prior and one posterior – and so when it occurs that the senses are drawn in a concerted way to the spirits of those heavenly bodies, the soul becomes connected (*ta'alluq*) with them and the soul, when it perseveres in these acts, reaches a level close in rank to that soul innately disposed towards this special occult power (*al-naḥs al-maḥtūra 'alā hādhihi al-khāṣya*).⁴⁰⁵

Sensual stimuli are co-ordinated to draw the estimative faculty and the imagination towards the celestial spirit. As we have already discovered, the imagination operates under the direction of the estimative faculty: the latter, having received the *ma'ānī* or intentions of the celestial spirit, leads the former to create simulacra which embody the intentions of the spirit. With the completion of the forty day period of fasting and worship, the adept's soul becomes master of the occult sciences (*ghawāmiḍ al-'ulūm*) and he is imbued with occult power.

7.9 Sabian perfected man

⁴⁰⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 16.

Al-Ishārāt 10 and the *Aḥwāl* represent attempts at a naturalistic account of how the properties of prophethood can be individually displayed, to varying degrees by ordinary humans, as well as prophets.⁴⁰⁶ It is in light of this attempt that the beliefs and practices of Rāzī's Sabians are to be understood. Imaginational 'prophecy' by means of celestial soul noesis can be exhibited by the Turkic shaman; piercing philosophical intuition (*ḥads*) can be displayed by a thinker like Avicenna himself; and occult power can be exerted by a man possessed of divine gnosis, a malevolent sorcerer or even the evil eye of an envious neighbour. Philosophical accomplishment is certainly present in the subtext of *al-Sirr*, the theoretical passages of which are presented as the thought either of 'the philosophers and the Sabians'. Whilst the knowledge extolled in the introduction to *al-Sirr* pertains to particulars, the philosopher Sabians, as contrasted with their more earth-bound idolatrous co-religionists, are certainly not excluded from insight into the universals.

So each of the three properties can be individually displayed by ordinary humans and severally displayed by great prophets. Crucial to the operation of the imaginational property is the estimative faculty which mediates between the practical intellect, which receives traces from the Celestial Souls, and the imagination. It is just as vital in the exercise of occult power. And just as the estimative faculty mediates between the immaterial intellect and the internal faculties, which are rooted in the material substrate of the brain, so the imaginational capacity bridges the intellectual and the occult-practical extraordinary capacities.

⁴⁰⁶ For the varying degrees to which philosophical intuition (*ḥads*) can be displayed, see ch. 14 of Avicenna, *Aḥwāl al-Nafs*, pp. 122-3.

Nowhere in the *Aḥwāl* or in *al-Ishārāt* does Avicenna assert that only prophets might exhibit all three properties of extraordinary human capacity. Whilst the account in the *Aḥwāl* appears under the title ‘On establishing prophethood’ (*Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwa*), it is by no means restricted to prophets. Indeed both the *Aḥwāl* and *al-Ishārāt* allude to non-prophetic figures who have attained such completion, whose occult power can extend throughout the sublunary world, exerting its authority on all physical phenomena. But whilst Avicenna attributes the occult-practical capacity to a power in the soul that is innate, it is the innovation of *al-Sirr* to extend the logic of Avicenna’s psychology to suggest that noetic connection with the Celestial Souls has the potential not only to impart knowledge of the unseen but also to develop occult power in a soul which is not otherwise so innately disposed. Thus the man who has successfully completed the arduous ritual of planetary ascent described in *al-Sirr*, to whose command the very planets humbly submit, becomes the Sabian analogue of Avicenna’s perfected man.

7.9.1 Perfected Man in Avicenna’s *al-Ishārāt*

Both Avicenna as he writes in *al-Ishārāt* and the Sabians as Rāzī presents them in *al-Sirr* agree that noetic connection with the celestial souls produces occult knowledge: since the souls of the heavenly bodies possess knowledge of themselves as causes of change in the sublunary world, connection with them will yield knowledge of future events and hidden things. But *al-Sirr* goes one step further in linking this form of noesis with the acquisition of both occult knowledge and power. It would not be an unnatural inference to draw: if noetic connection with the Celestial Souls occasions the transference to a human

recipient their knowledge of themselves as the effective causes of sublunary phenomena, then why could it not also involve the transference of the power to cause change? Whilst Avicenna is cautious not to go this far, Rāzī's commentary on *al-Ishārāt* makes fleeting allusion to the fact that his theory might indeed allow for such an understanding. Having presented his theory of celestial soul noesis as an explanation of the ability of those possessed of gnosis to attain occult knowledge, Avicenna then moves on to examine their ability to produce effects which breach the customary course of events (*khawāriq al- 'ādāt*). He says:

You may receive information about the knowers that runs almost contrary to custom, and then you begin to disbelieve. This is like saying a knower sought rain for people, hence they received rain; or sought recovery for them, hence they recovered; or wished them ill hence they were cast down, inflicted by earth tremors, or perished in another way. This is also like saying he wished them well, hence they were emancipated from diseases, murrain, torrential streams and floods; or a beast submits to some of them, or no bird flees from them, or other similar things occur that do not count as belonging to the kind of things that are clearly impossible. Stand still and do not rush into rejecting these things, for such things have causes in the mysteries of nature. Perhaps it will be possible for me to relate some of these matters to you.⁴⁰⁷

The ability to cause rain, floods and earth tremors bears a close resemblance to the extraordinary capacities described by Ṭumṭum al-Hindī as reported in *al-Sirr*

⁴⁰⁷ Avicenna in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 656-7.

1:4. But, says Rāzī commenting on these extraordinary feats described by Avicenna:

...they are all related to the ability to act on the elemental world (*muta‘alliqa bi’l-taṣṣaruf fi al-‘ālam al-‘unṣuri*) and he [i.e. Avicenna] mentions that their causes are known, without mentioning at all anything that relates to the celestial bodies because the ability to act on them by way of changing their courses is, according to him, impossible.⁴⁰⁸

Of course, Rāzī here is clarifying the fact that the one possessed of such power acts directly on elemental reality without any need to control the planets, the proximate causes of change in the sublunary world. But perhaps in addition to this Rāzī, realizing the potential of Avicenna’s theory of celestial soul noesis, expects Avicenna to make the link with occult power. And yet he holds back from doing so. Perhaps Rāzī’s expectation was encouraged by Avicenna’s commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Theologia*:

...It is not impossible that the celestial bodies should in some way be employed by souls other than their own. Especially when a soul has perfected its power within its own body, it may, when need or expediency so demand, employ, in its place, a higher and more noble body than its own.⁴⁰⁹

Unfortunately, Avicenna does not explain how such a soul can ‘employ’ the heavenly bodies without, as Rāzī observes, ‘acting on them by way of changing their courses’. Another way perhaps is by completion of the planetary ascent

⁴⁰⁸ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 657.

⁴⁰⁹ *Aristū ‘inda al-Arab*, (ed.) Badawi, p.72, translated and cited by Rahman *Prophecy in Islam*, p.85, fn. 75.

ritual, which accords the man thus perfected power over the sublunary world.

In *al-Ishārāt*, Avicenna advises his reader:

Do not think it far-fetched that some souls possess a fixed habit whose influence reaches beyond their bodies and, that due to their power, these souls operate as a kind of soul for the world.⁴¹⁰

The reasoning here is that if the human soul can affect its own physical body, then it can also affect other bodies; this gives rise, at least to the logical possibility, of a soul possessed of occult power of such magnitude that it can act directly on the entire world as though it were its own body.

He goes on to say:

Therefore do not deny that some souls have this power such that they act on bodies other than their own and that such bodies react to these souls as the bodies of these souls do. Again, do not deny that these souls extend their proper powers to the powers of other souls on which they act, especially if the former souls have sharpened their fixed habit by means of subjugating their bodily powers which belong to them. Thus they subjugate desire, anger or fear of other souls.⁴¹¹

Rāzī comments thusly:

It is not impossible that one soul (*baʿḍ al-nufūs*) can have a special occult property (*khāṣṣiyya*) by which it is enabled to act on the elemental reality of this world and the relationship of that soul to the totality of the elements of this world is as the relation of our souls in relation to our bodies; neither is

⁴¹⁰ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 657.

⁴¹¹ Avicenna, in Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 657-8.

it impossible for the effects of that soul to extend to other souls such that they, by virtue of their connection with that soul (*li'l-ttiṣāli-hā bihā*), become empowered to act in a similar way or in a way that approximates to it. If this is possible (*muḥtamal*) in the substance of the soul, then if it also receives spiritual discipline (*riyādāt*) by which I mean the breaking of the powers of desire and anger (*quwwatay al-shahwa wa'l-ghaḍab*) then there is no doubt that then they become even more powerful.⁴¹²

Rāzī thus represents Avicenna as asserting three serially connected possibilities: (1) the existence of a soul so powerful that it can act throughout elemental reality in the sublunary world; (2) by virtue of their connection with this soul possessed of such singular power, other souls can be empowered to perform feats which approximate to its own; (3) the power, which is accorded by such a connection, can be augmented in individual souls by means of spiritual discipline and the subjugation of the base passions.

He detects in Avicenna's reasoning an allusion to the logical possibility of a number of human souls who possess occult power by virtue of their connection to one singular soul uniquely possessed of a semi-divine capacity to operate throughout nature. Such a soul, of course, need not be that of a prophet: after all, Avicenna in this section of *Ishārāt* 10 is discussing the power of those possessed of gnosis (*'arifīn*) to perform feats which contravene the natural course of events.

In *al-Maṭālib* 8, Rāzī amplifies the first of these possibilities as one which was accepted by the philosophers, including presumably Avicenna. Summarizing

⁴¹² Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 658.

‘the position of the philosophers on the reason by which prophets and saints can perform miracles and saintly wonders’, Rāzī says:

...the estimative faculty possessed by man can be so powerful that it can effect bodies [...] the existence of a man who possesses this power perfectly is not impossible; so it follows that he would be able to act on prime matter in this world howsoever he wills and desires.⁴¹³

We are reminded of course not only of Ṭumṭum al-Hindī’s description in *al-Sirr* 1:4 of the man whose complete meditative focus affords him control over all the elements of sublunary reality but also of the perfected man to whose command the planets humbly submit at his completion of the planetary ascent ritual.

7.9.2 Perfected Man in Avicenna’s *Aḥwāl al-Nafs*

In the thirteenth chapter of Avicenna’s *Aḥwāl al-Nafs* (‘States of the Soul’) entitled ‘On establishing prophethood’, the imaginational property of prophethood is explained in light of the same cognitive theory of Celestial Soul Noesis that we encountered in the *Ishārāt*. The *Aḥwāl* makes it clear that:

...apprehension of intelligible forms (*al-itīṣṣāl bi’l-ṣuwar al-‘aqliyya*) is by means of the individual’s theoretical intellect (*al-‘aql al-naẓarī*); forms which comprise speech are formulated by another power, namely the practical intellect, served in this capacity by the imagination. So particulars, <as received from> the higher psychic substances (*al-jawāhir al-‘āliya al-nafsāniyya*), are apprehended by the power of the soul that is called the practical intellect. The soul apprehends universals by a power

⁴¹³ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 137.

called the theoretical intellect, from the higher intellectual substances
(*al-jawāhir al-‘āliya al-‘āqliya*).⁴¹⁴

The three levels of power and clarity in the noetic experience which we read in *al-Ishārāt* also appear in the *Aḥwāl*, where they are explained in terms of the receptivity of the human soul to the transmission of particulars from the celestial souls and the strength of the human imagination to render these traces appropriately.⁴¹⁵ But in the *Aḥwāl*, adding a fourth degree which is distinguished from the rest by a superlative propensity (*tahayyu'*) for noetic reception, Avicenna explicitly classifies all four as levels of prophethood.⁴¹⁶

For Avicenna, the revelation of a prophet, the veridical dream and the utterances of a Turkic shaman fall within the same cognitive category of prophetic experience. Thus, insofar as Avicenna's formulation of the imaginal property of extraordinary human capacity is concerned, the *ilhām* which the Sabian sages of *al-Sirr* receive when connected with the celestial souls must also fall within this same category. This is completely unacceptable for an Ash'arī theologian. Very important paragraph

In the following chapter of the *Aḥwāl*, having described the corresponding levels of intuition (*ḥads*) possessed by the theoretical intellect, ranging from the weak

⁴¹⁴ Avicenna, *Aḥwāl*, p. 117.

⁴¹⁵ During our exploration of *al-Ishārāt* we learnt of three degrees to which a 'spiritual trace' from the celestial souls might be received and retained by the human soul: (1) those traces which are so weak that they leave no enduring impression; those which are sufficiently strong as to stir the imagination which, however, continues in its movement to generate new images by way of association such that only the imagination's associated images, rather than the original trace, are retained; and finally those traces of such intensity and power that they are clearly imprinted in the imagination and stored in the memory undefiled by the confusion of associated images. But in the *Aḥwāl*, a fourth degree is added, which is distinguished from the rest by a superlative propensity (*tahayyu'*) for noetic reception. See Avicenna, *Aḥwāl*, p. 118 -9.

⁴¹⁶ Avicenna, *Aḥwāl*, p. 119.

to the powerful, Avicenna then moves onto the familiar argument which is that forms in the soul, such as those igniting anger or desire, exert an effect on the body and spur it to action; and that therefore:

...we do not deny that there can be powers of the soul which exert a more powerful effect than our own such that their effect is not restricted to the matter of their own body but rather, if they will, they can produce in the matter of the world that which is visualized by the same means by which they act in their own soul; the principle of that is naught but producing movement or rest; coolness or heat; rigidity or suppleness; just as it produces in its own body. As a result of that clouds and winds, lightning and earthquakes are produced and waters and springs burst forth, and so on, in the world of men, by means of the will of that man (*irāda hadhā al-insān*).⁴¹⁷

Those who have perfected this occult-practical capacity ‘...can produce in the matter of the world that which is visualized by the same means by which they act in their own soul’. With a fixed and one-pointed imaginative focus, they visualize the nature of the effect they intend to produce in terms of movement and quality. Such is the magnitude of their power that they are able to control meteorological and geological phenomena. We are reminded of course of Ṭumṭum al-Hindī’s meditator who ‘dispatches rain, lightning, thunder, lightning bolts and earthquakes’ and ‘is in command of the Earth’s elements’. In contrast with *al-Ishārāt*, Avicenna in the *Aḥwāl* draws together all three properties of extraordinary human capacity in one individual:

⁴¹⁷ Avicenna, *Aḥwāl*, p. 124-5.

...the most pre-eminent kind of human is he who has (1) realized perfection in the intuition of the theoretical intellect, such that he is completely free of need of a human teacher; and (2) (has realized perfection) in his practical divinatory ability (*fī kahānati-hi al-‘amalīya*) such that he witnesses the realm of the soul (*al-‘ālam al-nafsānī*) [i.e. the realm of the celestial souls] and that which therein relates to the states of the lower world, establishing them whilst awake so that the imagination completely performs its action for him to witness them in a specific way, as we have already explained and ; (3) the power of his soul exerts its effect throughout the natural world.⁴¹⁸

By reason of his perfection this individual moves freely throughout the three realms of Intellect, Soul and Physical Nature. As such he commands the sole rightful claim to sovereignty over the rest of humanity. Avicenna describes such a person as:

...the real king who, by virtue of his essence, deserves to rule [...] if he links his soul (*in nasaba nafsa-hu*) to the realm of the intellect (*‘ālam al-‘aql*), he will be found to have achieved spontaneous noetic connection with it; if he links his soul to the realm of soul (*‘ālam al-nafs*) he will be found to be one of the inhabitants of that realm; if he links his soul to the realm of nature (*‘ālam al-ṭabī‘a*) [i.e. the sublunary world] then he will be able to effect it in whatever way he wills.⁴¹⁹

Moreover, those who follow him will, by virtue of that fact, gain rank and distinction amongst the rest of humanity:

⁴¹⁸ Avicenna, *Aḥwāl*, p. 125..

⁴¹⁹ Avicenna, *Aḥwāl*, p. 126.

...he who follows him also will be a great ruler (*ra'īs kabīr*), only of a lesser rank, and the rest will be the nobles and honoured men of humankind.⁴²⁰

Just as we saw in *al-Ishārāt*, we here detect an allusion to a group of humans distinguished by their connection with the perfected man.

