Chapter Title: Disciplining the Soul, Freeing the Mind: Spiritual Practice (al-riyāḍa) in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt

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DISCIPLINING THE SOUL, FREEING THE MIND: SPIRITUAL PRACTICE (AL-RIYĀḌA) IN FAKHR AL-DĪN AL-RĀZĪ’S SHARḤ AL-ISHĀRĀT WA-L-TANBĪHĀT

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Introduction

One of the key features of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 606/1210) developed philosophical theology is his repeated description of two ways to approach knowledge of God—namely, through the exercise of discursive reasoning (al-naẓar wa-l-istidlāl), and spiritual practice and striving (al-riyāḍa wa-l-mujāhada). While each way is distinct, the two are most effective when combined, each supplementing the other to allow the seeker to approach the Divine and to ensure eternal felicity of the soul. Although the way of theoretical reasoning, modeled on a fusion of the intellectual traditions of theology and philosophy, is relatively clear, what exactly al-Rāzī intends by riyāḍa remains obscure, most often stated without concrete explanation in his theoretical works.

1. I am immensely grateful for the feedback that I received from generous colleagues on drafts of this article. In particular, I’d like to thank Loumia Ferhat, Lara Harb, Salimeh Maghsoudlou, Arjun Nair, Oludamini Ogunnaike, Elizabeth Sartell, Cyril Uy, and Cyrus Zargar for generously workshopping this chapter, and Mohammed Rustom and Atif Khalil for their incisive comments and edits.
The first reference point for the use of *riyāda* is naturally the Sufi tradition, which developed various forms of *riyāda* to tame the lower self (*nafs*) and aid seekers in their quest for knowledge of and union with the Divine. In his doxography of beliefs that fall within and outside of Islam, *ʾtiqādāt fi raʾa al-Muṣlimīn wa-l-mushrikin* (*The Beliefs of Muslim and Non-Muslim Sects*), al-Rāzī writes that it is a mistake to leave the Sufis out of an account of Islamic groups (*fiṣaṣ*) for “the Path to knowledge (*maʿrifā*) of God is purification (*raṣfiya*) and detachment (*tajarrud*) from bodily connections.” Al-Rāzī’s description of the dual utility of the Sufi tradition for extraction from the material realm and refinement of the self are indeed emblematic of his understanding of the use and efficacy of spiritual practice (*riyāda*) in the pursuit of knowledge of God.

Yet the most resounding influence on al-Rāzī’s developed notion of the two-fold Path and its use of *riyāda* is *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt*, Ibn Sinā’s (d. 428/1037) last work that melds Sufi terms and concepts with the philosophical tradition (*falsafa*), and upon which al-Rāzī wrote a commentary early in his career in the year 576/1180. Along with a number of his contemporaries, al-Rāzī was a careful reader of Ibn Sinā’s works, and follows his lead in merging philosophical ideas with Sufi concepts and practices as made explicit in the *Ishārāt*. His commentary certainly integrates various aspects of Ibn Sinā’s philosophy, such as his understanding of the need for moderation in the self, the taming of the lower faculties of the soul, and the turning of the intellect towards the upper realm to ensure eternal felicity. Aspects of the *falsafa* tradition with which al-Rāzī evidently disagreed, such as the existence of the Active Intellect (the final intellect in the emanationist system which governs generation and decay in the sublunar realm and enables abstract human thought), are largely absent in al-Rāzī’s commentary (though, in this, he follows Ibn Sinā’s omission of explicit reference to the Active Intellect in this section).

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3. It is common practice to present many views on the meaning of Sufism in Sufi handbooks. Writers pondered not only the various standard practices of the Sufis, but also the etymology of the term. Here, notably, al-Rāzī is uninterested in giving his reader a consideration of the numerous theories on the origin of “ṣūfīyya,” which included the name being derived from their wearing of coarse wool (*ṣūf*), their being of the first rank (*ṣūf al-arwāḥ*), the covered room adjacent to the Prophet’s mosque (*ṣūf*), or, as is al-Rāzī’s interpretation, a signal of the people’s purity (*ṣūf*). He instead binds both the term, and the essence of their practice, to self-purification, and limits their goal to *maʿrifā*.


5. A broad intellectual history of the increasing tendency towards syncretism that merged philosophy with Sufism, a trend that was already flourishing in al-Rāzī’s time with such thinkers as ʿAyn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadhānī (d. 526/1131), Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl (d. 587/1191), and Ibn ʿArabī (638/1240), is beyond the scope of this article. Deep and thoughtful comparison between al-Rāzī’s and al-Suhrawardī’s epistemologies, see Heidrun Eichner, “’Knowledge by Presence’, Apperception and the Mind-Body Relationship: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Suhrawardī as Representatives and Precursors of a Thirteenth-Century Discussion,” in *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century*, ed. Peter Adamson, Warburg Institute Colloquia 16 (London: Warburg Institute, 2011), 117–40.

6. Al-Rāzī briefly addresses the theory of the Active Intellect in the fourth volume of the *Maṭālib* in a discussion of the emanation of creation as posited by the *falsafa*. There, he points out the inconsistencies in the doctrine; he raises the
In contrast to other scholars who have dismissed al-Rāzī’s turn to Sufism as a late, non-intellectual conversion or who have falsely subsumed it under the Avicennian concept of intellectual intuition (ḥads), this article engages in a careful examination of al-Rāzī’s Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt and argues that al-Rāzī, at an early stage, repurposed various concrete forms of spiritual practice (riyāḍa) as vital for the completion of the seeker’s intellectual-spiritual ascent to God. Given the vastness of the category of Sufism and the vagueness of the term “mysticism,” I am uninterested in arguing whether Ibn Sīnā’s text or al-Rāzī’s commentary should or should not be classified as Sufi or mystical. What I am interested in is what al-Rāzī means when he introduces the Ishārāt as a text that “systematized the sciences/knowledge of the Sufis (‘ulūm al-ṣūfīyya) in an unprecedented manner,” and how he understands the last sections of the work to be a representative description of a peak human experience undergone by the seeker on the Path (al-ṭariqa). Given themes that recur in later texts, it is apparent that the Ishārāt and the writing of this objection, for instance, that there is no logical reason why the continued threefold production of intellect/soul/sphere should cease with the production of the Active Intellect rather than continue ad infinitum. See al-Maṭālib al-ʻulūm min al-ʿilm al-ḥads, ed. Ahmad Ḥājīj Ahmad Saqqā, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-ḥālāl al-ʻArabi, 1987), 395–6. Shihadeh also notes that al-Rāzī rejects the theory of the Active Intellect in his monograph; see Ayman Shihadeh, The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Islamic philosophy, theology and science vol. 64 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 42. Al-Rāzī’s early dismissal of this theory is also noted by Bilal Ibrahim; see Bilal Ibrahim, “Freeing Philosophy from Metaphysics: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Philosophical Approach to the Study of Natural Phenomena” (PhD diss., McGill University, 2013). While beyond the scope of this article, al-Rāzī’s refusal to incorporate the Active Intellect into his epistemology connects intimately with his understanding of knowledge by presence and his rejection of the mind’s abstraction of universal essences.

7. Ayman Shihadeh has argued that al-Rāzī “converted” to Sufism in the last years of his life, though he notes the early discussion of the “dichotomy of methods” in the Sharḥ al-Ishārāt while still describing the text as uncharacteristic in its treatment of riyāḍa. He writes that “[Rāzī] reads this section as an essentially Sufi text and gives it a fittingly Sufi interpretation,” which I maintain overgeneralizes al-Rāzī’s approach to the text and fails to note the ways in which al-Rāzī is already forging a unique and lasting approach at this early stage that appropriates and redefines Sufi terms within his own framework through the commentary. I agree with Shihadeh that the existential doubt regarding the efficacy of the intellect is not evident at this stage, but I am skeptical that al-Rāzī’s turn to Sufism was limited to his later years, and doubt as well that we can appropriately characterize him as converting to Sufism rather than simply continuing to develop his project of adopting and intellectualizing Sufi thought while simultaneously increasingly wrestling with the inadequacy of discursive reasoning as an means to access knowledge of God. I agree with Damien Janos’s critique of Shihadeh’s strict dichotomy between the intellectual and spiritual ways of knowing as producing two kinds of knowledge that are “unrelated and autonomous,” and his argument that “mystical” and “philosophical” knowledge, along with Sufism and philosophy, are intimately related for al-Rāzī and overlapped in their search for a singular object. Janos, however, distinguishes between discursive thought (fikr) and intuition (ḥads), Ibn Sīnā’s term for the immediate realization of the middle term in a syllogism through conjunction with the Active Intellect as the intellectual and spiritual modes of thought in al-Rāzī’s Sharḥ al-Ishārāt, which I contend fundamentally misunderstands al-Rāzī’s theorization of the twofold path to metaphysical knowledge. In my reading of al-Rāzī’s commentary, he follows Ibn Sīnā in distinguishing between fikr and ḥads, but does not ultimately incorporate ḥads into his own developed philosophical system (though one could argue that ḥads—sans Active Intellect—is absorbed into his understanding of the ideal third type—i.e., those who combine perfect inborn capacity with intellectual and spiritual striving). Al-Rāzī describes fikr and ḥads in his commentary as distinct modes of the theoretical intellect, associated explicitly with the discursive approach to knowledge of God. Put simply, fikr accesses the middle term of the syllogism after searching for it, while ḥads lands first and immediately upon the middle term without seeking it out. Far from being equated with the perfect intellectual operation of ḥads, riyāḍa and the second approach of spiritual practice and striving are linked to the practical intellect and directed towards the proper alignment and purification of lower aspects of the self. See al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt, ed. ‘Alī Rāzī Najafīzādah (Tehran: Anjuman-i Ās̲ār va Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 2005), 2:268–72; Ayman Shihadeh, “The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” in Sufism and Theology (Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Damien Janos, “Intuition, Intellation, and Mystical Knowledge: Delineating Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Cognitive Theories,” in Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazali: Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary (Boston: Brill, 2015).


9. Damien Janos translates this singular, all-encompassing ṭarṣa described in al-Rāzī’s Sharḥ al-Ishārāt as a discipline, a way, and a method, and interprets it to be a “single cognitive tree” with two branches (the rationalist and spiritual), leading “to a kind of knowledge that, while intuitive, remains intrinsically intellectual and syllogistic in nature.” Janos, “Intuition, Intellation, and Mystical Knowledge,” 207. While I agree that the knowledge accessed is fundamentally intellectual, I doubt that al-Rāzī, even at the point of writing this early work, would have described it as syllogistic. His understanding of the Path and its ultimate goal of unity with God aligns better with Neoplatonic descriptions of the intellectual visions that fill the pages of such texts as The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Cognitive Theories, or in Aristotle, an Arabic rendering of books IV–VI of Plotinus’s Enneads attributed to Aristotle. The Theology similarly describes the delving into the intelligible realm as a kind of intellectual witnessing which allows for comprehension through unity with the object of thought. As such, the knowledge accessed is intellectual while not being syllogistic. See, for instance, the description of the person’s unity with the intellectual “lord” (ṣāda) in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawi, ed., Afṭīṭat ‘inda al-‘Arab (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbūʿāt, 1977), 116–17.
commentary were formative for al-Rāzī, and that he viewed Ibn Sīnā as partaking in the Path (ṭarīqa) that properly pursues the same higher Truth (singular and universal) sought by both more traditional forms of Sufism and by the metaphysical investigations of the philosophers (Muslim and otherwise).

Borrowings, Variations, and Amalgamations

Before delving into the concrete forms of riyāḍa explored in the Sharḥ al-Ishārāt, it is worth noting major Sufi terms and concepts that al-Rāzī follows Ibn Sīnā in reinterpreting through a philosophical framework. Though al-Rāzī’s work reflects the desire for the inner transformation of the seeker as advocated by contemporary Sufis, what al-Rāzī describes is not an erasure of lower aspects of the self as described by some but rather a reordering and harmonization such that the true nature of the soul—immaterial, holy—may orient itself towards the higher realm. “The commanding soul” (al-nafs al-ammāra) represents not traits that can be removed with one’s union with the Divine and subsequent evolution, but rather aspects of the self that must be tamed and brought under the command of the rational faculty. It is not replaced by the tranquil soul (al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna), representing the rational faculty, but rather co-exists with it.

Rāzī’s cosmology, too, represents a unique mixture of diverse influences. While he employs the ubiquitous dichotomy between this world and the next, the lowly and the lofty, his understanding of this duality is rooted in the philosophical tradition’s division between the material and the intelligible realms (in sharp contrast with the strict atomism of traditional Ashʿarite theology). He most often describes this duality as “the loftier world” (al-ālam al-ʾālā) or “the loftier side” (al-jānib al-ʾālā), as opposed to the lowly world/side (al-jānib al-suflī)—terms that follow The Theology of Aristotle’s descriptions of the material and intelligible realities—and we find ample evidence in the Sharḥ al-Ishārāt for his understanding of this division as fitting within the material/immaterial, sensible/intelligible cosmology of the falāsifa. The knower, for instance, may “become accustomed to the true intellectual beauty” and realize, upon returning to the world of sense (ʿālam al-ḥiss), that anything that is beautiful is closer to the intelligibles (al-ʿaqliyyāt).

Al-Rāzī dismisses those pleasures which are immediately present (and sensible) as enticing but vacuous, whereas the true pleasure is that which is intellectual (ʿaqliyya). Indeed, it is the soul’s ultimate goal to become like a polished mirror turned to “the holy side,” upon which are ever-etched “the pure engravings,” the cause of these “intellectual pleasures (ladhdhāt ʿaqliyya).” It is this world that al-Rāzī describes as “the holy world of separates” (ʿālam al-mujarradāt al-qudsiyya), a reality of intelligible beings abstracted beyond the material world.

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12. Ibid., 2:620.
13. Ibid., 2:612.
to the divine is by no means purely intellectual, the intellect itself is not a barrier to accessing this ultimate reality (though al-Rāzī’s contemplation of the power and limitations of the intellect continues throughout his later corpus, and represents an irresolvable anxiety voiced on his deathbed).