The Avicennan perfected man, acquires supernal knowledge by means of celestial soul noesis; his estimative faculty is so powerful that it can extend across the sublunary world. He represents the conceptual background against which the Sabian adept, perfected through the long ritual of planetary ascent, has been projected.

⁴²⁰ Avicenna, *Aḥwāl*, p. 126. The theme of the philosopher-king, the 'natural ruler of the world', possessed of occult power by virtue of his connection with the celestial souls, is pursued by Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn Ḥabash Suhrawardī (d.1186) in the last chapter of his *Partū Nāma* (see *The Book of Radiance*).

Chapter 8: Occult Epistemology

8.1 Introduction

The aspiring practitioner of the occult practices recorded in *al-Sirr* must have command of astrology, to ensure correct ritual timing, so that a congenereity might be established between his soul and that of the heavenly body whose aid he endeavours to attract. So crucial is this knowledge that its mastery is one of the twelve conditions which must be fulfilled if occult practice is to meet with success.⁴²¹ I shall argue that, whilst ritual timing is crucial, the very practice of catarchic astrology, by the practitioner himself, is of commensurate importance in the establishment of human-celestial psychic congenereity; for just as the estimative faculty is the vital link between the human practical intellect and the *mutaṣarrifa* in producing noetic connection, so it is also the operative faculty in the practice of astrology. Such is the importance of astrology that, aside from the treatise on astral correspondences, Rāzī devotes two chapters in the first treatise to discussing the Sabian epistemological basis of astrology.⁴²² It is my contention that his formulation of this epistemology draws on Avicenna's account of the ways in which the estimative faculty arrives at its conclusions about the extra-mental world. In this way I hope to show that the cognitive processes in which the estimative faculty engages during the activity of astrological practice play a vital role in Sabian occult ritual.

8.2 Rāzī's solution to the Epistemological Problem of Astrology

⁴²¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 6.

The empirical limitations which hinder certainty in the science of astrology are arranged by Rāzī systematically in *al-Sirr*. He begins by circumscribing its field of inquiry to what can be known empirically, to highlight the vast area which lies beyond the ken of observable reality. He then proceeds to introduce doubt into the field about which astrology does indeed make positive truth claims.

He reasons therefore that the heavens contain bodies which are so small that they cannot be observed. Thus are we entirely unaware of their existence and of the influence they exert on the sublunary world. Even those heavenly bodies which we can detect with the eye, such as those which constitute the Milky Way, are so small that their natures (*ṭabā'i'*) cannot be ascertained. Moreover, the perpetual motions of the heavenly bodies, and the constant alteration of their configurations, resist any definite conclusions about their natures.⁴²³ Furthermore, the precise effect of the heavenly bodies on sublunary phenomena cannot be ascertained with any degree of certainty:

...as for sublunary material, complete apprehension (*al-wuqūf al-tāmm*) of their natures is impossible since complete reception (*al-qabūl al-tāmm*) does not occur unless it be with the fulfilment of the conditions of quality, quantity, position and others; sublunary material is not stable in one state. Rather it is in a state of perpetual transformation and change though this may not be apparent to sense perception. Thus it becomes obvious from what we have mentioned that complete apprehension of the states of the active heavenly forces and the passive terrestrial forces does not occur in man. Were it to occur to anyone, then that individual

⁴²³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 9-10.

necessarily would know all the minutiae (*tafāṣīl*) of the past and the future and be able to cause wonders (*umūr ‘ajība*).⁴²⁴

Recalling the discussion on talismans in the previous chapter, Rāzī's attention here turns to the relationship between active heavenly and passive terrestrial forces and in doing so emphasizes the relationship between astrology, knowledge of sublunary materials, and the practical craft of striking talismans. Even terrestrial phenomena defy apprehension by sense perception which is sometimes incapable of discerning the inevitable changes and transformations to which they are subject. In general, the infinitely intricate complex of celestial and terrestrial factors which constitutes sublunary reality resists any attempt at complete human apprehension. However, in the remote event that a single exceptional individual were indeed able to grasp such a bewildering array of phenomena, then he would have the power to perform prodigies.

In response to these epistemological doubts, Rāzī acknowledges their validity but rejects as unreasonable the impossible standards of empirical certainty which they implicitly demand:

...what a fine saying it is that not everything which cannot be entirely perceived merits abandonment (*mā lā yudrak kullu-hu lā yutrak kullu-hu*) for although human intellects fall short of knowing the higher active forces and <their corresponding> lower, passive phenomena (*al-munfa ‘ila al-sāfila*), they are nevertheless capable of being apprised of some of their conditions.⁴²⁵

⁴²⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.10.

⁴²⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.10.

The reasoning of Rāzī's putative critics of astrology asserts that if an object of empirical inquiry cannot be completely and entirely observed, then those observations of it which can be made are devoid of any epistemological value. A corollary of this assertion therefore is that if a field of inquiry is to yield a body of true knowledge, it must be founded on apodictic demonstration. Rāzī responds by appealing to a sense of pragmatism: although reliable empirical observation is limited, the knowledge which it yields should not be disdained but rather valued as the best that can be achieved within the narrow scope of human apprehension. In responding in this way, Rāzī attempts to redeem astrology, and by extension the *craft* of striking talismans, from the anathema of those who insist on apodictic demonstration as the *sine qua non* of any field of true knowledge. The means by which he does so demands close scrutiny as it represents an attempt to construct an epistemology of astrology: repeated observation (*al-tajārib*)⁴²⁶ must be augmented by veridical intuition (*ilhām ṣādiq*). He says:

Insofar as long-term repeated observation and veridical intuitions (*al-tajārib al-mutaṭāwila wa'l-ilhāmāt al-ṣādiqa*) are concerned, that portion (*qadr*) <of knowledge>, though it be paltry and insignificant in relation to everything in existence, is immense in relation to the capability and power of man. We are not <logically> compelled <to conclude> that, if we are incapable of mastering <a field of knowledge> entirely, that which we have mastered of it will bring no benefit; nor are we <logically> compelled to conclude from the absence of apodictic demonstration (*burhān*) its disqualification as a science (*ilm*). For a science based on apodictic demonstration (*al-ilm al-*

⁴²⁶ In 'The Empiricism of Avicenna', Gutas translates *tajriba* as 'testing and proving'. In the context of astrology it is best translated as 'repeated observation'.

burhānī) is more specific (*akhaṣṣ*) than a <general> science (*ilm*) and the fact that the specific science does not exist does not necessarily mean that the more general does not exist (*lā yulzam min ‘adam al-akhaṣṣ ‘adam al-a‘amm*).⁴²⁷

Thus fields of inquiry based on albeit limited empirical observations, rather than the certainties of apodictic demonstration, nevertheless contain real knowledge value. And where sense perception fails, intuition succeeds at least to some degree in bridging the epistemological gap which must be traversed if a particular field of inquiry is to be established as a true body of knowledge. Rāzī’s allusion to the ‘non-existence’ (*‘adam*) of a ‘specific’ apodictic basis to astrology mirrors the reference made by Abu Ma‘shar in his *al-Madkhal al-kabīr* (Great Introduction) to the ‘existence’ (*wujūd*) of astrology, as though it were independent of the astrologer’s mind, awaiting discovery and exploration.⁴²⁸ But whilst Abu Ma‘shar restricts all forms of prognostication, including the professions of astrology, medicine and husbandry, to repeated observation (*al-tajārib*), Rāzī supplements this method with that of veridical intuition. Taking his cue from Abu Ma‘shar, Rāzī adopts as a useful illustrative comparison the example of medicine, a field of knowledge based on a similar epistemological foundation:

So knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) of drugs and medicines (*adwiya wa-aghddhiya*) occurs despite the fact that this knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) is not based on demonstrative proof. Indeed this craft (*ṣinā‘a*) is more deserving of attention than the craft of medicine because, though they might share in

⁴²⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 10

⁴²⁸ *‘fī wujūd ‘ilm aḥkām al-nujūm’*, Abu Ma‘shar, *Great Introduction*, 2, p.6, cited by Burnett, article ‘Doctors versus Astrologers’.

not being based in logical demonstrative proof, this craft is distinguished from medicine on account of the fact that either it brings benefit or it brings no harm. But as for medicine, it can either bring benefit or it can harm, for potions when taken can bring harm just as they can benefit. Thus it is established that attention must be paid to this craft.⁴²⁹

Being a body of practical knowledge grounded in observation medicine, like astrology, is referred to as a *ma'rifā*, a term which Rāzī seems to apply here in a technical sense to designate a form of knowledge which is more general (*a'amm*) rather than the more specific (*akhaṣṣ*) form of knowledge which is based in apodictic demonstration (*'ilm burhānī*). It is with this distinction in mind that he refers to each of medicine, astrology, and the general subject matter of *Al-Sirr*, as a *ṣinā'a* or *craft* which is grounded in repeated observation and veridical intuition.

This latter way of knowing is explored in further depth in the third chapter of the first treatise entitled 'the method by which the conditions of the heavenly bodies are known.'⁴³⁰ The generally held position (*al-mashhūr*) of those who would defend astrology restricts its means of inquiry to repeated observation (*tajriba*). However, astrology makes claims about phenomena, such as thousand year cycles and certain planetary conjunctions, which occur over such vast periods of time that they defy observation by any single individual.

This position in my opinion is false, for observation requires repetition (*tikrār*) but in this case, such phenomena do not recur for a very long time

⁴²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 10. Compare Abu Ma'shar as observed by Brunett in 'Doctors versus Astrologers', p. 107.

⁴³⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 10-11.

(*lā tafī al-a ‘māl bi-ḍabṭ tawārīkhi-hā*) such as when they speak of thousands, conjunctions, and the precession of the equinoxes [...] Rather the truth is that the method is repeated observation in some things and revelation and inspiration (*waḥy wa’-ilhāmāt*) in the rest such as with respect to the images of the degrees, the thousands and the conjunctions (*ṣuwar al-darajāt wa’-ulūf wa’-qirānāt*).⁴³¹

Rāzī’s solution therefore is to ground astrology in the method of repeated observation for those phenomena which do in fact submit to such scrutiny, and in ‘revelation and intuition’ (*al-waḥy wa’-ilhām*) for those which do not. With the allusion to ‘images of the degrees’ Rāzī segues into a discussion of more explicitly occult matters: the images, glyphs and incantations associated with the heavenly bodies. Since such data is also apprehended by means of intuition and revelation, the crucial role of noetic connection with the celestial souls in both astrology and occult practice is brought into sharp focus:

Indeed there are no means to attain the images, unknown characters, and incantations (*al-ṣuwar wa’-ruqūm al-majhūla wa’-riqā*) which the masters of talismans prescribe except by means of inspiration. Tinkūlūshā claimed that many matters were revealed to him whilst he was sleeping in the temples of the heavenly bodies, having offered acts of obeisance and sacrifices. And it is related on the authority of Zawāyāy, the first man (*sayyid al-bashar*) that he saw in the World of the Two Poles (*‘ālam al-quṭbayn*) marvellous things the like of which do not exist in the World of the Centre (*‘ālam al-markaz*) and he claimed that he only came to know them because the Sun revealed them to him because Zawāyāy

⁴³¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 11.

stood in praise of the Sun for forty-two days, day and night, extolling it in a way that none had done before, craving for propinquity to the Sun, until he saw in his sleep the idol of the Sun saying “the God of gods is utterly free of need of you and anyone else so do not torment yourself”. Know that the doctrine of these Sabians is that these heavenly bodies are living, intelligent and rational, capable of action; and they are agreed that each one of the spirits of these heavenly bodies (*arwāḥ hādhihi al-kawākib*) can become manifest to man at any time and reveal to him these characters (*ruqūm*) and incantations (*riqā*): they are the names of these spirits and their adjutants (*a‘wān*). All their books contain this assertion. Moreover it is not unlikely that it be said that these incantations, which are unknown to us, <consist of> meaningful words (*kalimāt ma‘lūma*), but they are uttered in languages which have in our day become archaic (*mahjūra*), for most of this knowledge is transmitted from the Kasdānians who lived in ancient times. As for now, these languages have become extinct and so it comes as no surprise that these words remain obscure (*mubhama*). We surmise that these words consist of praise of the heavenly bodies and the enumeration of their special occult properties (*khawaṣṣ*) and effects; so it is not a remote possibility (*lā yab‘udu*) that a man might enumerate the attributes of the heavenly bodies in the words of (a known language) which could stand in their place, according their (same) benefit. This is my opinion on this topic.⁴³²

So Rāzī’s solution in *al-Sirr* to the epistemological problem of astrology, and by extension to other crafts (*ṣinā‘āt*) such as medicine and talisman making, is to

⁴³² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 11.

navigate the field of inquiry using the methods of repeated observation and revelation.⁴³³ However in chapter three of the third treatise of *al-Maṭālib* 8, entitled ‘On the method by which is attained knowledge of the natures of the celestial bodies’, the solution is developed and refined with the addition of a third approach to knowledge: analogical association (*qiyās*). Thus he says:

Know that this method comprises three approaches (*umūr*): analogical association (*qiyās*), repeated observation (*tajriba*) and revelation (*waḥy*).⁴³⁴

As the first of these approaches, analogical association begins a process that eventually leads to noetic connection with the celestial souls and the reception of data by means of revelation (*waḥy*).⁴³⁵ He explains the process of analogical association with an appropriately medical illustration, alluding to black bile, emphasizing the affinity between the two crafts:

As for analogical association it is that when they witness the darkness in the colour of Saturn, and this darkness corresponds to *sawdā* (black bile/melancholy), they conclude (*ḥakamū ‘alayhi*) that the nature of Saturn is cold and dry. And when they witness the redness in the colour of Mars – and this colour resembles the colour of fire – they conclude that its nature is fiery and dry.⁴³⁶

If adopted as the sole approach to knowledge, analogical association is a weak means of proof and the conclusions to which it gives rise are unreliable. But as a

⁴³⁴ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 159.

⁴³⁵ Rāzī does not in fact explicitly state that the celestial souls are the source of this revelation, but given his discussion of veridical dreams and knowledge of the unseen in *al-Maṭālib* 8 which draws from Namaṭ 10 of *al-Ishārāt*, we are on safe ground to make this assumption.