Intimately connected to this material/immaterial cosmology is al-Rāzī’s view of the sirr, the Sufi term for the innermost self employed by Ibn Sīnā and exposited by al-Rāzī. In his commentary on Ibn Sīnā’s third reason for practicing riyāḍa, namely the “refinement (talṭīf) of the innermost self (al-sirr),” al-Rāzī elides sirr with dhihn, the mind, and interprets the ultimate goals of this practice to be intellectual in nature. The attainment of “intellectual perception” (al-idrākāt al-āqliyya) requires the “refinement of the mind (talṭīf al-dhihn), stripping itself away (tajrīdihi) from moments of forgetfulness (ghaflāt), and fixing the gaze of the intellectual faculty (al-quwwa al-ʿāqila) on its goal, turning itself towards it.”

The mind is the inner self (sirr) that must be refined, and it is this refinement through self-correction by way of riyāḍa, resulting too in the shifting of its inner locus towards its goal (i.e., the divine and the immaterial), that allows it to grasp absolute metaphysical truths.

Fundamental to this reframing of the innermost self is al-Rāzī’s view of knowledge, which is simultaneously informed by and at odds with contemporary Sufi views of intellectual (ʿilm) versus spiritual (maʿrifa) knowing. Al-Qushayrī, for instance, defines the sirr as that which allows for the vision of God (al-mushāhada), rather than knowledge (al-maʿārif), which is seated in the heart (qalb). He also notes that ʿilm and maʿrifa are employed indiscriminately by scholars (al-ʿulamāʾ); Sufis are careful to distinguish these types of knowing. Maʿrifa he describes as an advanced state of being in which God makes His secrets known (taʿrīf) to the practitioner; such a blessed seeker is then understood to be a knower (ʿārif) in a state (ḥāl) of maʿrifa. In a similar vein, al-Hujwīrī (d. ca 465/1073) demarcates maʿrifa as being either cognitional (ʿilmī) or that which is, itself, a state (ḥālī).

In such handbooks, maʿrifa emerges primarily as a state of witnessing that is bestowed rather than grasped by the mind through meditative exercises. In maʿrifa, one turns to God alone rather than to one’s mind or heart. Al-Qushayrī writes:

Just as the intelligent person (al-ʿaqil) turns to his heart, his contemplation, and his memory in dealing with all that arises for him, the knower (al-ʿārif) turns to his Lord. If he has been preoccupied with nothing save his

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15. Ibid., 2:616.
16. For an expansive enumeration of definitions of knowledge in Sufism and in other disciplines in medieval Islam, see Franz Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant the Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 46–69.
19. Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-qushayriyya, 390. Similarly, al-Kalābādhī conveys that Junayd taught of two types of maʿrifa, one occurring through God’s making Himself known to (taʿarruf) the elect, and the other of instruction (taʿrīf) to the majority of believers. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kalābādhī, Kābī al-Taʿarruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1933), 37.
21. Al-Hujwīrī writes, for instance, “If reason were the cause of gnosis, it would follow that every reasonable person must know God, and that all who lack reason must be ignorant of Him, which is manifestly absurd.” Al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-Maḥjūb, 268.
Lord, he turns not to his heart. So, how can a notion enter the heart of one who has no heart?\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Maʿrifa} is a certain kind of knowing, distinguished by being in the full presence of God to the exclusion of all else. It is explicitly separate from thought and reflection, for it is caused by God, and God alone. It contains no marker of the individual self that would distinguish the seeker as knower, and God as known.\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Maʿrifa} is, instead, an all-consuming witnessing through which the knower is unaware of all else save the Divine. \textit{ʿIlm} appears as its opposite; in distinguishing the two, al-Hujwīrī writes that while \textit{maʿrifa} is intimately connected to practice and one’s state (ḥāl), \textit{ʿilm} is knowledge which is lacking both.\textsuperscript{24}

What role does the mind play in acquiring knowledge in such Sufi handbooks? As in every other aspect of the tradition, there is a wide variety of opinion. Al-Kalābādhī (d. ca 380/990), for instance, relays the view that the intellect is incapable of accessing God with the admission that it is still the necessary tool for acquiring knowledge, though it nonetheless must be enlightened by God to access the highest truths (and which it alone cannot perceive).\textsuperscript{25} Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) praises the intellect, too, as the source of all knowledge, while maintaining the necessity of coupling knowledge with practice.\textsuperscript{26} At best, the intellect may only encounter God through God’s grace and intervention. In the estimation of many, the intellect is utterly incapable of approaching God at all. It is bound to the world of creation and time—so how could it access the timeless Creator?\textsuperscript{27}

How does al-Rāzī describe the knowledge that is the ultimate goal of the seeker? As was cautioned by a number of Sufi thinkers (though similarly unheeded by numerous others), he often fails to differentiate between \textit{ʿilm} and \textit{maʿrifa}, but focuses on knowledge of “the separates,”—i.e., of a metaphysical reality that approaches the Divine. In his introduction to his commentary on the \textit{Ishārāt}, al-Rāzī writes:

Know that intellects are in accord and minds in agreement that knowledge (\textit{al-ʿilm}) is the most excellent of felicities, the most perfect of perfections and ranks, and that its possessors are the most excellent people in repute and the most handsomely clothed, the best of them in strength and stock, the highest of them in dignity and glory, most notably [the possessors of] the true knowledge (\textit{al-ʿulūm al-ḥaqīqiyya}) and pursuits characterized by certainty (\textit{al-maṭālib al-yaqīniyya}) which do not differ with variances in time and place, and do not change with the shifting of religious codes and religions. The most excellent of these is knowledge of existences abstracted from material reality (\textit{al-ʿilm bi-l-mawjūdāt al-mujarrada ‘an al-mawādd}) which are far from faculty and preparedness (al-

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{22} Al-Qushayrī, \textit{al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya}, 390.
\bibitem{24} Al-Hujwīrī, \textit{Kashf al-Maḥjūb}, 382. He further writes that Sufis go so far as to disparage the possessor of knowledge (dānishmand), not insofar as they possess knowledge, but insofar as their knowing is disconnected from practice, for “the ʿālit depends on himself, but the ʿārif depends on his Lord.” Al-Hujwīrī, \textit{Kashf al-Maḥjūb}, 383. On the dismissal of ʿilm as a barrier on the path of the seekers, see Annemarie Schimmel, \textit{Mystical Dimensions of Islam} (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 140.
\bibitem{26} Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, \textit{Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn} (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2005), 98–100.
\bibitem{27} For a range of opinions presented on the intellect and forms of knowing, see al-Kalābādhī, \textit{Kitāb al-Taʿarruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf}, 37–40.
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For the difference between the ranks of knowledge derives from the variation in their objects. The more elevated the object of knowledge, the more beneficial is knowledge attained of it in the two abodes (fī l-dārayn). There is no doubt that the Self of God exalted, and His attributes, is the most perfect of existing things.28

Here, the highest goal is ‘ilm, with no differentiation between one type of knowledge and another. Rather than distinguishing between an earthly knowledge (‘ilm) and a divine state of knowing (ma‘rifa), al-Rāzī paints knowledge as a continuum the ranks of which are determined by the object, with the highest type of knowledge being that of the immutable. This, then, is the goal of riyāḍa: to come to know the immaterial reality by turning towards this lofty realm through spiritual practice and the assiduous pursuit of truth, ultimately losing one’s sense of self and otherness entirely through complete and utter absorption in God. As we have encountered, the Path is not solely intellectual, but it also does not exclude, discard, or devalue intellectual ways of knowing. Instead, it integrates them as a key means towards this lofty goal.

One subpoint on the ability to express the nature of these states of unity with God is particularly telling of al-Rāzī’s wedding of this immaterial reality with the intellect. On Ibn Sīnā’s statement that “speech cannot convey, nor expressions explain” the arrival of the seeker (a justification in part for the brevity of the Ishārāt), al-Rāzī comments that this inability of speech to express the experience is due to the fact that “phrases have only been set to those intentions which have been conceptualized. As those stations [of the knower] have not been conceptualized by the linguists (ahl al-lugha), how could they have invented words for them?”29 Further, he writes, even if they were to have produced words that express the experience, only those who had partaken in the experience could use those signifiers effectively. “It is known that the masses do not conceptualize those ranks; this being the case, it is impossible that the verbal expression (al-‘ibāra) successfully produce an understanding of those stations.”30 What is well worth noting is what al-Rāzī is not arguing. He does not say (as he well could have) that the experience is beyond the mind altogether, and therefore cannot be conceptualized or expressed in language at all given the gulf between the reality embodied and that which is comprehended and thus conceptualized by the intellect. He instead argues that the experience is “conceptualized” (taṣawwara) but only by an elite few, and thus it defies the conventions of language, which require universal experience of the signified to allow for universal signifiers.31 Certainly, one who wishes to grasp this

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28. Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt, 1:1–2. Any awkwardness in translation is absent in the original Arabic, which focuses on stylistics more than literal meaning. The phrases rhyme in the Arabic and form a kind of loose panegyric to those possessors of this highest form of knowledge.
29. Ibid., 2:624.
30. Ibid.
31. Al-Rāzī rejects the theory of abstraction of essences as posited by Ibn Sīnā, proposing instead a theory of knowledge by presence in which knowledge is formed through a direct relation between the knower and object known. However, he continues to employ the term taṣawwara (to conceptualize) in the general sense of obtaining knowledge of an object. On al-Rāzī’s theory of knowledge by presence and a comparison with al-Suhrawardi, see Eichner, “‘Knowledge by Presence’, Apperception and the Mind-Body Relationship: Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī and al-Suhrawardi as Representatives and Precursors of a Thirteenth-Century Discussion,” 126. On further analysis of al-Rāzī’s critique of abstraction and his alternative epistemological theory, see Bilal Ibrahim, “Faḥr Ad-Dīn Ar-Rāzī, Ibn al-Haytām and Aristotelian Science: Essentialism versus Phenomenalism in Post-Classical Islamic Thought,” Oriens 41, no. 3–4 (2013): 379–431.
reality must “become one of those who arrive at the source (al-wāsılın ilā al-ʿayn), not those who hear of its effects”—but this is due not to the inability of the mind to conceptualize the immaterial realm, but rather to the inherent limitation of conveying an elite experience through universal forms of expression.\textsuperscript{32}

Types of Seekers

Thus, we see here and elsewhere in the commentary that al-Rāzī follows Ibn Sīnā in warning that the Path to the Truth is not universally tread. Yet al-Rāzī does not limit the ways of treading the Path to one, either; he not only divides the means to knowledge of God into the intellectual and the spiritual, but also the seekers of God into four types, each of whom benefits from different forms of riyāda.

In the second part of the ninth namaṭ of Ibn Sīnā’s al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt entitled “On riyāda and its qualities,” al-Rāzī begins with the qualification that the exact use of riyāda depends on the person’s innate disposition (fiṭra) and outward development. Here, we immediately encounter al-Rāzī’s concept of a two-fold way to knowledge, each buttressing the other, indicating an early synthesis of al-falsafa with al-taṣawwuf that is rooted in Aristotle’s division between theoretical and practical intellect. For each type of person, riyāda is different. There is no single type of person – no universal human form—al-Rāzī writes, but rather different types that vary in their preparedness for this path. Al-Rāzī’s descriptions of the various ways in which intellectual pursuits and innate dispositions intersect with riyāda inform us of the breadth of his term.

Neither the use, nor the effects, of riyāda are uniform. Al-Rāzī writes that “the effect of riyāda is nothing other than the removal of obstacles and the lifting of veils,” but what is ultimately attained depends on the soul of the seeker. If the soul is well prepared (mustaʿadda), then it will benefit from riyāda in its pursuit of felicity (saʿāda), and if it is not, some degree of safety (al-salāma) is still available to it—for “when the bodily connections are reduced and weakened, the soul will not suffer after separation with a longing for the body.”\textsuperscript{33} Riyāda in some form is beneficial to all, but the types of riyāda prescribed depend upon the nature of the seeker.

The first type of person is one whose approach to the metaphysical is through the mind. Their assiduous devotion to the study of lofty topics has produced in them an orientation towards what al-Rāzī calls “the upper world,” i.e., the immaterial realm. Al-Rāzī writes:

They applied themselves to the metaphysical sciences (al-ʿulūm al-ilāhiyya), and strove in their study, arriving at (wuṣūl ilā) their intricacies with meticulous discernments and profound reflection, such that there came upon them an intense longing and complete attraction (injidhāb) towards the loftier side. Thus, their love of perfection carried them to riyāda.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt, 2:624.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 2:606.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 2:603.
A few aspects of this concise description are well worth noting. The first is the description of the seeker applying themselves to, or “practicing” (mārasa), the metaphysical sciences. The study, then, must be active and all-consuming to produce the result of which al-Rāzī speaks. Secondly, the attraction to the lofty realm occurs after significant progress has been made in the study of metaphysics, an inner orientation that is righted due to the pursuit, and attainment, of higher truths. And lastly, riyāda is not an immediate aspect of this path, but rather occurs after some degree of progress, enough that the import of the practice is recognized. It is the love of perfection and the realization of these higher truths that produces in these seekers a recognition of the role that riyāda plays in further progress.

The second type of person in al-Rāzī’s taxonomy is one who is blessed with an innate nature (fiṭra) that draws them immediately to that which is lofty without the need for any kind of learning or critical inquiry. Whereas the knowledgeable person lacking in fiṭra is privy to quantitatively more unveilings through their devotions in riyāda, al-Rāzī writes that the ignorant yet naturally blessed accesses unveilings of higher quality (an assertion stated both in the Sharḥ al-īshārāt as well in the Maṭālib). Here too, riyāda supplements what is already present. The innate nature of these seekers, already turned towards what is lofty, is amplified by their use of riyāda.