⁴³⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 159.

way of generating hypotheses which can be tested by repeated observation, analogical association can serve as a useful tool of inquiry:

In our opinion (*al-mukhtār ʿinda-nā*), this method (*al-ṭarīq*) [i.e. analogical association] is weak indeed and cannot be relied upon. For it is established in the field of medicine, that inferring from specific colours the occurrence of certain natures (*ṭabāʿi*) is the weakest form of diagnosis (*ad ʿafu aqsām al-dalāʿil*). Rather the truth is that whilst <reliance> on colour as evidence for a diagnosis is weak, when they add to it repeated observation (*al-tajārib*), and the repeated observation is consistent with the analogical association (*muṭābaqa li-hādhā al-qiyās*), then the knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of the natures which is generated is based on the application of the two approaches. So analogical association is the principle motor of intellects and ideas (*al-mabdaʾ al-muḥarrik li-l-ʿuqūl waʾl-khawāṭir*), whilst repeated observation constitutes completion and perfection.⁴³⁷

Despite being weak when adopted as the sole means of investigation, analogical association nevertheless plays an important role in its ability to stir motion within the soul in order to generate a working hypothesis. Since, strictly speaking, the rational soul is immaterial, the use of the word *muḥarrik* – or motor – to describe the activity of analogical association would imply that its locus is an internal organ with a physical substrate. Of course, as we have already learnt, this activity is characteristic of the *mutaṣarrifa*, when operating either *qua* the imagination or the cogitative faculty. We also know that it shares its seat in the substrate of the brain with the estimative faculty. The aim of the investigator is to establish a consistent correspondence (*muṭābaqa*) between the

⁴³⁷ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 159.

hypothesis, which has been generated by analogical association, and the data produced by repeated observation. The greater the number of repeated corroborating observations, the stronger the correspondence, and the stronger the supposition (*ẓann qawīy*) that the hypothesis is in fact correct:

Know that the method of repeated observation is that when a certain kind of event (*naw' min anwā' al-hawādith*) occurs in this world, then a man engaged in such observation establishes knowledge of how the celestial configurations were by means of perfect and detailed examination (*'alā sabīl al-istiḡṣā wa'l-kamāl*) and so, if the like of this event occurs a second time, then a third, a fourth and a fifth, and he establishes the celestial configurations are like the first, then there arises in his heart a strong supposition (*ẓann qawīy*) that that specific celestial configuration gives rise to the occurrence of that certain kind of event from among the events which take place in this world.⁴³⁸

Once a hypothesis that a certain celestial configuration gives rise to a particular kind of terrestrial event is confirmed by repeated observation, the investigator can then move on to make inferences about the 'nature' of that celestial configuration:

The upshot (*al-ḥaṣīl*) is that repeated observation involves the inference, from the coming to be of certain events in this world, of knowledge of the natures of the celestial configurations (*ma'rifa ṭabā'i' al-awḍā' al-falakiyya*). So if these repeated observations are established, then after

⁴³⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, pp. 159-160.

them he infers, from the arising of that specific celestial configuration, the occurrence of that kind of terrestrial event.⁴³⁹

Astrology, like medicine, builds its knowledge on the accumulated observations, inferences and conclusions of generations throughout time. And just like the astral religion of the Sabians, described by Rāzī in his *al-Tafsīr* as the ‘oldest religion of mankind’, the epistemological approach which characterizes astrology has overseen the incremental accumulation of human knowledge since time immemorial:

Know that this <mode> of inference was held in esteem by the peoples of the earth since time immemorial until today. So he who wants to become an expert in this knowledge (*‘ilm*) then, each time he sees a certain kind of event in this world (*naw‘ min al-ḥawādith fī hādihā al-‘ālam*), he must engage in a detailed examination in order to know the celestial configuration which is associated with the coming to be of that event (*ḥudūth dhālika al-ḥādith*), and compare his observation (*tajribatu-hu*) with the sayings of the ancients (*al-mutaqaddimīn*). If he perseveres in this method for a prolonged period, and it so happens that his soul is suited to this knowledge (*‘ilm*) by virtue of his original disposition (*fiṭra aṣliyya*) then he will attain a mighty portion (*mablaghan ‘azīman*).⁴⁴⁰

Since it is one of the most ancient fields of human knowledge, the investigator must compare, although not necessarily be bound by, the transmitted sayings of the ancients which preserve the intellectual tradition. Rāzī observes:

Know that you never see a religion or sect except that most of its principles are based on transmission from predecessors (*al-naql min al-*

⁴³⁹ Rāzī, *al-Matālib* 8, p. 160.

⁴⁴⁰ Rāzī, *al-Matālib* 8, p. 160.

salaf). The like of this is therefore not unlikely with respect to this knowledge (‘ilm), and God knows best.⁴⁴¹

The third complementary approach to astrology is of course revelation and inspiration. Again, Tinkūlūshā and Dhawānāy are the sources cited for the illustration of this point. But whilst in *al-Sirr* the revelation is the result of a richly described process of purification and idolatrous solar worship, in the *al-Maṭālib* the revelation is more soberly presented as being solely the product of purification:

As for the third method, it is the method of revelation and inspiration. This is also agreed upon by the masters of this knowledge. Tinkūlūshā related that, when Dhawānāy, the father of mankind (*sayyid al-bashar*), had completed the purification of his soul and the training of his mind (*taṣfiya al-naḥs wa-riyāḍa al-dhihn*), ineffable forms from the celestial world would become manifest to him.

Thus in the *al-Maṭālib* the agency of celestial souls in the education of the human soul in the context of astrology is minimized. Nevertheless, for the reader who is familiar with *al-Sirr*, its shadow remains in the background.

8.3 The Crafts and the Estimative Faculty

Rāzī’s formulation of the epistemology of the crafts such as astrology, medicine, and talisman making draws its inspiration from Avicenna’s account in the *al-Shifā’* of how the estimative faculty experiences the extra-mental world and

⁴⁴¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 160.

reaches its conclusions concerning its phenomena.⁴⁴² A brief consideration of this account would illuminate our understanding of how Rāzī adapted it to his theory of occult practice.

Avicenna poses the question:

How does the estimative faculty, without being associated with the intellect at the time of its estimative activity (*ḥāla tawahhumi-hi*), apprehend (*yanāl*) the *ma'ānī* which are in sensible objects, when the external sense apprehends their form, without those *ma'ānī* being sensed, and without many of <those *ma'ānī*> bringing benefit or inflicting harm in that moment?⁴⁴³

He identifies three ways of apprehension. The first is intuition (*ilhāmāt*) 'which emanates on the all from divine mercy.'⁴⁴⁴ Examples of the emanation of intuitions include the natural impulse (*gharīza*) of the baby to grab onto someone when made to stand upright or to shut its eye when something is brought close to it. Animals also share in this intuition, by means of which the sheep is wary of the wolf even though it may have never previously experienced one (*min ghayr tajriba*).⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² See Avicenna's *De Anima*, Nafs 4.3, 182.14-185.6. For my introduction to this important passage on the estimative faculty, I am grateful for the paper presented by Dimitri Gutas, Gothenburg, July 2016. His translation informs my own, which however differs significantly from his in key parts.

⁴⁴³ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p.183, ll.13-16. Gutas translates as follows: 'How does the Estimation that was not accompanied by intellect at the moment that it is estimating attain the connotational attributes of sensibles as the senses are attaining their form, although none of those attributes was sensed and many of them were at that moment neither beneficial nor harmful?' Gutas translates the phrase '*al-ma'ānī allatī hiya fī al-maḥsūsāt*' as 'the connotational attributes of sensibles' as though it were a genitive construct; I render it as 'the *ma'ānī* which are in sensible objects'.

⁴⁴⁴ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p.183, ll.17-18.

⁴⁴⁵ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p.183, ll.18-p.184. l.12

The second method of apprehension is 'similar' to experience (*tajriba*):

When an animal experiences pain or pleasure or is touched by some sensible benefit or harm associated with a sensible form, such that the form of the thing and the form of that which is associated with it are inscribed in the Form-bearing faculty; and the *ma'ānā* of the relationship (*al-nisba*) between them and their judgment (*al-ḥukm*) are inscribed in the Recollection (*al-dhikr*); then the Recollection, through its essence and natural disposition (*jibilla*), apprehends that. So when this form appears to the Imagination (*al-mutakhayyila*) from the outside, it stirs in the Form-bearing faculty, together with the beneficial or harmful *ma'ānā* associated with it, and in general the *ma'ānā* which is in the Recollection, by way of transference and mental presentation (*'alā sabīl al-intiqāl wa'l-isti'rād*), which is in the nature of the imaginative faculty. And so the Estimative faculty senses all of that simultaneously, and sees (*ra'ā*) the *ma'ānā* together with the form. This <occurs> in a manner which approximates to experience (*tajriba*). It is for this reason that dogs are frightened of stones and pieces of wood.⁴⁴⁶

The third method resembles the analogical association involved in identifying the correspondence between Saturn and bile or melancholia:

Other judgments may occur to the estimative faculty by means of identifying similarity (*al-tashbīh*) <between objects> whereby a thing may

⁴⁴⁶ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p.184, ll.13-p.185. l.3. In the language of the *De Anima* of the *al-Shifā'*, the 'form-bearing faculty' (*al-muṣawwira*) denotes the memory which stores forms; the 'recollection' (*al-dhikr*) denotes the memory which stores *ma'ānā*. Concerning dogs being frightened of stones and pieces of wood, Gutas comments: 'The text has literally, lumps or clods of earth or dry mud (*madar*) for stones. What is meant is that dogs are afraid of things lying around on the ground that people might throw at them. In certain localities, apparently where Avicenna was writing his work, or perhaps where he first observed this phenomenon, clods of dry mud or earth were something that one could find more easily on the street than stones.'

have a form associated with an estimative *ma'nā* in some sensible particulars (*fī ba'd al-maḥsūsāt*) but which are not always associated with all of them; so with the presence of this form <the estimative faculty> turns its attention towards its *ma'nā* which could be different.⁴⁴⁷

Since the estimative faculty is the governor of the animal soul, most of the examples with which Avicenna illustrates these three approaches relate to animal cognition. The intuitions (*ilhāmāt*) received by babies and animals have the quality of what moderns would understand as instinct, which are somehow neurologically hard-wired into the physical substrate of consciousness. For Avicenna, their source is divine and extra-mental. There is a qualitative difference between the nature of these intuitions, that determine the behaviour and actions of pre-toddling babies and wolf-wary sheep, and those that are received by Rāzī's astrologers which impart to them knowledge items pertaining to the celestial spheres, which lie beyond the ken of human sense perception.

A parallel distinction can be discerned between Avicenna's account of the estimative faculty's way of processing quasi-experience (*shay'un ka'l-tajriba*)⁴⁴⁸ and the 'experiences' (*al-tajrib*), or repeated observations, of the astrologers. Avicenna's quasi-experiences are illustrated by the bitter lessons learnt by dogs fleeing the dry mud missiles of irritable passers-by. Gutas explains that such lessons are only quasi-experiences:

...because in the logical and epistemological discussions of experience elsewhere he associates syllogism building with experience proper, something that can be accomplished only by the human rational soul.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p.185, ll.4-6.

⁴⁴⁸ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p.184, l.13.

⁴⁴⁹ See footnote 14 of handout which accompanied Gutas's 'Estimation, the most crucial internal sense'. For a fuller discussion of this point see Gutas, 'Empiricism of Avicenna'.

The “experiences” - or repeated observations - of Rāzī’s astrologers are, by way of contrast, very much part of an empirical inquiry. Avicenna himself distinguishes between the nature of estimative cognition in animals, and in humans operating on the level of the animal soul, and the cognition of the estimative faculty which is ennobled by its proximity to reason. He describes the nature of the estimative faculty in the former category as follows:

The estimative faculty is the greatest judge in animals, judging by way of stimulation of the imaginative faculty (*inbi’āth takhayyulī*) without this being subjected to verification. The like of this is what occurs to a man when he deems honey vile on account of its resemblance to yellow bile. For the estimative faculty judges that it [i.e. the honey] falls into the same category (*fa-inna al-wahm yaḥkumu bi-annahū fī ḥukm dhālika*) <as the yellow bile> and the soul follows the estimative faculty even though the intellect deems <its judgement> false. Animals, and those humans who resemble them, only follow this judgement of the estimative faculty which possesses no logical discrimination of its own.⁴⁵⁰

But for one whose estimative cognition falls into the latter category:

...there could occur to his senses and his faculties, on account of their proximity to reason (*al-nuṭq*), that which almost renders his internal faculties rational, in contrast with animals. So it is for this reason that he can apprehend from the benefits of composite sounds, colours, fragrances, and tastes, and from hope and desire, things which other animals cannot. Because it is as though the light of reason outpours and flows on these faculties; and the imagination which the man possesses

⁴⁵⁰ Avicenna’s *De Anima*, p.182, l.14 - p.183, l.2.

may have become subject to reason, whilst in animals it is subject to the estimative faculty. As a result he can derive benefit from it [i.e. in the pursuit of various branches] of knowledge, and his memory can bring benefit in such knowledge, just like the experiences (*al-tajārib*) which (are recalled) by the memory, and observations of particulars (*al-arṣād al-juz'iyya*) and so forth.⁴⁵¹

Thus the estimative faculty of he who abjures the world of gross materiality, is more aligned with the immaterial intellect, and is able to apprehend 'the *ma'ānī* which are in sensible objects' as they truly are, without being led to erroneous conclusions by an undisciplined imagination which would have him believe that honey is as vile as yellow bile. In the context of occult ritual, the estimative faculty of the philosopher Sabian will enable him to relate all the *ma'ānī* which inhere in the sensible objects of ritual, including 'composite sounds, colours, fragrances, and tastes', to the celestial soul with which he strives to generate congenercity within his own soul---an ultimately noetic connection.

⁴⁵¹ Avicenna's *De Anima*, p.183, l.3-11. For an insightful analysis of Rāzī's restrained epistemological optimism concerning the *wahm*, see Adamson, Fakh al-Dīn al-Rāzī On Place'.

Chapter 9: An Alternative Account of Astral Visions

Thus far we have established how, just as Avicennism dominates Sabian cosmological doctrines, so Avicennan internal sense theory deeply informs the account which *al-Sirr* presents of how spiritual discipline and astral ritual facilitate noetic connection with the celestial souls, imbuing the practitioner with occult knowledge and power. But we have also seen how Rāzī includes alternative cosmological views within the Sabian heterogeneous construct. We will now examine his inclusion of an account of visions which is alternative to the Avicennan psychological analysis.⁴⁵²

In section 3.4.5, we saw how in *al-Sirr* 4:1, Rāzī presents two competing theories on the shape of the heavenly bodies: one attributed to the philosophizing Sabians, who assert that they are simple spheres; the other attributed to the Chaldean Sabians who assert that they are theriomorphic. We learnt that the latter draw this inference from the *a priori* assumptions that: (1) the heavenly bodies are the causes of corresponding theriomorphic forms in the sublunary world; and (2) a resemblance necessarily exists between the cause and its effect. The Chaldean Sabians, in contrast with their philosophizing cousins, understood the causal relationship between the celestial principles and sublunary phenomena as one of congenerity between higher and lower, this being the simplest account necessary to account for the efficacy of their occult practices.

When, in *al-Sirr* 1:5, Rāzī reports the opinion that the objects perceived in astral visions are extra-mental, its justification, expressed in a condensed form, represents a theory of the visionary experience that is opposed to the

Avicennan account. Rāzī attributes it to the mysterious ‘masters of talismans’ (*aṣḥab al-ṭilasmāt*).⁴⁵³ Observing the same Occamic principle that was applied by the Chaldean Sabians in *al-Sirr* 4:1, who applied the Hermetic dictum of ‘as above so below’ to justify their belief in the theriomorphic shape of the heavenly bodies, so the masters of the talismans prefer to assert the extra-mental reality of the objects of their visionary perception over accepting Avicennan internal sense theory.

Their basic *a priori* assumption is that:

...each form in this world has its archetype in the starless sphere (*kull sūra fi hādhā al-‘ālam fa-lahā mithāl fi al-falak*) and that the earthly forms are subject to heavenly forms (*al-ṣuwar al-suflīya muṭī‘a li’l-ṣuwar al-‘alawīya*): serpents to Draco; scorpions to Scorpio; predatory animals to Leo and so on.⁴⁵⁴

Now, on this assumption, they go on to consider the ontological status of the fantastical form which can be constructed in the imagination. Such a form cannot be characterized by absolute existential negation since the imagination can apprehend it, conferring on it such attributes as magnitude and extension. This would simply be impossible for that which is absolutely non-existent. They say:

...the form which can be imagined, such as a man with a thousand heads, or a ruby as long as a *farsang*, can either be said to be absolutely non-existent (*ma ‘dūm maḥḍ*) or to have existence. The first <disjunct> is false

⁴⁵³ Rāzī gives no further information on these talisman masters. They reappear in *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 387-95.

⁴⁵⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18.

because our imagination (*khayālunā*) points towards it and bears witness to its magnitude (*miqdār*), length, width, distance and extension (*maṣāḥa*): absolute negation is not like this.⁴⁵⁵

They then proceed to examine the issue of whether such a form exists: (1) within us (*mawjūd finā*); or (2) externally (*fīl-khārij*). Reason would admit of only two possible modes of existence were the first limb of this disjunction correct. Either: (1a) it would exist in the mind as an abstracted substance (*jawhar mujarrad*); or (1b) it would exist in a bodily faculty, as a state inhering in a physical substrate such as the heart or brain. (1a) is eliminated for the reason that the imagined form (*al-ṣūra al-mutakhayyala*) is subject to division, the resultant parts being distinguishable from the other, and thus cannot be, at the same time, an abstracted substance; (1b) is dismissed for the simple reason that a large form, such as a man with a thousand heads, or a ruby as long as a *farsang*, cannot inhere in an internal sense like the common sense, rooted as it is in a physical substrate as small as the front ventricle.⁴⁵⁶

In rejecting the logical possibility that the imagined form can exist within us, they reject the Avicennan account that the astral vision is the creation of the imagination, albeit as a result of a trace (*athar*) received from a celestial soul. The object of this astral vision therefore can only exist extra-mentally,

⁴⁵⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18.