The third type combines these two paths to knowledge in an ideal form, an amalgam of both innate capacity and outward application. “These, on the basis of their nature (fiṭra), are formed longing for the side of glory. That yearning was then perfected by concerted practice (irtiyāḍ) of divine signs (al-maʿālim al-ilāhiyya) and true investigations (al-mabāḥith al-ḥaqīqiyya).” Combining the inborn attraction to the immaterial with devotion to riyāda and intellectual investigations, this ideal, though rare, person attains the highest reaches of perfection and felicity. In this ideal type, one witnesses a combination of inborn fiṭra with devotion to the higher truths of metaphysics. It is these blessed few who al-Rāzī elsewhere describes as “the venerated prophets (al-anbiyāʾ al-muʿaẓẓam ūn) and the perfect sages (al-ḥukamāʾ al-kāmilūn).”

The last type of person is void of both an innate disposition and outer refinement, yet they have heard enough of the perfection of this Path (ṭarīqa) and of the heights of human felicity associated with it that they were convinced of and drawn to it. For them, the focus is not internal but rather external; they must improve their actions and follow ethical behavior in the hopes of awakening from “years of negligence and the sleep of ignorance.” While al-Rāzī does not explicitly deny their use of riyāda, his later statement that one of the requirements for the benefits of riyāda

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35. This particular order in the rationalist way is echoed in al-Rāzī’s commentary on Sūrat Yūsuf in al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr. See Fakhr al-Dīn Muhammad ibn ‘Umar al-Rāzī, al-Tafsīr al-kabīr (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Bahiyya al-Miṣriyya, 1934), 18:111.
37. Al-Rāzī, 2:603.
39. Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-īshārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt, 2:605. A similar description of the first stage of awakening and repentance (tawba) is provided by al-Qushayrī, who writes that “at first, the heart awakens from the slumber of heedlessness and the servant becomes aware of his evil condition.” Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, 157. For extensive analysis of the theme of tawba in the Quran, and in the writings and narratives of early Sufis, see Atif Khalil, Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).
is the soul’s preparation and suitability for it implies that any person who has not already awakened an innate desire for perfection through the Path will find not benefit from its ways.\footnote{40} 

**Forms of Riyāḍa**

In contrast with al-Rāzī’s later works, we find an exploration of concrete practices in the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* as well as theoretical musings on how various forms of *riyāḍa* allow the seeker to disconnect from the material realm and purify themselves in pursuit of divine knowledge. In sections of his commentary on the ninth class (*namaṭ*) that treat *riyāḍa*, al-Rāzī discusses the practices of seclusion (*ʿuzla*), reflection (*fikr*), audition (*samāʿ*), and asceticism (*zuhd*), and merges Sufi tradition with philosophical psychology and cosmology in an amalgam that emerges as the hallmark particularly of his last magnum opus of philosophical theology, *al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya*, completed between 603–605/1207–1209.\footnote{41}

This key dichotomy between intellectual and spiritual ways to approach God is primarily rooted in Aristotle’s division between theoretical and practical knowledge. This is made explicit in al-Rāzī’s *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, in which he contrasts theoretical with practical wisdom and states that “the companions of *al-riyāḍāt* are occupied with practical wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-ʿamaliyya*) then ascend to theoretical wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-naẓariyya*), while the companions of intellectual thoughts and spiritual contemplations first reach theoretical wisdom, then descend from there to practical wisdom.”\footnote{42} As we will see, each various form of *riyāḍa* is employed to promote inner harmony of the lower aspects of self with the rational faculty at the helm, meant to purify the seeker from desires towards the lower, material realm, and to increase one’s “pull” towards the lofty reality. As such, despite the fact that the second way is described as that of spiritual practice and striving (*al-riyāḍa wa-l-mujāhada*), these practices are of key importance for both the intellectual and the spiritual approaches to the Path, aiding both the intellectual and the spiritual seeker in their pursuit of knowledge of the Divine.

The association between *riyāḍa* and the practical intellect in the falsafa tradition is noted by al-Ghazālī in his summary of philosophical terms and systems, *Miʿyār al-ʿilm fī l-manṭiq*. In his discussion of the theoretical and practical intellects, al-Ghazālī writes that the practical intellect (*al-ʿaql al-ʿamalī*), which is associated with the body and its desires, is strengthened by spiritual practice and striving (*al-riyāḍa wa-l-mujāhada*)—al-Rāzī’s exact formulation describing the second path.\footnote{43} Al-Rāzī thus develops the impulse of his predecessors in intellectualizing Sufi *riyāḍa* as a development of the practice of philosophy as a way of life, providing a rich exploration of various types of Sufi *riyāḍa* to be employed in the dual intellectual-
spiritual path to knowledge of God in his commentary on Ibn Sinā’s already syncretic al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt.44

ʿUzla

Seclusion from society (ʿuzla) requires a certain degree of self-sufficiency and, for al-Rāzī, this comes not in the form of innate fitra, but rather in knowledge, “for there is no greater guide than knowledge (ʿilm).”45 It is thus only prescribed for the first type of seeker (and, presumably, the third and ideal type). However, one who is ignorant is in danger of going astray if entirely alone – for this type, ʿuzla is inappropriate.46

Al-Rāzī expresses no anxiety, however, about the danger one may pose to others, or that others may pose to the seeker, in advocating for the use of seclusion. This initial goal of guarding against one’s own potential to harm others is emphasized in al-Qushayrī, who presents tales emphasizing the impurity of those who are at the beginning of their journey, and the use of seclusion as a means of protecting others from their untamed lower selves.47 Alternatively, al-Ghazālī’s section on ʿuzla in Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn emphasizes that it is a way to preserve oneself from the sinful habits of others, including slander and hypocrisy.48 Al-Ghazālī, too, warns that there are both benefits, and dangers, associated with seclusion, depending on the seeker. One must have achieved a certain degree of education (for education can only be achieved in society) for seclusion to be an effective tool for self-purification and spiritual achievement. As is echoed in al-Rāzī, al-Ghazālī warns that without a sound mind and basic teachings, one will lose their way in seclusion from society.49

Unsurprisingly, while the initial goal of seclusion as treated by al-Qushayrī is self-purification, the ultimate goal of the practice is the achievement of greater intimacy with God.50 In al-Ghazālī’s consideration, this is achieved through the ability to devote oneself fully to acts of obedience, and to reflection and the cultivation of knowledge.51 Al-Rāzī’s larger view of the goals and efficacy of riyāḍa incorporate these sentiments, but his understanding of the use of seclusion is specific and unique. Far from dismissing the knower (al-ʿālim) as inferior and knowledge (ʿilm) as a false guide, he writes that the person who benefits from seclusion possesses “primary knowledge,” the first principles that constitute the

44. For the iconic study of the ways in which Greek and Hellenic philosophy consisted not purely of discursive thought but also of bodily discipline and spiritual exercises, see Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (New York: Blackwell, 1995). For the continuation of this project through a rich exploration of the ways in which Islamic philosophy consisted, too, of the practice of spiritual exercise, see Mohammad Azadpur, Reason Unbound: On Spiritual Practice in Islamic Peripatetic Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).


46. Ibid., 2:604. Further, the need for a shaykh is also prescribed specifically for one who is not learned. Al-Rāzī, 2:606.