⁴⁵⁶ The first <disjunct> is false because our imagination (*khayālu-nā*) points towards it and bears witness to its magnitude (*miqdār*), length, width, distance and extension (*maṣāḥa*): absolute negation is not like this. Thus it is established that it exists either within us or extra-mentally. This first <disjunct> is false because either it exists in its own self, which is an abstracted substance (*jawhar mujarrad*), or <it exists> in a bodily power, as a state in the heart or the brain: the first <disjunct> is false because the abstracted substance cannot be divided, one part being indistinguishable from the other: this imagined form (*al-ṣūra al-mutakhayyila*) is not thus. The second <disjunct> is also false because since one's entire body in respect of this imagined form is as the relation of the small to the large and large magnitude cannot inhere in a small substrate (*yumna ḥulūlu-hu fī al-maḥall al-saghīr*). Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18.

independent of the observer (*mawjūda fī'l-khārij 'annā*). And considering that, were it to exist in the lower world, then all would partake in the same cognitive experience of it – which is patently untrue -- it must follow that it exists outside of the mind in the higher world:

...it either exists in the lower world – and this is false for otherwise anyone present with us would see would see it. So it becomes necessary to concede (*fa-ta 'ayyana*) that they exist in the higher world.⁴⁵⁷

Rāzī's talisman masters refute the Avicennan analysis of their visionary experiences by deploying an argument which constitutes the reverse mirror image of Rāzī's own interpretation of Avicenna's account, in the tenth *namaṭ* of *al-Ishārāt*, of the cognitive experiences of people suffering from fevers. This interpretation, appearing in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, represents an original argument, formulated by Rāzī, as an *advocatus diaboli*, to defend Avicenna's position. Although we have already encountered the argument, it is worth reminding ourselves of its structure in order to appreciate the talisman masters' mirror reversal.⁴⁵⁸

Firstly, a logical disjunction is established by considering whether the forms apprehended during fevers are non-existent (*ma 'dūma*) or existent (*mawjūd*). The first limb of this logical disjunction is eliminated on the ground that they cannot be non-existent because this would entail absolute negation, and that which is characterized by absolute negation can never be witnessed. This being the case, they must either exist extra-mentally or not. They cannot exist extra-mentally, for were this the case, then everyone with sound external sense

⁴⁵⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 18.

⁴⁵⁸ See section 7.4.

faculties would perceive them. Their existence must therefore be entirely subjective.⁴⁵⁹

Being subjective, they must either exist in the rational soul or in a bodily faculty (*quwwa jismāniya*). The former possibility can safely be ruled out because the rational soul cannot perceive particulars, and the forms of sensible things cannot be imprinted therein. So these forms must exist in a bodily faculty. Now this bodily faculty can either be an external sense faculty – namely the vision (*al-quwwa al-bāṣira*) – or an internal sense faculty – the common sense. Since it is possible for a blind man to perceive such forms, the power of vision can be eliminated as the bodily faculty in which these forms are imprinted. Thus are we led to the conclusion that it is the common sense, with its physical substrate in the brain, which is witness to these forms. The hallucination of the feverish man, which arises when the *mutaṣarrifa qua* imagination and the common sense stand opposite each other, is compared to the optical phenomenon which occurs when two mirrors are placed in opposition.⁴⁶⁰

Both the novel argument, which Rāzī writes as *advocatus diaboli*, to support Avicenna's account of feverish hallucinations, and his talisman masters' defence of the extra-mental reality of the objects of their astral visions, begin by posing the question of whether or not the objects of these cognitive experiences have some manner of existence or if they are characterized by absolute negation. Both affirm that they must indeed have some manner of existence and proceed to consider their subjective or extra-mental reality. Of course, the Avicennan account affirms the former whilst the talisman masters affirm the latter. But

⁴⁵⁹ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 645.

⁴⁶⁰ Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 645-6.

when examining their potentially subjective reality, both consider whether they are experienced as abstracted substances or as forms imprinted in a faculty which inheres in the physical substrate of the brain. Moreover, in drawing their respective conclusions of either purely subjective experience or cognition of an extra-mental reality, both then proceed to pose a further logical disjunction: whilst the former considers if the seat of the subjective experience is an internal or external sense faculty, the latter considers if the extra-mental object of cognition exists in the lower or higher worlds.

So the talisman masters' reasoning is a mirror reversal of the *advocatus diaboli* argument which Rāzī adduces to elucidate the Avicennan account of feverish hallucinations. In rejecting the assertion that a perceptual object of large magnitude can inhere in the relatively small physical substrate of the brain, their reasoning entails an implicit polemic against the Avicennan internal sense theory which informs the psychological discussions in *al-Sirr*. Rāzī himself is sympathetic to their opposition to this theory which, together with the Avicennan intromission theory of optics, he criticizes in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*.⁴⁶¹ The account of the talisman masters is discordant with the Avicennizing account of psychology by which much of *al-Sirr* is characterized. However this is entirely in keeping with the spirit of a work which represents less of an attempt at intellectual consistency and more of an intellectual exercise. The purpose of this activity is to produce a philosophical melange which will serve as a stimulus for future systematizing thought.

⁴⁶¹ For these critiques, see his commentary on the third namaṭ of Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, in *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 216-264.

Part Four: Sabianism and Rāzī's Alternative Soteriology

Chapter 10: A Clarification

10.1 Introduction

In his introduction to *al-Sirr* he disavows all that opposes the true faith. Rāzī nevertheless devotes *al-Sirr* 1:6, to providing a ‘clarification’ (*bayyina*) of the weakness (*duʿf*) of the Sabian way in light of Ashʿarī insistence on God’s power (*qudra*) extending to all things. He entitles the chapter: ‘A clarification of the weakness (*duʿf*) of what we have related of the philosophers and the Sabians and an explanation of the correctness of the religion of Islam’.⁴⁶² The only other note of discord against Sabianism appears briefly in *al-Sirr* 4:1 which we have already examined. Of interest here is the nature and extent of Rāzī’s dispute with the philosophers and Sabians.

As we discussed earlier, Rāzī identifies three theologically distinct categories of Sabian: pure polytheists; Avicennan emanationists; and those who believe in a creator God, possessed of choice.⁴⁶³ In this chapter I will make two observations. Firstly, the critique of Sabianism in *al-Sirr* 1:6 addresses only the first two of the three Sabian categories: on the third category, he is silent. This is because his real target appears to be Avicennan emanationism. Secondly, in the brief critique of Sabianism in *al-Sirr* 4:1, Rāzī concedes that belief in celestial causation as the divinely mandated custom of nature, does not offend against the fundamental belief in God’s power (*qudra*) over all things. And thirdly, Rāzī expends considerable effort reconciling Sabian belief in an ensouled cosmos

⁴⁶³ See chapter 3.

with Islamic scripture. This should come as no surprise since as a people of the book, the Sabians were recipients of an originally pure revealed monotheistic faith. Thus it should be possible to imagine a form of their religion, and approach to their natural philosophy, which does not fundamentally conflict with Islam.

10.2 Critique of the Sabians in *al-Sirr* 1:6

The critique encapsulates the essence of Sabian error in the following terms:

Know that the axis of their discourse (*madār kalāmihim*) <centres on> the eternity of the world and the existence of <a series of > temporally originated phenomena which has no first (*ḥawādith lā awwala lahā*). This doctrinal position is false <as a number> of arguments (*wujūh*) prove.⁴⁶⁴

The target is clearly defined as those who believe in the eternity of the world and that the endless series of phenomena therein has no beginning: these are none other than the unrepentant polytheist Sabians and their Avicennan emanationist cousins. The critique proceeds in two stages: The first is to prove that all existents but the Necessarily Existent are merely possible (*mumkin*); the second is to prove that every existent that is merely possible is also originated in time. It therefore follows that: ‘...all existents except for the One are possible and temporally originated.’⁴⁶⁵ Thus the two categories of Sabian, both heresiological conceits, provide the need for a critique which functions simultaneously as a positive proof for belief in the God of the Islamic

⁴⁶⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.19.

⁴⁶⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.19.

theologians, a choosing agent (*fā'il mukhtār*), besides whom all existents are originated in time, the products, directly or indirectly, of His volitional acts.

10.2.1 All existents except the Necessarily Existent, are merely possibles

So the first stage of the argument, an elegantly condensed adaptation of Avicenna's proof for the absolute unity of the Necessarily Existent in the fourth *namaṭ* of his *al-Ishārāt wa'l-Tanbīhāt*, sets out to prove that all besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible.⁴⁶⁶ It rests on two limbs: (1) the proposition that the Necessarily Existent must exist; and (2) that there can only be one Necessarily Existent.⁴⁶⁷ Rāzī does not dwell for too long on the first limb, impatient to present the three premises on which he hopes to demonstrate the second: (2)(i) necessity of existence (*wujūb al-wujūd*) is a positive attribute (*ṣifa thubūtiyya*); (2)(ii) the determinate existence of an entity (*ta'ayyun al-shay'*) is an individuating specificity additional to its quiddity and a matter of positive affirmation (*qayd zā'id 'alā māhiyatihi wa huwa amr thubūti*); (2)(iii) that in which participation between two things occurs is distinct from that by which two things are distinguishable from each other.⁴⁶⁸

Simply stated, (2)(i) asserts that the attribute of necessity of existence, like for instance that of sight, involves positive affirmation: this is to be contrasted with

⁴⁶⁶ Rāzī scrutinizes Avicenna's proof for the unity of the Necessarily Existent in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* as the fourth issue (*mas'ala*) arising from the fourth *namaṭ*. (See Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 353-73.) Whilst here in *al-Sirr*, Rāzī seems to endorse and adopt the proof, in the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, he is far more sceptical.

⁴⁶⁷ Concerning the first limb, Rāzī simply says: '...this is something which we have already proved when we made it clear that all possibles must end with a necessarily existing existent'. The second limb is expressed specifically in the following terms: '...the existence of two existents, each one of which is necessarily existent, is impossible'. Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19.

⁴⁶⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. For my translations of the terms *ta'ayyun*, *māhiyya*, and *qayd* respectively as 'determinate existence', 'quiddity' and 'individuating specificity', see Shihadeh, 'Avicenna's Corporeal Form and Proof of Prime Matter'.

positive affirmation (*qayd zā'id 'alā māhiyatihi wa huwa amr thubūtī*). As for it being an additional individuating specificity, it is because the concept (*mafhūm*) of \acute{a} does not preclude participation in its meaning (*lā yamtani 'nafs taṣṣawūr ma'nāhu min al-sharika*). Whilst the concept of “this \acute{a} ” or “this \acute{a} ” precludes participation in its meaning, “this \acute{a} ” includes <the concept of> \acute{a} . And so we can know that “this \acute{a} ” comprises an additional individuating specificity. As for the fact that it is a positive attribute, it is for the reason that this, since it is existent and its being this is a part of its being “this \acute{a} ”, and a part of an <individual> existent cannot be non-existent, then we can know that it is a positive attribute.⁴⁷⁰

So, if two individual existents both participate in a third, then that by which those two participating existents are mutually distinguishable must be other than that in which they both participate. This principle forms the substance of (2)(iii):

...that in which participation between two things occurs is distinct from that by which two things are distinguishable from each other – this is an illuminating premise indeed (*hādhihi muqaddima jaliyya*).⁴⁷¹

With these three principles established, any speculation about the reality of two necessarily existing existents will be forced to blunder either into an infinite regress, or into an absurd contradiction. Since one necessary existent would be distinct from the other, each would be a composite, characterized both by necessary existence and by that which gives it its own individual existence. Each

⁴⁷⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. For Rāzī's objections to Avicenna's argument that determinate existence is a positive attribute, see *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, pp. 367-371.

⁴⁷¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19.

of these two constitutive parts would then be either necessarily existent or not. If they are both necessary, then again, whilst both would share in necessity, each must nevertheless be distinct in quiddity, and thus composite in of itself. The only way to resist the ensuing infinite regress would be to assert that a constitutive part of one of these necessarily existing existents, or indeed of a constitutive part thereof, is merely a possible. But this would only serve to divert the endlessly futile inquiry into the impasse of the absurd contradiction that, since a composite is dependent on its parts, a necessarily existing existent would be dependent on a possible and thus not necessary at all. All existents, therefore, must only be possible except for the One Necessarily Existent.⁴⁷²

Whilst the foregoing proof to establish that all besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible relies on an Avicennan argument, to prove that all possibles are also originated in time, Rāzī resorts to one advanced in classical *kalām*.

10.2.2 All possibles are originated in time

Now since, reasons Rāzī, everything besides the Necessarily Existent is merely possible, and exists in a relationship of dependency on that which influences to

⁴⁷² ‘...were we to postulate two existents, each one of which is necessary by its own essence (*wājib li-dhātihi*), then each would participate in necessity but be distinct (*mutabāyinayn*) in its determinate existence (*al-ta’ayyun*), such that each one of them would be a composite of two parts. Moreover, those two parts <in turn> would either be necessary or not be necessary. If they are necessary, then they too would share in necessity but be distinct in quiddity (*māhiyya*): so each one of them would be a composite of <yet> two other parts, leading to an infinite regress. If they are not necessary then either or each one of them would be a possible. The composite is dependent on its parts and that which is dependent on a possible is even more so a possible (*mā yakūnu muftaqiran ilā mumkin kāna awlā bi’l-inkān*). And so that composite is a possible – but we have just postulated that it is necessary. This is a contradiction. Thus, with all that we have mentioned, it has been established that all existents are possible except the One.’ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.19. Summarizing, in his commentary to the *Ishārāt*, Avicenna’s proof that there can only be one Necessarily Existent, Rāzī says: ‘...were we to postulate two things which are necessarily existent, each would differ from the other in its determinate existence (*fī ta’ayyunihi*) but share with it in the necessity of its existence. That in which they share is distinct from that by which they differ (*mā bihi al-ishtirāk mughāyiran li-mā bihi ail-ikhtilāf*). And so the essence (*dhāt*) of each one of them is a composite of the necessity in which it shares with the other, and of the determinate existence through which it is distinct from the other.’ (*Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, 2, p. 363).

produce the effect of its existence (*mu'aththir*), the question arises as to the nature of that dependency:

... its dependence on that which influences <occurs> either: <1> in the state of its continued existence (*ḥāla baqā'ihī*); or <2> in the state of its coming-to-be in time (*ḥāla ḥudūthihī*) ; or <3> in the state of its non-existence (*ḥāla 'adamihī*).⁴⁷³

Rāzī eliminates the first of these logical disjuncts on the following ground:

The first <disjunct> is false because a thing, in the state of its continued existence, is existent. So if, in the state of its continued existence, it depended on that which causes its existence, then the existent would, in the state of its existence, depend on he who makes it existent, and that would <amount to> the bringing about of that which is <already> occurrent (*taḥṣīlan li'l-ḥāsil*) and that is absurd.⁴⁷⁴

To say a possible is dependent on an influencer for its continued existence is an assertion that is empty and redundant. For its continued existence should be autonomous, its relationship to that which causes its existence being that of a building to its builder once it has been constructed. With this logical disjunct eliminated thusly, the temporal origination of all possibles necessarily follows, the absurdity of the third logical disjunct hardly requiring discussion:

Thus is it established that it is in need of that which influences either in: <2> the state of its coming-to-be in time or <3> in the state of its non-existence.

⁴⁷³ *'fa-iḥtiyājūhu ilā al-mu'aththir imā an yakūna ḥāla baqā'ihī aw ḥāla ḥudūthihī aw ḥāla 'adamihī'*, Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 19. The phrase *'aw ḥāla ḥudūthihī aw ḥāla 'adamihī'* is missing from the Cairo lithograph but is present in all other witnesses.

⁴⁷⁴ *Al-Sirr*, p. 20.

<On the basis> of either postulation, the definite conclusion (*al-qat'*) that every possible is originated in time necessarily follows. So is it established that all besides the Existent, the One, is originated in time.⁴⁷⁵

The argument presented here establishes one of the primary precepts of classical *kalām* and was deployed most importantly in cosmological proofs for the existence of God as creator *ex nihilo*. Rāzī's critique of the Sabians, therefore, serves simultaneously as a positive proof for God as a choosing agent, the God of the Islamic theologians, as well as those Sabians about whom the polemic of this discussion remains conspicuously silent.⁴⁷⁶ With the proof that all possibles are originated in time, Rāzī reassures his readers that the polytheist Sabians and

⁴⁷⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20. Rāzī claims: 'This is a proof which God has uniquely bestowed on us (*hādihā burhān khaṣṣanā Allahu ta'ālā bihi*) the like of it occurring to no-one before us. For their proof [i.e. that of the classical theologians] is based on motion and stillness and did not comprise aught but bodies and accidents: that everything besides God is originated in time cannot be established by this proof.'

⁴⁷⁶ For analysis of this proof, see Shihadeh, *Doubts on Avicenna*, pp. 86-88. It is worth mentioning that Rāzī appends to the main argument a couple of other supplementary proofs that all possibles are temporally originated. The first argues that since the quiddity of motion, is the fact of being preceded by something prior, whilst the quiddity of beginning-less time is precisely the opposite, the simultaneous assertion of both attributes would entail an absurd contradiction: '...the quiddity of motion (*māhiyya al-ḥaraka*) entails being preceded by something else (*taqṭaḍī al-masbūqiyya bi'l-ghayr*) because it is a term <denoting> movement from one thing to another (*al-intiqāl min amr ilā amr*) and movement is preceded by that from which movement has been made. <But> the quiddity of beginning-less time (*al-azal*) is that it requires the negation of being preceded. So the simultaneous assertion of both motion and beginning-less time (*al-jam' bayna al-ḥaraka wa'l-azal*) is the simultaneous assertion of two contraries (*jam' bayna al-naqīdayn*) and that is absurd.' Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20.

According to the second supplementary proof, a similarly absurd contradiction would arise from the assertion of possibles existing in beginning-less time, from the fact that since: (1) the aggregate of originated phenomena would be preceded by an aggregate of individual non-existences; and (2) those individual non-existences, having no beginning, would be gathered together in beginning-less time, then their coming-to-be must also be held to occur in beginning-less time: '...each one of these temporally originated phenomena is preceded by non-existence which has no beginning (*masbūq bi-'adam lā awwala lahu*). So there is an aggregate of non-existences (*majmū' 'adamāt*) which have no beginning and those non-existences, in their totality, come together in beginning-less time (*mujtami'a fī al-azal*). And if the non-existence of their entirety occurs in beginning-less time, then it would be impossible for any <individual> one of them to occur in beginning-less time. Otherwise, the simultaneous assertion of two contraries would necessarily follow.' Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20.

their Avicennizing cousins have been soundly refuted, and that the central doctrine of the true faith – belief in the volitional Creator God– is made clear:

And so it is established [...] that the world is originated in time and that temporally originated phenomena have a beginning. And since that is established, their primary doctrine (*aṣl kalāmihim*) is proven false; and if the primary doctrine is proven false then so too is that which they derive from it. And God is the source of guidance.⁴⁷⁷

Unable to resist the inevitable slide into the polytheism of their idolatrous cousins, the Avicennizing Sabians of *al-Sirr* are guilty of the same error as al-Ghazali's Avicennan opponents in the fourth issue of his *Tahāfut*.⁴⁷⁸

As previously discussed, the erroneous belief that all to which the Necessarily Existent directly gives rise is necessarily ordered ontologically in beginning-less time is of central importance to the structure of Avicennizing Sabian cosmology. It represents the second premise on which relies their proof, in *al-Sirr* 1:1, for the role of active heavenly forces as the proximate causes of sublunary change. This belief resolves the apparent paradox of the ultimate dependence of sublunary generation and corruption on the changeless simplex that is the Necessarily Existent.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 20.

⁴⁷⁸ Al-Ghazali decries what he sees as their contradiction in asserting both the eternity of the world and its dependence on a cause. He argues that, in asserting the eternity of the celestial spheres in beginning-less time, they have no grounds on which to assert their dependence on a cause, and thus no reason to reject the position of the materialist *Dahriyya*, who aver: that matter is eternal and without cause; that only accidents and forms originate in time; and that all chains of temporally originated causes and effects end in the circular motion of the celestial spheres. The Avicennizing Sabians of *al-Sirr* stand in the same relation to the polytheist Sabians, who uphold the belief in multiple necessarily existing existents, as do al-Ghazali's Avicennan opponents in relation to the *Dahriyya*.

⁴⁷⁹ Of course the polytheist Sabians who believe in a multiplicity of necessarily existing existents are not confronted with such a dilemma.

As observed earlier, the supposed authors of the proof, when demonstrating this second premise, fail to address and eliminate the logical possibility that all to which the Necessarily Existent gives rise indeed occurs in time, by implication, as the result of the action of a volitional creator God. Thus, an alternative account of talismans – one that is compatible with Islamic theology – is left unexplored. This presumably would be the account of talismans preferred by the third group of Sabians, mentioned in *al-Sirr* 4:1. These of course are the Sabians who believe the heavenly bodies:

...occur by way of the action of an agent possessed of volition (*fā'il mukhtār*), namely the Most Supreme God, and that that God created these planets, investing each with a special power, and delegating them with the authority to govern this world. They say this does not diminish from the majesty of God – exalted is His splendour – for what imperfection is there for a king to possess obedient slaves. Then He delegated to each of them the government of a specific kingdom and rule over a specific clime. In general, despite their differing doctrines, they claimed the spheres and the planets have specific attributes.⁴⁸⁰

The endeavour to fortify the Islamic theological conception of God against attack also demands that attention is paid to the issue of the volitional creator God's *qudra*, or power over all things. This is the concern of the conclusion of *al-Sirr* 4:1 which adopts the following line of reasoning. The critique of the Sabian belief in the planets as proximate gods (*ālīha qarība*) deserving of devotion cannot rely on the condemnations uttered by the prophets. For the verification of their claim to prophethood rests on the fact that God makes manifest through

⁴⁸⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

them miracles – extraordinary acts of which none other is capable except Him. But an act cannot be recognized as miraculous unless it is proven that only God – and not celestial motion – can be the author of such prodigies. Unless this is shown, an argument relying purely on the utterances of prophets would be circular and therefore invalid:

Know that this <Sabian> doctrine is false but it cannot be refuted by means of reports from the prophets – upon whom be peace – concerning its falsehood. For the proof of prophethood hinges on (*mutafarri ‘a*) on the fact that a miracle is an act of God – exalted is He! – and that can only be established if <belief in> the planets as governing the conditions of this world is proved false. So if we prove this doctrine false by means of the words of the prophets – upon whom be peace – then a circular argument would have been advanced which is false (*waq ‘a al-dawr wa annahu bāṭilun*).⁴⁸¹

So according to Rāzī in *al-Sirr*, to prove the world is originated in time, is to prove its dependency on God as the only real possessor of agency, whose power to influence must extend to all possibles. This being the case, the notion that the celestial spheres have any agency – let alone miraculous power – is proven false:

Indeed this doctrine is proved false by our proving that the world has been brought into being in time (*innamā yabṭulu hādhā al-madhhab bimā annā nuqīma al-dalāla ‘alā anna al- ‘ālam muḥdath*) and that the producer of influence (*al-mu’aththir*) on <this world> must be able (*qādir*); if He is able then His power must extend to all possible things (*kull al-mumkināt*); and

⁴⁸¹ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p.113.

if His power extends to all possible things then He must be the creator of all possible things. Given all this, <belief in> the planets as gods which govern this world is proved false.⁴⁸²

The logical consequence of this reasoning is that nothing occurs unless it is by God's power. So long as this belief is maintained, any apparent causal relationship between celestial configurations and terrestrial phenomena can only be understood as the divinely mandated custom (*'āda*) that has been established in this world: it provides no evidence whatsoever of any real agency other than God's. Once this is conceded, then any such apparent relationship in the cosmos between cause and effect that can be drawn from inductive reasoning about the observable cosmos, is a matter of correct or erroneous scientific conclusions, not of true faith or unbelief:

However, when they professed that the <planetary> movements and applications are causes for the temporal coming-to-be of originated phenomena in this world <as they occur> in accordance with custom (*asbāb li-ḥudūth al-ḥawādith fi hādhā al-'ālam 'alā majrā al-'āda*), then this would neither be disbelief (*kufr*) nor misguidance (*ḍalāla*). However, induction becomes necessary for if we see reality thus [i.e. planetary movements as the causes of events] then we assent to it to that extent; otherwise we declare it untrue whilst <at the same time> averring that that untruth does not amount to unbelief (*wa lākin yajib al-istiqrā' fa-in ra'aynā anna al-amra*

⁴⁸² Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

*kadhālika sadaqnāhu ‘alā hādhā al-wajh wa illā kadhdhabnāhu ma ‘a al-qaṭ‘ bi-anna dhālika al-kadhb laysa bāb al-kufr).*⁴⁸³

So despite their shared belief in the volitional creator God of Islamic belief, even members of the third group of Sabians will be in error so long as they believe that the created heavenly bodies possess any sort of agency outside of God’s power.

10.3 Qualified reconciliation

Now, were the universe simply a complex but inanimate system of interacting bodies in motion, held in place by God’s power, then the matter could perhaps rest there. But all three categories of Sabian believe in the celestial spheres as living, rational beings. So indeed, in *al-Sirr* at least, does Rāzī. He argues that:

...reason and revealed religion are in agreement that placed in authority to govern each separate species of temporally originated phenomenon in this world is a heavenly spirit and these spirits are called, in the language of revealed religion ‘angels’ (*al-‘uqūl wa’l-sharā’i mutaṭābiqa ‘alā anna al-mutawallā li-tadbīr kulli naw‘ min anwā‘ hādhā al-‘ālam rūḥ samāwī ‘alā ḥidda wa hādhihi al-arwāḥ hiya al-musammāt fī lisān al-shar‘ bi’l-malā’ika).*⁴⁸⁴

So from the perspective of reason (*bi-ḥasab al-‘uqūl*), he argues that since rational proofs (*al-dalā’il al-‘aqliyya*) have established that: (a) the spirits of the higher world govern the lower world (*al-‘ālam al-asfal*); and (b) one single principle cannot act as the source of different effects (*al-mabda’ al-wāḥid lā*

⁴⁸³ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 113.

⁴⁸⁴ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 109.

yakunu maşḍaran li-āthār mukhtalifa), it must follow that each one of these effects is dependent on a celestial spirit.⁴⁸⁵

This rational conclusion is one which, in Rāzī's opinion, revealed religion (*al-sharā'i*) entirely concurs. He identifies the referents of a number of Qur'ānic oath verses, the subjects of which are mysterious sound feminine plural nouns, with the angels of the celestial spheres. Of particular interest, is his identification of the *nāzi'āt* and the *ṣāffāt* as the angels of the sphere of Saturn; the *zājirāt* as the angels of the sphere of Mars; and the *tāliyāt* as the angels of the sphere of Jupiter.⁴⁸⁶ Rāzī then moves on to the numerous prophetic traditions which indicate that angels are entrusted with the management of the clouds; thunder; lightning; with the daily sustenance of men; with the care of mountains and the seas; and so on for all natural phenomena.⁴⁸⁷

And so in the light of the overwhelming weight of scriptural evidence, this issue thus becomes one of agreement (*mas'alatu wifāq*) between the prophets and the sages (*al-ḥukamā'*). This being the case, Rāzī avers that:

⁴⁸⁵ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 109. Even if someone were to deny this principle, reason would demand that it should be conceded at the very least that one thing cannot be the source of effects which have opposing natures: '...as for he who maintains that one <thing> cannot give rise to aught but one, this is self-evident. As for he who does not maintain this, then there can be no doubt that he <should> deny that one principle can be the source of contrary acts such as the benefic and the malefic, masculinity and femininity, hot and cold.' Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 109.

⁴⁸⁶ '*wa'l-nāzi'at gharqa wa'l-nashitātī nashta*' (Qur'an 79:1); '*wa'l-saffāt saffa*' (Qur'an 37:1); '*fa'l-taliyat dhikra*' (Qur'an 37:3). The *ṣāffāt* are identified as the angels of the sphere of Saturn on account of its 'firmness and slow movement' (*l-thibātīhi wa buṭuwwi ḥarakatīhi*). The subjects of other mysterious Qur'ānic oaths, identified with angels are: 'By the lashing gales! By heavy-laden clouds!' (*al-dhariyat dharwa, fa'l-hamilati wiqran*) (Qur'an 51:1-2); and 'By angels disbursing as commanded!' (*fa'l-muqassimati amra*) (Qur'an 51:4). Amongst other verses interpreted in light of this doctrine, Rāzī adduces the following utterance attributed by the Qur'an to Solomon: 'We have been taught the language of birds' (*ullimna mantiqa al-ṭayr*) (Qur'an 27:16). In relation to this last verse, Rāzī says the intent is that Solomon's spirit connected with the spirit of Mercury because Mercury is connected with birds. (*al-Sirr*, p. 110). Rāzī then moves on to the numerous prophetic traditions which indicate that angels are entrusted with the management of the clouds; thunder; lightning; with the daily sustenance of men; with the care of mountains and the seas; and so on for all natural phenomena.

⁴⁸⁷ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

... each <angel> has a specific name. And so it is not impossible (*lā yamtani`*) that a man, if he calls on their names, seeking their aid, beseeching them, adjuring them by the names of their chiefs and those appointed in authority over them (*wa yuqsim `alayhā bi-asmā`I ru`asā`ihā wa`l-mustawlīn alayhā*), that they should respond to him and perform what he desires from them and that the practitioners of magic should exert themselves (*an tujīb al-insān wa-taf`al mā yaltamisu al-insān minhā*).⁴⁸⁸

The belief of the Sabians in an ensouled cosmos thronged by a plenitude of spirits, was confirmed by the Qur`ān and Ḥadīth. In pursuing a science which identified the divinely mandated patterns of nature, by correlating celestial configurations with frequencies of sublunary events, the Sabians were not in manifest error. But inferring from such patterns that anything, animate or inanimate, within that cosmos, at any moment had any real agency independent of the divine *fiat*, the Sabians were gravely misguided. Rāzī never states explicitly that a Sabian science sanitized by Ash`arī theology is not inconceivable. But it is an inference which he allows his readers to draw. For in much the same way that a modern day Ash`arī can concede the efficacy of a solar panel to run the green neon lighting of the mosque minaret, so a twelfth century Ash`arī theologian, for instance, might concede the efficacy of a solar astral ritual to bring him fame, wealth, and royal patronage. A Sabian science of talismans could, theoretically, be reconciled with the Ash`arī theological position that God is the only real sufficient cause for any event.

⁴⁸⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 110.

Chapter 11: *al-Maṭālib* 8 and the new Islamic soteriology

11.1 Introduction

We have seen that in *al-Sirr*, it is the individual's perfect nature which inspires, reveals veridical dreams and leads him in an ascent through the celestial spheres towards perfection and ontological transformation. This chapter will explore how, having committed himself to this doctrine so early in his career when he wrote *al-Sirr* in 575/1179, Rāzī finally integrates this notion into the philosophical-theological synthesis of *al-Maṭālib*, which he completes in 606/1209 soon before he dies.

This chapter will show how Rāzī makes the doctrine of the perfect nature the cornerstone of his prophetology. In doing so, he rescues the Islamic belief in prophethood from the relativizing effect of Avicennism, affirms the unique status of the prophet, whilst at the same time providing the chance for the personal soteriology for a spiritual elite who, by means of connection with their own perfect natures, can complete their own epistemological ascent through the ontological hierarchy of reality to attain certainty in metaphysical truths and realize the perfect philosophy. And since the celestial spirits – or angels – which turn the spheres, are ontologically superior to man, the prophet is conceived of as somehow straddling the ranks of humanity and angelhood. He communes with the celestial angels; his visions and occult power are received by way of connection to his perfect nature; and the proof of his prophetic claim is his ability to perfect imperfect human souls (*takmīl al-nāqīṣīn*). The significance of the doctrine in *al-Maṭālib* is thus twofold: firstly, it preserves the

prophet's essential uniqueness; and secondly, it provides the soteriological means by which the individual might realize his own perfection. Sabian and Islamic soteriologies converge into one.