49. Al-Ghazālī, 702–4. Al-Qushayrī, too, warns of the dangers of seclusion for the impure and untrained. “One of the rules of seclusion,” he writes, “is that one must acquire that knowledge by which one solidifies one’s conviction in the oneness of God (in order not to be seduced by Satan’s whisperings), then that knowledge of the Divine Law by which one may fulfill one’s religious duties (such that what one’s undertaking rests on a solid foundation).” Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, 170.


51. Al-Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn, 692.
building blocks of sound syllogistic reasoning. In a significant break with the Sufi tradition, for al-Rāzī, seclusion provides the opportunity for uninterrupted reflection upon apodictic knowledge already achieved in order to produce further certain knowledge (a process of the production of theoretical knowledge which he details, too, in the introduction to his Sharḥ).\(^5\)

**Fikr**

Reflection (fikr) is not explicitly prescribed for all types of seekers, but rather for the second type of person who is blessed with an innate fiṭra but who lacks knowledge. For these, both fikr and samā’, al-Rāzī writes, allow them to disconnect from the sensible realm (al-maḥsūsāt). They use these forms of riyāda to ignite a state of ecstasy (wajd) and longing (ḥanīn), becoming enveloped in spiritual states and holy reflections that cause them to further detach from the physical realm above their already natural propensity to incline towards the “loftier side” and away from the material.\(^5\) In a separate discussion of “subtle reflection” (al-fikr al-laṭīf), al-Rāzī writes that thinking aids in the refinement of one’s inner being (talṭīf al-sirr), assisting the intellect as it “fixes its gaze” upon its goal of attaining “intellectual grasplings.”\(^5\) With practice, fikr becomes easy and itself refined (laṭīf), though it is remarkably difficult for novices.\(^5\) Thus, just as in al-Rāzī’s positive evaluation of Sufism in the Iʿtiqādāt, we see the twin goals emerge in the text of disconnecting from the sensible realm and refining the self through the use of reflection.

In these brief passages, fikr does not emerge as an examination of the conscience in the vein of Ḥasan al-Basrī or al-Muḥāsibī.\(^5\) **Fikr** in al-Rāzī’s explanation serves rather to disconnect from the material realm and to attain knowledge of the immaterial. While these are certainly not at odds with the Sufi tradition, they are also not entirely cohesive with explanations of fikr such as that of al-Ghazālī, who focuses on the use of fikr as a tool for self-examination and admonishment, and for reflection on the glory of the Creator, with the ultimate goal being the attainment of knowledge as that which informs virtuous action.\(^5\)

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\(^54\). Ibid., 2:603.

\(^55\). Ibid., 2:616. Al-Hujwīrī, too, warns against heedlessness (ghafla)—a careless ignorance—as a severe obstacle to the cultivation of religion and morality. See al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 86.


Samāʿ

As we have noted, al-Rāzī prescribes samāʿ and fikr for the second type of person who has an innate fiṭra—i.e., who is naturally drawn to the upper realm, and yet is ignorant of the ways and concepts of philosophy. Samāʿ is a communal, ritualized auditory and bodily practice, widespread by al-Rāzī’s time; a non-discursive practice that, for al-Rāzī, taps into this potential through the use of rhythmic poetry and melody, employed with the goal of reigning in the lower faculties (primarily the appetitive and irascible aspects of the soul). Al-Rāzī speaks both of the practice of samāʿ (which he writes results “in ecstasy, longing, and moaning the likes of which are not found outside of the time of samāʿ”), and of listening in general terms, writing that the seeker should be balanced in their speech and in their hearing, decreasing the amount that they talk (which al-Rāzī, longwinded himself, admits to be difficult) while focusing on those objects of audition that will aid them on the Path.

Following Ibn Sīnā’s lead in asserting the power of tune and lyric to render the commanding soul (al-nafs al-ammāra) obedient to the tranquil soul (al-nafs al-mutmaʾinna), al-Rāzī writes that melody (and particularly that which is set with poetry, for exhortative speech is fundamental for the use of samāʿ in riyāḍa) pulls the heart away from all else and towards that to which it already inclines. Used well, listening (samāʿ) brings forth feelings of longing for the Beloved in a unique way.

Al-Rāzī’s recognition of the power of melody to draw the listener in multiple directions—towards the divine, or towards the worldly—echoes numerous Sufi handbooks. Certainiy, just as AbūʿAlī al-Daqqāq maintained (as relayed by al-Qushayrī), when used by the common folk who “remain under the influence of their [lower] souls,” listening to music is deleterious, while for ascetics who “engage in the spiritual struggle” it is permitted, and for others still, it is recommended. Or, as Bundār b. al-Ḥusayn said, “There are those who listen by their [lower] nature, then those who listen by their spiritual state, and those who listen truly (bi-l-ḥaqq).” For both the Sufi tradition and for al-Rāzī, the effects of samāʿ vary depending on one’s temperament and spiritual advancement, as do the resulting states produced by the experience.

Al-Rāzī writes that melodies themselves can be employed towards various means, and each variation affects different aspects of the self in divergent ways.

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59. Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa l-tanbīhāt, 2:609. In addition to noting ecstasy (wajd) as a particularly emblematic state of one participating in samāʿ, al-Rāzī’s reference to moaning signals that he has in mind not only listening in general terms but also the communal practice of the Sufis in which “a variety of inarticulate sounds . . . can be seen as symptomatic of dissociative states in which there is a greater or lesser relinquishing of conscious control over utterances and audible respirations.” Kenneth S. Avery, Psychology of Early Sufi Samāʿ: Listening and Altered States (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 115.

60. Ibid.

61. While melody is important, al-Rāzī writes that the words set to the melody, or recited without melody, are the most powerful aspect of the experience which cause one to fully experience the greatness of God, for human beings are “of the [same] essence of the angels.” Al-Rāzī, 2:613.


63. Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, 418.

64. Ibid., 422.

Some melodies dampen one’s anger, and others are a remedy for anxiety and sorrow. Thus, each melody should be employed to increase or decrease a particular state in a given stage. Regarding the efficacy of various melodies, al-Rāzī writes:

If one were in the station of awe (khawf) of God Exalted, and we wished to increase that [in the seeker], then we would make them listen to heart-rending melodies (alḥān shajiyya). And if we wished to shift them into hope, we would make them listen to lively melodies (alḥān muṭriba); and if we wished to strengthen their soul such that it becomes overwhelming and masterful, we would make them listen to melodies suitable for that.

Thus, melody itself is a tool—like many forms of riyāḍa—that can be used to shape the seeker’s inner states.

Zuhd

In his commentary on the eighth section, al-Rāzī elaborates on the “acquired” (muktasaba) things necessary for riyāḍa to benefit the seeker, which he divides as either spiritual (nafsāniyya) or bodily (badaniyya). Here we see prescriptions for a life lived in moderation and balance much in line with the akhlāq genre exemplified by the writings of Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī, rather than in denial and asceticism.

Far from encouraging fasting and sleeplessness (as was practiced, often in the extreme, particularly by early Sufis as a means of training the lower self, the nafs), al-Rāzī warns of the adverse effects of hunger on the mind and body.