I shall proceed in the following way. Firstly, I shall show how Rāzī partly achieves his critique of the Avicennan theory of prophethood by adapting material from *al-Sirr* relating to the talismanic science **(11.2)**. I shall then move on to outline Rāzī's conceptualization of the prophet as a figure which straddles humanity and celestial angelhood **(11.3)**. This will be followed by an examination of how the perfect nature determines the upper limit to which the individual human soul can reach perfection. This will reveal the utility of the doctrine in preserving the unique status of the prophet which Rāzī believed the Avicennan naturalistic account of prophethood relativized **(11.4)**. Then I shall turn to Rāzī's rational proof for the doctrine **(11.5)**. Now, since its truth, being of a highly metaphysical nature, cannot be rationally demonstrated to the level of certainty, Rāzī asserts that it is only by spiritual discipline and direct visionary experience of the perfect nature that its reality can be known. This will be the focus of the following section **(11.6)**. This chapter will conclude with a final word on how the perfect nature is implicitly woven into the fabric of the epistemology of *al-Maṭālib* as a guide which leads the initiate in an epistemological ascent through the celestial spheres to attain certain metaphysical truth **(11.7)**.

11.2 The critique of the Avicennan theory of prophethood in *al-Maṭālib* 8

In examining Rāzī's critique of the Avicennan theory of prophethood, I shall first consider its assault on Avicenna's treatment of its epistemological-imaginational aspect, included in the conceptual category of theoretical capacity (*al-quwwa al-nazariyya*). Then I shall examine its deconstruction of the Avicennan account of prophetic occult power, which forms part of practical capacity (*al-quwwa al-'amaliyya*). Understanding this critique will bring into focus the explanatory power and utility of the perfect nature doctrine in formulating not only an alternative account of prophethood but also in imagining a new soteriology.

As we have already seen, Avicenna's account of the epistemological-imaginational aspect of prophethood, is grounded in his theory of the internal senses, which explains how the human soul can connect with the celestial souls in order to derive knowledge of the unseen in the form of visions and veridical dreams. Whilst the forms he sees are the creation of his imagination, their cause is extra-mental, deriving from a celestial origin (see chapter 7).

In *al-Maṭālib* 8, Rāzī critiques this theory, unfairly it must be said, by emphasizing the subjectivity of the prophetic visionary experience as conceived by the Avicennan account. He represents it as asserting that forms witnessed by prophets cannot have any extra-mental reality, for otherwise, all possessed of sound external senses would experience them: to assume this were not the case would give rise to an extreme form of scepticism concerning the reliability of the senses. Rāzī directs this argument back at the Avicennists, pointing out that

were the visual experience of a prophet purely subjective, then the general trust we place in our perception of sensory objects in the extra-mental world would collapse. Rather, he asserts that to affirm the extra-mental reality of the objects of our perception results in a far lesser degree of scepticism: for whilst we could concede that we do not perceive all that is in the extra-mental world, we can at least have confidence in the reality of what we do in fact perceive therein, rather than constantly struggling with the possibility of their purely imagined, subjective reality.⁴⁸⁹

Instead, Rāzī insists that such perceptions are experienced in the rational soul, which is an absolute unity. Concurring with the talisman masters of *al-Sirr* 1:5, Rāzī asserts the extra-mental reality of prophetic visions.⁴⁹⁰ So to account for them, he invokes a doctrine to which all three Sabian groups in *al-Sirr* 4:1 subscribe: the perfect nature. He says:

So it is not impossible that that which sometimes gives it (i.e. the human soul) visions during sleep (*yurīhā fī al-manāmāt tāratān*), sometimes whilst awake, and which sometimes gives it inspirations (*ilhāmāt*), is that perfect nature. Nor is it impossible that that perfect nature is capable of taking on different forms, in the shape of a specific body.⁴⁹¹

Curiously, failing to address the issue of why, if the vision is external, others cannot see it, Rāzī chooses not to avail himself of the solution provided by the talisman masters of *al-Sirr* 1:5 which asserts that the object of the vision exists in the higher world: were this solution applied to Rāzī's account of prophethood, it

⁴⁸⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, pp. 134-5.

⁴⁹¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 136.

would explain the unperfected souls surrounding the prophet cannot themselves share in his numinous experience (see chapter 9).

Now, in *al-Maṭālib* 8.7.3, Rāzī targets for criticism the Avicennan account of prophetic occult power, presenting it as follows.⁴⁹² The human estimative faculty is capable of exerting an influence (*ta'thīr*) on bodies:

...and since it is not remote (*lā yab 'udu*) that there should be a man whose soul is in perfect possession of such a faculty, so then it follows that he can be capable of acting on the matter of this world (*hayūlā hādhā al-'ālam*) however he so wishes or desires.⁴⁹³

Such is a soul which can produce miracles and wonders. But, points out Rāzī, just as this account is only possible (*muḥtamal*), so there are other accounts which are equally as plausible in explaining such phenomena, such as the actions of angels and jinn, the celestial applications (*al-ittiṣālāt al-falakiyya*) and astral magical operations (*a 'māl al-kawākib*).⁴⁹⁴ So if all such explanations are equally plausible, the Avicennists are required to provide a proof which substantiates their conviction in the unique power of the prophetic operative estimative faculty, eliminating competing accounts. Since they have failed in this, their insistence on their naturalistic account of the prophetic miracle is unjustified (*tarjīḥ min ghayr murajjih*). Thus, to demonstrate at least the possibility (*iḥtimāl*) of other means by which such prodigies can be made manifest is to demonstrate the inability of the Avicennan theory to defend the unique nature of prophethood. Moreover, if the accounts of such means can be

⁴⁹² The main divisions of *al-Maṭālib* are *juz'* (or part), *qism* (division), and *faṣl* (chapter).

⁴⁹³ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 137.

⁴⁹⁴ Here, I construct '*a 'māl*' in the sense of astral magical operations. The alternative is to construct it as meaning 'actions of the planets'.

made even more plausible using Avicennan cosmology and psychology, then the inadequacy of the Avicennan account is rendered all the more apparent.⁴⁹⁵

Rāzī set about this task with vigour in *fī al-kalām fī al-siḥr*, the third and last division of *al-Maṭālib 8 Fī al-Nubuwwāt*, where he listed no fewer than ten categories of *siḥr*, ranging from those which use entirely natural means, such as remarkable engineering feats (*handasa*) and the special properties of drugs and potions, to those which invoke the aid of the *jinn* and the celestial souls.⁴⁹⁶ One means by which he attempted to expose the weakness of the Avicennan account was to argue for the possibility that all humans have the potential to develop a strong operative estimative faculty. Thus when discussing ‘magic based on the power of the estimative faculty and the purification of the soul’ (*al-siḥr al-mabnī ‘alā quwwat al-wahm wa taṣfiyat al-nafs*), he argued that: since rational souls are of the same genus as the celestial spirits, and are generated by them (*al-nufūs al-nāṭiqa min jins al-arwāḥ al-falakiya wa muwallada min-hā*), it is inevitable that they too possess a certain power and effect. If the rational soul focuses on one aim, shutting out all other distractions, then its power becomes strong, its effect is intensified, and it can cause wondrous events to occur in this world. Moreover, when it is purified and engaged in spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*), then it is drawn towards the celestial soul (*al-rūḥ al-falakī*), which is its perfect nature (*al-ṭibā ‘al-tāmm*), its original father (*abūhā al-aṣli*) from which issues a power that suffuses the essence (*jawhar*) of the soul.⁴⁹⁷

Although not strictly Avicennan, combining as it does the Avicennan psychological concept of the estimative faculty with the Barakātian doctrine of

⁴⁹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 137.

⁴⁹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, pp. 143-6.

⁴⁹⁷ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 144.

the perfect nature, this account served Rāzī's immediate aim of providing an account equally as plausible (*muḥtamal*) as the Avicennan, thus exposing its implied relativizing of the prophetic prodigy. But it is by the systematic and scientific explanation of talismans, the raw data of which he had already presented in *al-Sirr*, that Rāzī established the inability of the Avicennans to defend the unique status of the prophet. Its theoretical account of talismans, used Avicennan cosmology in order to explain their efficacy. In doing so, its critique of Avicennism, by deploying its own arguments, was rendered all the more effective.

Rāzī understood the prophet's unique ability to know the unseen and to wield occult power as two aspects of the perfected man in every age: the *quṭb*, or *axis mundi*.⁴⁹⁸ In his view the Avicennan naturalistic account of these prophetic abilities reduced them to the level of the internal sense faculties. Since any individual can share, to a greater or lesser degree, in these abilities, there is nothing essentially unique about the prophet. This destabilized the entire institution.

The perfect nature doctrine is of particular interest as it was so important to the epistemology and ethical theory advanced in *al-Maṭālib*. In *al-Maṭālib* 8, having critiqued the Avicennan account of imaginational prophethood, Rāzī advanced his own: the prophetic vision, contra Avicenna, is a cognitive experience of an extra-mental reality. That reality is the prophet's own perfect nature which takes on various forms. Now, the perfect nature doctrine justified Rāzī's later ethical determinism, which held that no human soul can progress beyond the

⁴⁹⁸ In contrast with Avicenna's metaphysical proof from necessity, the proof with which Rāzī substantiates this claim is based on induction (*istiqrā*). Nevertheless, it is a proof which he subtly adapts from Avicenna's *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*. See Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, p. 140.

level of perfection of its perfect nature.⁴⁹⁹ This being the case, the prophet's perfect nature must derive from a celestial spirit that is the most perfect of all such spirits. His essential uniqueness amongst humanity is thus guaranteed - unlike the Avicennan prophet's.

But the perfect nature doctrine also served another purpose: as we shall see, just as it discloses to the prophet his revelation, so it leads the philosophical and spiritual aspirant to the epistemological ascent to certainty in metaphysical truths.

11.3 Prophethood in *al-Maṭālib*

In the first chapter of this thesis, I argued that the development of Rāzī's teleological ethics of *al-Maṭālib* was facilitated by his formulation and adoption of three key interdependent doctrines: (1) the ontological superiority of the celestial angels over man; (2) the origin of the individual human soul in the perfect nature; (3) human perfection, conceived of as an epistemological ascent through the celestial spheres towards angelomorphosis. These doctrines deeply inform Rāzī's later formulation of prophethood, which differed from the classical Ash'arī perspective in significant ways.

The considerable effort which Rāzī exerts, in *al-Maṭālib 7 Fī al-arwāḥ al- 'āliya wa'l-sāfila* ('On the Higher and Lower Spirits'), to formulate philosophical and scriptural proofs for the first of these doctrines, the superiority of the celestial

⁴⁹⁹ See Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, Chapter 3.

angels to man, need not detain us.⁵⁰⁰ It suffices to state that Rāzī presents their superiority in three aspects: their essence; their knowledge; and their power to act on the world of bodies.

Rāzī assertion of celestial-angelic superiority reflects his shift away from an action-oriented ethical theory for which hardship and effort are the measure of superiority, to one that is framed in terms of “character-oriented perfectionism,” for which the intrinsic worth of the agent’s essence is the sole index of value.⁵⁰¹ Thus, man is no longer superior by virtue of the hardship he endures in taming his baser soul and obeying God: the celestial angel is superior by virtue of its intrinsic impulse to submit to God’s will and magnify His glory. So, it is the impulse towards angelomorphosis that drives man’s desire for perfection. Being the apogee of human perfection, the prophet is a liminal figure who mediates the two levels of humanity and celestial-angelhood.

Fī al-nubuwwāt consists of three main divisions, the first two are relevant to our present discussion. The first examines various philosophical positions which deny the institution of prophethood followed by a defence of the classical Ash‘arī test to verify a prophetic claim which is established by the occurrence of miracles at the hand of the claimant who, calling to the worship of the one God, publicly declares his prophetic mission. The miracle serves as God’s corroboration to the people of the truth of his prophetic claim.⁵⁰²

Whilst affirming the soundness of the approach which attempts to verify the truth of a prophetic claim by way of miracles, Rāzī prefers another, advanced in

⁵⁰⁰ See *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 409-20 for the scriptural proofs; for the philosophical proofs see pp. 420-9.

⁵⁰¹ Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, p.115.

⁵⁰² On Rāzī’s discussion in his *Muhassal* and *al-Maṭālib*, of the means by which a prophetic claim is verified, see Griffel, ‘al-Ghazālī’s Concept of Prophecy’, pp. 106-13.

the second division, which reasons as follows: since we know correct belief and correct action, when we encounter a man who, announcing his prophethood, and calling men to the religion of truth, is successful in perfecting deficient human souls, then we can safely conclude that that he is a genuine prophet who must be followed. Rather than claiming that this is the sole correct approach, Rāzī modestly asserts it has the soundest reasoning (*aqrab ilā al-‘aql*) and is beset by the least doubt.

This preferred second approach rests on four grounds. The first is:

...that the perfection of man is that he knows Truth in its essence and the Good (*al-khayr*) that he acts in accordance with it. What is meant by this is that the state of his perfection is defined by two matters. The first is that his theoretical capacity (*quwwa naẓariyya*) becomes perfect such that pure forms are perfectly and completely manifest to it (*tatajallā fīhā ẓuwar al-ashyā wa ḥaqā’iquhā tajalliyan kāmīlan tāmmān*) free of all mistake and error. The second is that his practical capacity (*quwwa ‘amaliyya*) becomes perfect such that he becomes possessed of a capacity (*milka*) which enables him to perform righteous works. By righteous works is meant those states which produce aversion to the pleasures of the body and desire for the next world and spiritual beings (*rūḥāniyāt*).

Developed theoretical capacity inclines his soul towards communion with the celestial spirits. Both the prophets and the divine philosophers (*al-ḥukamā al-*

ilāhiyūn) concur on this idea of human perfection. The ultimate aim of man therefore is to attain perfection (*kamāl*).⁵⁰³

This leads us to the second ground on which Rāzī's approach to prophethood rests. Men fall into three broad categories: the masses which fall short of perfection; the saints (*al-awliyā*) who have reached perfection but are unable to lead others to its attainment; and the prophets, perfected humans who lead men from the depths of imperfection to the summit to perfection.

The third and fourth grounds develop the idea of human perfection. The third reasons that, although the vast majority of humanity is characterized by imperfection, there exists amongst them a hierarchy of perfected humans: at its apex is the one who is 'the most perfect of their number' (*akmaluhum*) who exists at the highest level of humanity, being equal to the lowest rank of the celestial angels:

... the most perfect of perfected men (*akmal al-kāmilīn*) the most eminent of eminent and knowledgeable men, is at the furthest horizon of humanity. And you already know that the last of each kind (*ākhar kull naw'*) is connected (*mutaṣṣil*) to the first member of the kind which is nobler. And the kind which is nobler than humankind <comprises> the angels. So the last of humankind is connected with the first member of angel-kind. And since we have made it clear that that man exists at the highest rank of humankind it must follow that he is connected with the world of the angels, mixing with them (*mukhtaḷitan bihim*).⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰³ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 104.

⁵⁰⁴ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 107.

The fourth ground asserts that given that the rank of this ‘most perfect’ human is that of the angels; and that since the characteristics of the angels include:

...freedom from bodily constraints, mastery over the world of bodies, and independence from any need of bodily tools in order to act, then so too is this human characterized by that which corresponds to these attributes. Thus seldom is his attention drawn to the world of bodies (*jismāniyāt*); (but) his action (in the world of bodies) is powerful; his attraction to the world of spiritual beings (*‘ālam al-rūḥāniyāt*) is strong; his theoretical power realizes perfection by way of sacred illumination and divine gnosis (*quwwatuhu mustakmila bi-anwā ‘al-jalāyā al-qudsiyya wa’l-ma ‘ārif al-ilāhiyya*); his practical power exerts influence over the bodies of this world by various means of action. And that is what is meant by miracles. Then having realized these two stations his spiritual power exerts an effect on bringing to perfection the souls of those whose theoretical and practical capacities are deficient.⁵⁰⁵

Just like the celestial angels, he can act directly on bodies in the sublunary world with the power of his own soul, without the need of bodily tools. His soul nevertheless is drawn to the celestial realm. The ontological state of the prophetic figure who has reached complete perfection is to be found at the outermost limit of humanity, where he participates in angelhood. He learns directly from the angelic world and with his practical capacity he can administer the corporeal world:

⁵⁰⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 107.

the noblest amongst the denizens of the Lower World is the man who has attained the theoretical power by which he learns from the Sanctified Lights in the Angelic World (*yastaḥīd al-anwār al-qudsīya min ‘ālam al-malā’ika*); and the practical power by which he can govern this corporeal world in the most proper and perfect way (*tadbīr hadhā al-‘ālam al-jismānī ‘alā al-ṭarīq al-aṣḥā wa’l-sabīl al-akmal.*)⁵⁰⁶

The prophet stands at the apex of a hierarchy of perfected individuals. His miracles serve not as a means of establishing the truth of his prophethood, but as a means of corroborating its truth (*taṣḍīq*). Rather, his prophetic claim is established by the evidence of his ability to perfect. The impulse felt by those who would strive towards human perfection and liberation from the world of corporeality is the impulse to emulate the prophet, a man unique in the level of his perfection, by which he participates in both humanity and celestial angelhood. Thus the impulse towards perfection is the impulse towards angelomorphosis.