His enumerations of various requirements here are clear and precise. The seeker should dispense with all excess, and correct that which is inescapable, namely, the senses. Excess can comprise a range of objects, including wealth but also honor and mastery over others, as well as even “knowledge (al-ʿulūm) that does not bring one closer to God Exalted.” This step is indeed difficult, al-Rāzī admits, because those pleasures which are present are enticing whereas “intellectual pleasure is absent . . . and unfamiliar.”

Al-Rāzī addresses how the seeker should treat the objects of each form of sense perception in succession. In much of his discourse, al-Rāzī emphasizes the importance of an internal harmony. One should seek to reduce the amount that one eats, but focus on what is nourishing, for “intense hunger produces weakness in the main organs, causing imbalance, which then disturbs the soul and muddles the mind.”

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66. This description of the effects of melodies regardless of their pairing with poetry echoes al-Ghazālī’s note that “some sounds make one happy, while others make one sad; some evoke slumber, others incite laughter and delight, while still others elicit rhythmic movements from the limbs.” Al-Ghazālī, ʾIḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn, 746.
70. Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt, 2607.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
contemporaries, al-Rāzī’s warning against intense hunger as deleterious for the mind’s clarity and focus comes in direct contradiction with other Sufi valorizations of fasting. Al-Hujwīrī, for instance, writes in his section on fasting (ṣawm) that “hunger sharpens the intelligence and improves the mind and health.”73 For al-Hujwīrī, fasting is particularly useful as a means of taming the sensual aspects of the self.74 For al-Qushayrī, too, hunger and fasting are characteristic of the Sufis. Though they differ in the extent of their adherence to these practices, “they have found the wellsprings of wisdom in hunger.”75

Al-Rāzī further emphasizes inner harmony in his discussion of smells and climate, a key factor in the balance of the humors. He warns of putrid air and a variable climate, encouraging living in a vast desert with its unchanging environment “which acts as a remedy for any imbalance that occurs because of riyāḍa.”76 His discussions of sight and touch further stress moderation rather than asceticism. Rather than encouraging the use of dreary colors, al-Rāzī writes that bright colors support the spirit, gladden the heart, and delight the soul—it is these that should then be used, albeit simply, in one’s clothing and home. He urges the seekers to take in the glorious visions of God’s creation that expand one’s knowledge of God, and discourages sights of pomp and circumstances that may lead one to desire earthly power and possessions. Regarding touch, he warns that while abstinence from sex is required if possible, for many it merely increases one’s desire (a point made by al-Hujwīrī as well).77 For such a person, marriage is preferable.

Al-Rāzī’s focus on the importance of inner harmony comes to the fore in his emphasis on inner practice being the seeker’s goal, aided only by the external. “Real asceticism” is that which is internal, and bodily asceticism is primarily meant to produce this inner alignment. Yet “external asceticism is necessary first in order for true [asceticism] to occur.”78 At this point, al-Rāzī writes that the external may even be dispensed with entirely as long as the inner devotion remains. Al-Rāzī’s interpretation highlights a clear dialectic between the form and essence, external action and inner virtue. Just as al-Rāzī has described the taming of the senses not as a process of denial but rather one of refinement, he interprets Ibn Sīnā’s phrase “true asceticism” to mean that which is purely internal, with outer asceticism, like other outer forms of spiritual practice (riyāḍa), being merely a means of producing an inner ethical mode of being.79

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73. Al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-Mahjūb, 324.
74. Al-Hujwīrī writes, “The more the natural humours are nourished by food, the stronger does the lower soul become, and the more impetuously is passion diffused through the members of the body; and in every vein a different kind of veil is produced. But when food is withheld from the lower soul it grows weak, and the reason gains strength, and the mysteries and evidences of God become more visible until, when the lower soul is unable to work and passion is annihilated, every vain desire is effaced in the manifestation of the Truth, and the seeker of God attains to the whole of his desire.” Al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-Mahjūb, 325.
75. Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, 210. The motif of the desert as a powerful and pure setting has deep roots in the Arabic tradition. It is relayed that the Prophet Muhammad, like other sons of wealthier families in Mecca, was sent to the Bedouins in the desert for a period of time to learn pure Arabic and be raised by a foster mother (Ḥalīma Bint Abī Ḍh̲uʾayb) in a climate thought to be healthier for young children. Interestingly, al-Rāzī also prescribes retreat to the desert as that which may strengthen the practitioner of magic in his treatment of the subject in al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya. Al-Rāzī, al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya, 8:166.
77. Al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-Mahjūb, 361.
78. Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-ṭahārati wa-l-tanbīḥāt, 2:611.
79. Al-Rāzī’s emphasis on the importance of inner practice is by no means unusual and brings to mind al-Hujwīrī’s
The Goals of Riyāḍa

It is well worth noting that al-Rāzī follows Ibn Sinā’s lead in his intellectualization of Sufi riyāḍa. It is Ibn Sinā who, in the third section of the ninth namāt, writes that the knower (al-ʿārif) employs worship as a habitual form of riyāḍa to draw their faculties away from the side of error to the side of Truth (jānib al-ḥaqq). As such, these lower faculties become subordinate to the innermost sirr and allow it to fully arrive at “the light of Truth” (nūr al-ḥaqq).80 Further, while Dimitri Gutas and others argue that the object of conjunction (al-ittiṣāl) in Ibn Sinā’s Ishārāt is purely the Active Intellect, al-Rāzī’s interpretation of the Truth (al-ḥaqq) as representing God alone is perfectly reasonable.81 In the fifth section of the ninth namāt, for instance, Ibn Sinā remarks:

The knower seeks the First, the Real (al-ḥaqq al-awwal), not for anything else, and nothing compares to knowing It (ʿirfānihi). Their worship is to It alone, for It is deserving of worship. For [worship] is a noble relation to It—not for desire, nor for fear. If it were for the sake of these . . . the Truth would not be the end, but rather a means towards an end.82

Ibn Sinā explicitly adopts riyāḍa as a necessary tool for the knower. Absorbed in transcendental moments (awqāt) through a combination of will (irāda) and the use of riyāḍa, the knower (al-ʿārif) comes to see the Truth in everything. By way of riyāḍa, the seeker becomes like a polished mirror turned towards the Truth, thus transforming and ultimately abandoning attention to all save the Truth.83

Ibn Sinā’s enumeration of three goals for the use of riyāḍa guides al-Rāzī’s understanding of the utility of these forms of practice. In the eighth section of the ninth namāt, Ibn Sinā writes:

Furthermore, [the knower] needs riyāḍa. Riyāḍa is directed at three goals, namely: 1) The removal of influence from all other than God; 2) the obedience of the commanding soul (al-nafs al-ammāra) to the tranquil soul (al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna), such that the faculties of the imagination and the estimation will be drawn to those ideas proper to the holy, and away from the lowly; and 3) the refinement (talṭīf) of the innermost self (al-sirr) to wakefulness. The first goal is aided by true asceticism (al-zuhd al-ḥaqīqī). The second is aided by a number of things, including worship accompanied by reflection (al-fikra), then tunes employed by the faculties of the soul to render speech set to melody acceptable to the mind, then, finally, the same exhorting speech from a pure speaker by smooth expression, a pleasant melody, and a right manner. All three goals are aided by subtle reflection and virtuous love that is led by the nature of the beloved and not by the reign of desire (shahwa).84
Al-Rāzī’s commentary follows Ibn Sīnā by considering each of the three goals of riyāḍa in succession. Briefly addressing the need to remove the influence of all other than God, al-Rāzī notes the requirement for “true asceticism.” For al-Rāzī, as we have noted, “true asceticism” entails an internal mode of being that is formed first by external asceticism. The external form becomes superfluous once true asceticism is achieved, “for God does not look at your forms nor your acts but rather at your hearts.”