Al-Sirr and *al-Maṭālib* display a large degree of convergence in their respective eschatologies: the *telos* of man is perfection; the pursuit of this perfection demands the rejection of engrossment in material reality; this perfection pertains to his attributes of knowledge and power; perfection of knowledge involves some form of noetic connection with spiritual beings which are coordinated with the spheres of the cosmos; the perfection of power, or the practical capacity, involves the ability to perform prodigies in the sublunary world; complete perfection entails an angelomorphic transformation.

⁵⁰⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 107.

11.4 Perfect Nature and Qualified Ethical Determinism

Now, the ability of humans to attain such perfection varies. This is because the human soul derives its perfect nature, a celestial spirit:

Rational souls are of many types (*anwā` kathīra*) and different factions (*ṭawā`if mukhtalifa*). Each <rational soul> has its own celestial spirit (*rūḥ falakī*) which is the cause of its existence and is tasked with overseeing its welfare (*iṣlāḥ aḥwālihā*). That celestial spirit is in relation to it like the origin, the mine, the source: we have called it the perfect nature (*al-ṭibā` al-tāmm*).⁵⁰⁷

The perfect nature doctrine guaranteed the superiority of the prophet over all other men. Since his celestial spirit was the most superior of all from which men could derive, it could explain his ability, uniquely, to receive divine revelatory experiences, exert occult power in this world, and most importantly, to bring deficient human souls to perfection (*takmil al-nāqīṣīn*), which is the mark of his prophethood.

Adopting a deterministic view of human nature in the epistemological introduction to *al-Maṭālib* Rāzī asserts that:

rational human souls differ in their quiddity and substance: whilst some are ennobled, divine and lofty, others are dark, turbid and base.⁵⁰⁸

He explains:

⁵⁰⁷ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 136.

⁵⁰⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, p. 55.

Amongst <human> souls, there are those who, in the origin of their substance and quiddity (*fī aṣl al-jawhar wa'l-māhiyya*) is a divine soul which is receptive to the presence of divine sanctity, whose love for it is great, whose gnosis of it is profound; amongst <human souls> are those who share in these states but they are weak; and amongst them are souls which are turbid, dark, devoid of these divine inclinations and spiritual dispositions, drowning in the ocean of desires and the darkness of the world of senses and vain imagination.⁵⁰⁹

Rāzī illustrates the full extent of his ethical determinism with the analogy of mountains and the minerals they bear: the vast majority are barren; of the few which do indeed bear minerals, but a small minority carry precious metals; of those which carry precious metals, the majority require great effort for their extraction and refinement. Thus for the vast majority of humans, no amount of spiritual austerity and discipline brings improvement. Of the small minority who do indeed have the potential, their small spiritual gain will only be won after much pain and exertion. But there are a rare few who after but a little effort will be afforded tremendous unveilings (*mukāshafāt*).⁵¹⁰ These are precious exceptions to the overwhelming mediocrity of human spiritual aspirants. The determinism which defines this approach to human nature resonates strongly with the account given in *al-Sirr* that the substances of human souls differ in accordance with the differences between the substances of the celestial spirits from which they derive. The stark reality of this determinism, however, is mitigated by the fact that individual effort can, within the limitations of each

⁵⁰⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, p. 55.

⁵¹⁰ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, p. 56.

soul type, engender improvement in the condition of the soul. Adopting and defending this view, Rāzī says:

...human souls are one genus (*jins*) which comprises a number of species (*anwā'*) which differ in quiddity; within each species are a number of individuals which are equal in their quiddity; each species is as a product (*natīja*) which issues from a specific celestial spirit. Thus whilst one species might be free, noble and virtuous, possessed of strong intellect and beautiful actions, another might be base, evil and dull witted. This celestial spirit is the origin (*mabda'*) of the species and is called, in the terminology of the ancient philosophers 'the perfect nature', for the reason that an entity which is caused must be of the same genus as its cause and similar to it (*al-ma'lūl lā budda wa an yakūn min jins al-'illa wa shabīhan bihā*). Each attribute by which any given species of human souls is characterized is the result of the influence of the celestial spirit of that species, which possesses that attribute in a way that is more perfect than the way in which it obtains in the human souls that it engenders. For this reason they have called these principles (*uṣūl*) the perfect nature. Thus human souls are like the children of their celestial spirit which for them is like a father who shows them love and tenderness. The celestial spirit has a special role in the raising of its human souls. If a celestial spirit is noble, virtuous and intelligent, then so are the human souls <over which it presides>; if it is characterized by the opposite, then so are the human souls <that belong to it>. Moreover, since those souls belong to one species, then of course it follows that they would share a kinship and similarity and for this reason an increased love and affection exists

between them. For this reason a boundless love may bind together people from different nations whilst two others may harbour an indefatigable hatred and loathing for the other. It is most manifest that the master of revelation and divine law – peace be upon him – subscribed to this doctrine when said: “In His possession are souls who are like enlisted soldiers: those who have (already) come to know each other are in harmony; those who are ignorant of each other fall into difference’.⁵¹¹

Each human soul shares the same quiddity as its fellow sibling souls which derive from the same celestial spirit.⁵¹² The prophet, being the paragon of human perfection, receives revelation from the most perfect of such spirits. His status is thus preserved and unchallenged by the relativizing effect of the Avicennan naturalistic account of prophethood.

11.5 Rational proof for the Perfect Nature

The way in which Rāzī arrives at conclusions which are ‘the most apt and probable’ is part of a method of inquiry which gathers and systematizes all relevant views on a particular philosophical issue, and attempts to arrive at the truth using a process of elimination. According to the principles of scholastic argument, the investigator must arrive at a conclusion which can offer certainty, by not only positively proving it as a proposition, but also disproving

⁵¹¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 142-3. Ḥadīth, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1, 371.

⁵¹² The alternative view maintains that the substance of each soul is possessed of its own unique quiddity and essence; any similarity that might exist between them relates only to their attributes and not their essences. Rāzī lists this last position more for the sake of completeness rather than as a serious competitor to the doctrine of the perfect nature, for which he provides six proofs (see Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 145-148).

other competing theories. If he cannot, then the investigation has failed to yield a conclusive result. Often this is impossible, and the most compelling or probable conclusion (*awlā wa-akhlaq*), out of a range of possible alternative, might prove the only way to avoid simply suspending judgement. Thus must he content himself with a probable conclusion which falls short of apodictic certainty. Using this approach, Rāzī allows himself to express a view which concurs with what he finds to be the most probable out of a range of competing contradictory positions; he thus affirms, without pronouncing definitively on a given issue, what is *muḥtamal* ('probable') or *ghayr mumtani* ('not impossible'), in contrast with competing positions which he has proven to be, at the very least, closer to the impossible. This gives him the flexibility to consider in all seriousness a wide range of unusual views.⁵¹³ Amongst such views he considered were: that the celestial poles have their own spheres; that the empyrean might be surrounded by innumerable spheres of commensurate might and density; that our universe might be just one of many; and of course that the human soul derives from a celestial spirit, the perfect nature.⁵¹⁴

Rāzī's rational proof for the perfect nature appears as the answer to an even more fundamental question relating to what it means to be human: what is the cause of the human soul? In the course of establishing the ontological status of rational souls, Rāzī swiftly eliminates the possibilities that they are: (1) possessed of necessary being; or (2) not possessed of necessary being but are eternal and pre-eternal (*qadīma azaliyya*). He affirms they are possible in their essence and have been brought into being within time (*mumkin li-dhawātihā muḥdathatan ḥudūthan zamāniyan*). Being possible, they require an effector which

⁵¹³ Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics*, p. 194

⁵¹⁴ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 384.

brings them into existence (*mu'aththir wa mūjjid*). That which brings them into being must be either spatially bound (*mutaḥayyiz*) or subsistent in that which is spatially bound, or neither⁵¹⁵. The first two of these disjuncts is eliminated for the following six reasons:

1. All things which are spatially bound are alike in their quiddity; thus if one were to be a cause of something, then all other spatially bound things would be the causes of similar things – and this is patently false.
2. The philosophers aver that no one thing can be both a receptive (*qābil*) and an active agent (*fā'il*) at the same time. Therefore since bodies are receptive, they cannot be active agents.
3. That which is spatially bound has a weaker existence than an abstracted substance (*aḍ'af wujūdan min jawhar mujarrad*) since the former, in contrast with the latter, requires locus and direction (*makān wa-jiha*). The weaker cannot be the cause of the stronger.
4. The human soul is cognizant of realities, capable of acts whilst a body qua body is neither. Souls are thus “nobler” (*ashraf*) than bodies and the noble cannot be caused by that which is in relation to it baser (*akhas*).
5. The ability of bodies to exert an effect is dependent on their position relative to that which they affect. Thus a bodily effector firstly affects that which is closest; then that which is connected (*muttaṣil*) to that; then that which is connected to that. Its effect on that which is closer is more powerful than its effect on that which is further. Were this not the case

⁵¹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 263-4.

then the influence of a bodily effector on objects both near and far would be equal. The ability of a body to receive influence is contingent on its proximity to the effecting body. Thus an effecting body cannot exert an influence over something which cannot be characterized by proximity or distance from it. Since a soul is an abstracted substance, uncharacterized by distance or proximity, it cannot therefore be caused by a body.⁵¹⁶

6. Since souls are abstracted substances, they are not of the same genus as bodies. Thus the latter cannot be causes of the former.

Therefore the rational soul must be caused by a substance abstracted from bodily existence (*jawhar mujarrad 'an al-jismiyya*).⁵¹⁷ This abstracted entity must either be itself a soul which as such acts by means of a corporeal tool (*āla jismāniyya*) or an intellect which as such does not exert its influence by means of a corporeal tool. Rāzī dismisses the first of these two disjuncts as false and asserts that that which brings the human soul into existence must be an intellect.⁵¹⁸ However, he rejects the position of those who assert that the cause of human souls is the Avicennan Active Intellect which governs all beneath the lunar sphere.⁵¹⁹ He presents their argument as follows: human souls cannot be entities caused by the Necessary Being (*ma'lūlāt wājib al-wujūd*) since it is absolutely unique and transcends all multiplicity (*fard munazzah 'an jihāt al-kathra*) and thus there cannot issue from it a multiplicity of entities caused by it; therefore the intellects which govern the nine celestial spheres cannot be entities directly caused by the Necessary Being – nor indeed can humans be.

⁵¹⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 263-4.

⁵¹⁷ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 265.

⁵¹⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 265.

⁵¹⁹ Compare Rāzī, *Sharḥ 'Uyūn al-ḥikma*, 2, 281-284, observed by Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, fn. 45, p. 118.

Thus they reason that that which brings human souls into being is ‘the last intellect which governs that which lies beneath the sphere of the moon, namely the Active Intellect.’⁵²⁰ Rāzī, however, rejects the argument that only one thing can issue from one thing.⁵²¹ In doing so he opens up the possibility that human souls derive from the celestial spirits:

...it is not impossible (*lā yamtani* ‘) that it is the spirits which govern the bodies of the planets and the celestial spheres which bring about the existence of rational souls.⁵²²

Furthermore, he says:

If we say that these human souls belong to different species (*anwā* ‘*mukhtalifa*) it is not impossible (*lam yamtani* ‘) that some could be entities caused by (*ma* ‘*lūlāt*) <the movement of> the sphere of Saturn, whilst others could be entities caused by <the movement> of the sphere of Jupiter, and so on and so forth. Also, it is not impossible (*lā yamtani* ‘) that one group may <comprise> entities caused by the spirit that governs *al-Shi‘rā al-Yamāniyya* whilst a second group <comprises> those which are entities caused by the spirit which governs one of the other fixed stars.⁵²³

Each state of perfection realized by the human soul is the result of the influence of that human soul’s cause, the perfections of which are more complete in their realization. He says:

⁵²⁰ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 266. Shihadeh observes that Rāzī rejects the entire notion of the Active Intellect (see his *Teleological Ethics*, p.188, footnote 45).

⁵²¹ See *al-Maṭālib* 4, pp. 381-9 for Rāzī’s refutation of the argument ‘that only one thing can issue from one thing’.

⁵²² Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 266.

⁵²³ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 266.

Each <state of> perfection realized in that which is caused (*ma'lūl*) is an effect (*athar*) from (its) cause (*'illa*). The perfection of a state is realized in the cause and then that which is realized (*al-ḥāṣil*) on account of it in that which is caused to be (*al-ma'lūl*) is like a weak effect (*athar ḍa'īf*) in respect of the (original) perfection. And so it is for this reason that the Masters of the Talismans named the spirits which are the principle (*mabda'*) of a certain group of human souls the "Perfect Nature" (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*) because, being the principle (*al-aṣl*), (when) an attribute (*ṣifa*) (inheres) in it, it is complete and perfect (*tāmma kāmila*) whilst when it inheres in that which the (Perfect Nature) produces (*al-natā'ij*) it is weak and deficient (*qalīla nāqīṣa*). The relationship of this substance, which is the cause, to that which it produces is as the relationship of the father to his children or of the principle to its subsidiary. And just as the inclination (*injidhāb*) of the father to his children is greater than to those other than his children, so it is not impossible that the concern of each celestial spirit for human souls, which are for them like children, is more complete than their concern for that which other spirits produce. It is for this reason that the Masters of Talismans say: 'my perfect nature informed me of such-and-such and guided me to such-and-such'.⁵²⁴

Rāzī says that this argument for the Perfect Nature merely establishes its possibility but can make no stronger claims on certainty:

⁵²⁴ Rāzī, *Al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 266-7.

Know that the truth is that this kind of argument (*hādhā al-naw‘ min al-kalām*) contains nothing but speech about that which is merely probable (*laysa fīhi illā bayān mujarrad al-iḥtimāl*).

Having established that the human soul is indeed an abstracted substance;⁵²⁵ and then that its cause is an abstracted substance; and having disproved and dismissed all competing theories along the way, Rāzī’s reader will be forgiven for expecting that he would now produce a proof which establishes, with some degree of certainty, that the perfect nature is the cause of the human soul. But as his epistemological introduction to *al-Maṭālib* observes, in the pursuit of metaphysical understanding, we must content ourselves with conclusions that are at best the most “apt and probable”; and the higher the metaphysical truths we pursue, the more tentative those “probable” conclusions must be. To increase confidence in such conclusions, spiritual unveiling is required. Therefore he says:

If the lords of unveiling and the masters of spiritual witnessing (*arbāb al-mukāshafāt wa-aṣḥāb al-mushāhadāt*) happen to undergo immediate experience (*tajārib*) which strengthens this possibility, then belief (in the reality of the Perfect Nature) is also strengthened.⁵²⁶

So to be sure of the reality of the perfect nature, it must be the object of immediate experience. This can only be achieved by means of a noetic connection established by spiritual exertion.

⁵²⁵ In the second treatise of *al-Maṭālib* 7.

⁵²⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 267.

11.6 The Perfect Nature and spiritual discipline

Having established in his introduction to *al-Maṭālib* that the majority of theological and metaphysical investigations will yield nothing more than ‘apt and probable’ conclusions, Rāzī explores a second means by which such knowledge may be pursued, namely the method of spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*): by purifying the heart and focusing on nothing but God, divine illumination may lead the aspirant to certainty when the discursive method has failed.⁵²⁷ Thus where discursive reasoning may eliminate as impossible a number of views on a particular issue leaving but one probable position, divine illumination may provide corroboration for it when ‘reflection and inference’ have failed to provide it with the apodictic demonstrative proof necessary for certainty. Later we shall see how only spiritual unveiling can confirm the perfect nature as the correct account of the origin of the human soul. The path of spiritual discipline involves:

Voiding the heart of everything except the remembrance of God, for the substance of the soul insofar as it exists in its original state and innate natural disposition (*al-jibla al-aṣliyya wa'l-gharīza al-fiṭriyya*), is possessed of a passionate love for the presence (*ḥaḍra*) of the Divine Splendour. However, when it becomes attached to the body it becomes preoccupied with corporeal delights and base pleasures; its immersion in their pursuit becomes an obstacle which prevents it from inclining towards the original home (*al-waṭn al-aṣli*), the essential centre (*al-markaz al-dhātī*). If

⁵²⁷ See Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, pp. 199-200.

man exerts his utmost in the elimination of these (corporeal) accidents (‘*awāriḍ*) then, whilst the soul retains its original necessary concomitants (*lawāzim aṣliyya*), the veiling dust and obstructing cover will be lifted. Then the light of God’s splendour will become apparent.⁵²⁸

Spiritual discipline is therefore a means of attaining divinely inspired knowledge that is complementary to rather than alternative to the method of demonstration and logical proof. Indeed discursive reasoning plays a role in preserving from error the soul engaged in the way of spiritual discipline, for instance, by disabusing the aspirant of the mistaken belief that a certain truth or spiritual state marks the end of the journey for in reality the journey continues without end. In fact, Rāzī cautions against the path of spiritual discipline without the guidance of discursive reason. He says:

If the man who is engaged in spiritual discipline has not also embarked on the path of reflection and inference (*al-naẓar wa’l-istidlāl*) then perhaps in the levels of spiritual discipline he might experience powerful unveilings and overwhelming states and become certain that these states are the ultimate unveilings, the highest levels; this might become an obstacle preventing him from arriving at the goal. If, however, he is practised in the path of reflection and inference and he distinguishes between a <spiritual> station that is impossible from that which is possible, then he will be secure from this error. So if a man has reached perfection in the path of reflection and inference, and is then bestowed perfection in the path of purification and spiritual discipline, then his soul will be on the principle of his innate disposition (*kānat nafsuḥu fī mabda’ al-fiṭra*), perfectly suited to these

⁵²⁸ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, p. 58.

spiritual states; such a man would have scaled the gnostic paths of ascent to the furthestmost limits. It has been related that Aristotle once said: 'I used to drink but <my thirst> was never quenched. But when I drank from this ocean it was quenched such that I would never thirst again.' Mere speech cannot explain these spiritual states; they are beyond the reach of words. He who has not tasted does not know. He who has not witnessed cannot affirm their truth. And God knows best the Unseen.⁵²⁹

Detachment from the physical world and sensual stimuli is an essential means of disciplining the soul such that it can become receptive to spiritual illumination which acts as an adjunct to discursive reasoning. It is one of the chief means by which a man may establish connection with his perfect nature. In *al-Sirr*, spiritual discipline, the erasing of physical desire and the magnification of the perfect nature induces its appearance.⁵³⁰ So in *al-Maṭālib* 8, concerning the perfect nature, Rāzī says:

...when in a state of purity and discipline, <the rational soul> is drawn towards the celestial spirit, which is its Perfect Nature, its original father <then> from that perfect nature the essence of the soul will be imbued with a power by which it will be made great and its effect powerful.⁵³¹

The perfect nature is: 'the cause for the coming to be of knowledge and moral character in the substance of the human soul'.⁵³² Since knowledge can only be perfected by way of connection with the perfect nature from which illumination

⁵²⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, pp. 58-9.

⁵³⁰ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 114.

⁵³¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 8, p. 144

⁵³² Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7 p.267.

is received; and since this connection is impossible without the purification of the soul, spiritual discipline becomes necessary to the pursuit of knowledge.

11.7 the Perfect Nature and the Epistemological Ascent

When we encounter the doctrine of the perfect nature in *al-Maṭālib*, its philosophical implications have been woven seamlessly into Rāzī's epistemology and theory of soul. It is to the introduction of this work that we now turn our attention. As we shall see, the influence of the concept in its epistemological discussion is subtle but does not elude the scrutiny of the careful reader.

After introducing the 'science of the divine' (*ilm ilāhī*) as the most noble of all sciences, Rāzī chastens the reader's intellectual ambition for certainty therein with four robust proofs which assert that it is impossible to attain certainty in theology. Instead Rāzī advocates for the more humble aim of contentment with that which is 'most probable and apt' (*al-awlā wa'l-akhlaq*).⁵³³ The first and fourth of these proofs are particularly illuminating for our understanding of the perfect nature.⁵³⁴

The first asserts that the most apparent and fundamental knowledge man can possess is that of himself and his own special essence (*dhātuhu al-makhṣūṣa*). He who would know a thing must first know himself as one who knows; knowledge of himself as one who knows must be preceded by knowledge of his own special essence. Therefore knowledge of his special essence is the most fundamental of all knowledge. Rāzī distills the arguments concerning the man's special essence

⁵³³ See Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, pp.189-199, for a thorough treatment of these arguments.

⁵³⁴ The first argument is to be found in *al-Maṭālib* 1, pp. 42-46; the fourth on pp. 51-2.

to four basic positions: (1) it is simply the bodily structure that we perceive (*al-haykal al-mushāhad*); (2) it is a body within this structure; (3) it is an attribute of this structure; (4) it is a substance abstracted from the body. Seeing that the debates between these four positions are interminable and defy resolution, Rāzī concludes that even this most fundamental knowledge is steeped in obscurity.⁵³⁵ Man is thus trapped in an epistemological bind: he cannot know anything unless he knows himself as a knower; he cannot know himself as a knower unless he knows his own special essence. Yet he cannot know his own special essence unless he knows its cause. Knowledge of his cause would thus appear to be the key to knowledge. We have already established in *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib* the cause (*‘illa*) of the human soul as the perfect nature. It can thus be inferred that connection with this spirit is essential to the attainment of certainty in metaphysical truths.

The fourth proof which Rāzī deploys in his argument in favour of humbler claims to theological knowledge is grounded in the assertion that those who are able to attain such insights are rare indeed. He begins his proof by listing three possible approaches to knowledge: (1) inferring the effect by means of the cause (*istidlāl bi’l-‘illa ‘alā al-ma’lūl*); (2) inferring something by means of that which is equal to it (*istidlāl bi’l-musāwī ‘alā al-musāwī*); (3) inferring the cause by means of the effect (*istidlāl bi’l-ma’lūl ‘alā al-‘illa*). He rejects as redundant, for obvious reasons, the first two approaches as methods for attaining knowledge of God, leaving only the last, inferring the cause by means of the effect. With this last approach to knowledge, the investigator of truth (*al-muḥaqqiq*):

⁵³⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, p. 42. These four positions are explored in greater detail in *al-Maṭālib* 7, treatise 2, pp. 35-42.

...ascends from <knowledge of> the effect to <knowledge of> the effecter and from created being to the Creator (*yaṣ'ud min al-athar ilā al-mu'aththir wa-yantaqil min al-makhlūq ilā al-khāliq*). The human rational soul occupies the last rank of sanctified abstracted entities (*al-mawjūdāt al-mujarrada al-muqaddasa*) [...] Since this is the case it must ascend (*tatarāqqā*) from knowledge of itself to knowledge of its cause, and from knowledge of its cause to knowledge of the cause of its cause. Thus does it ascend, rank by rank until it reaches finally to the presence of the essentially Necessary Being, as God says in the Divine Book: 'and towards your Lord is the final end'; 'and to God do all affairs return' and as He said: 'He is the First and the Last'. The Reality (*al-Ḥaqq*, i.e. God) is the First at the <beginning of process of> descent from the Reality to creation and the Last at the <process of> the ascent from creation to the Reality. And since the intermediary levels are numerous, their ranks being hidden from the ken of human intellects, the states of those intermediary levels being different, just as the ranks of their lights, their domination (*qahr*) and power are different; and since the power of the rational human soul to ascend these ranks is weak, then it must of course follow that most human souls will remain on one of these intermediary levels. In fact we say that most of creation remains in the nadir of sensible worlds. Only the rare exception escapes from the sensory world, ascending from the world of sensibles to the world of imagination (*khayālāt*); and of those who reach the world of imagination but few move to the world of intelligibles (*ma'qūlāt*). Then in the world of intelligibles, the ranks of the sanctified spirits are many. So of course it follows that when they reach

the worlds of the illuminations of the intelligibles, most superior intellects vanish, becoming annihilated and dissolved in the illuminations of these sanctified spirits with the exception of he who is aided by an overwhelming power and a divine soul which ascends from the <fierce> ginger of Mars to the sweet wine (*salsabīl*) of Jupiter to the camphor (*kāfūr*) of Saturn; then has he risen over all and gained ascendancy over everything and reached the <divine> presence which has been sanctified of all concomitants of contingency and the mutability of coming to be (*lawāḥiq al-imbān wa ghyār al-ḥudūth*) [...]; thus does he rejoice in His saying: ‘and so their Lord makes them drink a pure drink’, namely the pure drink that purifies them of all contingency and coming to be and He reveals to him the threshold of the Essentially Necessary (*al-wujūb bi’l-dhāt*). When you know this, it becomes apparent that few are the human spirits that can rejoice in even an atom of the World of Divine Splendour (‘*ālam al-jalāl*).⁵³⁶

Rāzī’s description of the journey of theological investigation is striking for its planetary allusions and rhetorical language of ascent and we would not be violating reason to assume that, when writing it, the Sabian planetary ascent cannot have been far from his mind. It posits a tripartite cosmos: the world of sensibilia; the world of the imagination; and the world of intelligibles, the levels of which are beyond enumeration. The complete theological ascent follows the chain of effect and effecter, inferring the latter by means of the former, scaling all three worlds, beginning from the world of sensibilia. Just as in *al-Sirr*, the perfect nature is identified in *al-Maṭālib* as the cause and producer of the effect

⁵³⁶ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 1, pp. 51-2.

of the human soul. Knowledge of the perfect nature guarantees knowledge of one's essence, and thus of the self as the knower. In this way, certainty in knowledge becomes possible. Noetic connection with this celestial spirit, established by rigorous spiritual discipline, is the *sine qua non* of embarking on the ascent through the spheres of metaphysical knowledge to the uppermost limit of philosophical perfection.

The introduction of *al-Sirr* declares that the aim of magic is the attainment of the noblest of knowledge and power. If the ultimate aim of the human soul is to attain perfection in both knowledge and power, then the question arises: does the perfect nature, the celestial soul from which the human soul derives, pursue an aim in itself? In other words, what is the purpose of the movement of the stars? The answer is to be found in the last treatise of *al-Maṭālib* 7.

It begins with a robust defence of the doctrine that the heavenly bodies and celestial spheres are living rational beings, rejecting the classical *kalām* position which maintained the contrary position.⁵³⁷ For this purpose he deploys the same eight arguments that he uses in *al-Sirr* for this aim.⁵³⁸ He asserts that celestial souls are substances abstracted from corporeality, possessed of particular as well as universal perception and volition. Moreover, they know their maker and desire by their motion his worship.⁵³⁹ Examining the issue of why their motion is circular, he outlines and rejects four separate positions which explain it as natural, concurring with those who maintain that circular

⁵³⁷ See his refutation (*radd*) of the Sabians in *Nihāyat* 1, pp. 505-511.

⁵³⁸ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, pp. 110-114.

⁵³⁹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 355.

motion is the most perfect motion and that their motion is volitional and with purpose (*gharaḍ*).⁵⁴⁰ He argues that the aim of their circular motion is to obtain higher perfections but dismisses the position of Avicenna who argues that, in attempting to actualize by their motion the infinity of potential stellar configurations, the perfections which they seek are corporeal (*jismānī*) in nature.⁵⁴¹ Rather, Rāzī argues as ‘probable’ (*muḥtamal*) that they seek the perfection of their own souls. There are three aspects to this perfection by way of motion: life; knowledge and intellect. Life, Rāzī observes, is characterized by light, motion, transparency, and subtlety: the perfection of these characteristics is the measure of the perfection of life.⁵⁴² Knowledge, as acquired by human cogitation involves the movement of spirits in his brain; knowledge as acquired by the celestial souls involves the perfection of their infinite circular motion.⁵⁴³ As for intellect, Rāzī adopts what he reports is the position of the astrologers:

There is no doubt that the celestial movements are causes for the order of this world. This being the case, they say: ‘the perfection of the state of possible beings is the imitation of God to the extent that human potential [allows].’ It is with this meaning [in mind] that the master of the sacred law said: “Adopt the moral traits of God”. And it has been transmitted that the first philosophers have said: ‘Philosophy is the imitation of God to the extent that human potential [allows]’. There can be no doubt that this imitation is indeed a lofty and noble state. And since, in respect of their knowledge, gnosis, and virtue, the condition of the celestial spheres is more perfect than the human, then to the extent of their potential, their

⁵⁴⁰ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 358-359.

⁵⁴¹ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 360.

⁵⁴² Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, pp. 361-2.

⁵⁴³ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 362.

realization of perfection is more fitting. Whilst their motions secure the ordering of the lower world, their principle aim is not care for lower beings; rather it is the imitation of God insofar as He is the principle of order, goodness and mercy.⁵⁴⁴

Rāzī's speculation, however, does not halt at the celestial spheres. The essences of celestial souls, as well as their perfections, are merely possible: they too require an effector (*mu'aththir*) and a cause. And if the cause of the human soul cannot be anything other than an abstracted substance, then so must be the case for the celestial soul: just as human souls cannot be directly caused by the Necessary Being, which transcends all multiplicity, so too the immediate cause of the celestial soul's existence cannot be God but an intellect abstracted from all corporeality. It is from this intellect that it derives all its perfection by way of its eternal motion, driven by a yearning to imitate its cause so that it might imitate God.⁵⁴⁵

And so, we are now perhaps in a more informed position to appreciate the significance of the parting advice which Rāzī offers his reader at the conclusion of *al-Sirr*:

As for he who would seek knowledge and the complete philosophy (*al-falsafa al-tāmma*), he must invoke the perfect nature (*fa- 'alayhi bi-da 'wat al-ṭibā ' al-tāmm*).⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁴ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p. 363.

⁵⁴⁵ Rāzī, *al-Maṭālib* 7, p.375.

⁵⁴⁶ Rāzī, *al-Sirr*, p. 164.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

When Rāzī came to write *al-Maṭālib al-‘āliya min al-‘ilm al-ilāhī* towards the end of his life, he had fully integrated into his philosophical-theological summa key Sabian doctrines for which he declared sympathy in *al-Sirr al-Maktūm*, notwithstanding his public persona as a theologian writing manuals defending the Ash‘arī creed. Between *al-Sirr* and *al-Maṭālib*, five Sabian doctrines remain consistent: 1) belief in the ensouled nature of the celestial spheres; 2) a qualified acceptance of a science of talismans, the chief tool for performing astral magic; 3) a teleological approach to ethics which aspired to the perfection of the soul; 4) belief in the perfect nature as the origin of the human soul spiritual and philosophical guide; and 5) an epistemological celestial ascent in the pursuit of this perfection.

He theorized in a profound and personally engaged way on the nature of magic: on how it is experienced on the cognitive level; on the spiritual discipline that it demands; on the knowledge it requires; and on the mysteries of the ensouled universe that its practice could yield. No product of nature or human artifice was irrelevant to its comprehensive approach to reality. It was simultaneously a spiritual, a scientific, and a philosophical approach to embodied sublunary existence, every aspect of which participates in a complex web of celestial significance. The intellectual project of *al-Sirr* which I have outlined only came to fruition with *al-Maṭālib* in which 1) he responded to the relativizing danger which Avicennism posed to the Islamic belief in prophethood, by rooting it in the doctrine of the perfect nature, and 2) he offered the philosophically and

spiritually aspiring a new, deeply personal soteriology, by means of an epistemological ascent to perfection through noetic connection with their own perfect natures.

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