Rather than rendering Ibn Sīnā’s text comprehensible within a traditional Sufi framework in his analysis of the second goal of riyāḍa, al-Rāzī follows Ibn Sīnā in interpreting these two Sufi terms through philosophy. “What is meant by the commanding soul (al-nafs al-ammāra),” al-Rāzī writes, “is the faculties of sensation, appetite (shahwa), and irascibility (ghaḍab), as well as imagination and estimation.” Similarly, the tranquil soul (al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna) is none other than “the rational faculty (al-quwwa al-ʿāqila) which seeks knowledge (maʿrifa) of God Exalted and love of Him.” As elsewhere, al-Rāzī supports his interpretation with the Quran and hadith, signaling his own agreement with Ibn Sīnā’s ethics. Here, he quotes a hadith that relays that even the Prophet admitted to being born with a companion from Satan, as is every human being, which God alone can help the person overcome.

Given the inescapable difficulties of embodied life with the lower faculties which are tied to the sensual realm, is riyāḍa even possible? Al-Rāzī believes that it is, for he relays the sentiments of those who have arrived at the correct position (al-muḥaqqiqūn), who said:

The goal of riyāḍa is not that the faculties of sensation, appetite, and irascibility come to seek that which is separated from matter (al-ʾumūr al-mujarrada) but rather that they neither overpower nor dominate the rational faculty. For if the rational faculty is not overcome by these faculties, its very nature is to turn towards the holy immaterial realm (ʿālam al-mujarradāt al-qudsiyya).

Further, the imagination and estimation do not, by their nature, turn towards the sensibles, but can rather be bridled by either the lower faculties or by the rational faculty. “If what dominates in the person is disconnecting from this world, and turning towards God Exalted, then the activity [of the imagination and estimation] would follow such that one may even see the forms of angels in one’s sleep.”

The lower faculties must be, therefore, tamed and harnessed by the intellect through riyāḍa in order for it to fully turn towards the higher realm, but there is no expectation that these aspects of the self would either be abandoned in life, or would be made themselves to pursue the goals of the higher realm. Al-Rāzī reiterates that submission to the rational faculty is aided by different forms of riyāḍa, including: worship accompanied by reflection, with the goal being a remembrance of those separate beings; the use of melody; and exhortative speech spoken by a pure person in eloquent language (bi-ʿībāra balīgha).

85. Ibid., 2:611.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid., 2:612. Emphasis added.
88. Ibid.
The third goal stated by Ibn Sīnā is “the refinement (talṭīf) of the innermost self (al-sirr) to wakefulness.” This al-Rāzī interprets to mean “making the innermost self prepared (mustaʿadd) to turn towards that direction (qibla).”

Al-Rāzī makes it clear that the ultimate attainments are intellectual, writing that “the intellectual grasping are preceded by refinement of the mind (talṭīf al-dhihn), stripping itself away (tajrīdihi) from moments of forgetfulness (ghafalāt), and fixing the gaze of the intellectual faculty (al-quwwa al-ʿāqila) on its goal... a state that the intellect finds in reflection and thinking.” Thus the seeker employs riyāḍa to refine their inner self, further aided by reflection (al-fikr) that focuses the mind and by pure love (al-ʿishq al-ʿafīf) that heightens the seeker’s attentiveness to their Beloved and propels their care over their own actions and speech.

With greater devotion to practice (al-irtiyāḍ), the seeker experiences flashes (lawāmiʾ) of “pleasurable divine lights” (anwār ilāhiyya ladhīdha). As the seeker progresses, and with greater devotion to practice, these flashes or “moments” (awqāt) may appear even when they are not practicing riyāḍa. Following Ibn Sīnā’s description in the sixteenth section, al-Rāzī writes of the soul becoming like a polished mirror turned to “the holy side” upon which are eternally rendered “the pure engravings” which are the reason for eternal “intellectual pleasures (ladhdhāt ʿaqliyya).” Notable here is the emphasis on external practice as a preparatory stage, with the true experience being one that is internal, an ontological shift in the very nature of the seeker.

As the seeker disengages from their self, the experience turns from a “traveling to God (sulūk ilā Allah)” to attaining “complete arrival at God (al-wuṣūl al-tāmm ilā Allah),” that is, “being entirely beyond all that is other than God and residing (baqāʾ) entirely in Him, and as such actualizing wuṣūl.” While he retains the fundamental division between the lower world of sense and the intellectual world in which true beauty and goodness reside, he does not mention the Active Intellect, a key hypostasis in Ibn Sīnā’s cosmology (which is also left unnamed by Ibn Sīnā in these sections of the Ishārāt). Whereas al-Rāzī has elsewhere incorporated the philosophical vision of a separate intelligible realm and pleasure experienced by the intellect, here he replaces the contact with the Active Intellect to which Ibn Sīnā potentially refers by his use of wuṣūl with an arrival at and residing in God. The ultimate goal, writes al-Rāzī (and following Ibn Sīnā’s eighteenth faṣl), is being completely absorbed in attention to God alone, cutting oneself off from all that is other than God, including one’s pleasure in one’s own arrival at God. There is no room here for the consideration of any other beings in this climax of the seeker’s journey, no sensation beyond the pure and perfect felicity found in arriving at the Divine.

89. Ibid., 2:616.
90. Ibid.
91. Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt, 2:616.
92. Ibid., 2:620.
93. Ibid.
94. Al-Rāzī writes, for instance, that the knower may “become accustomed to the true intellectual beauty” and realize, upon returning to the world of sense (ʿālam al-ḥiss), that anything that is beautiful is closer to the intelligibles (al-ʿaqliyyāt). Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt, 2:628.
In this ultimate goal of a complete absorption in the Divine, al-Rāzī’s description of the station of “union” (jamʿ) fits well within the Sufi discourse of al-Rāzī’s time. Of the ultimate goal of union, al-Qushayrī, for instance, writes:

Thus, separation is witnessing all that is other than God Exalted; unification (jamʿ) is witnessing all that is other through God; and the unification of unification is utter self-dissolution [in God] and the annihilation (fanāʾ) of perception of anything other than God Exalted as Reality (al-ḥaqīqa) overwhelms.  

Al-Kalābādhī too writes of this narrowing—or alternatively, absolute broadening—of the perception of the seeker. He offers an image of dual receptivity in which the seeker reaches God, while simultaneously no other aspect of worldly existence reaches the seeker. “One of the great Sufis said, union (al-ittiṣāl) is when the servant witnesses none but his Creator, and when no thought reaches his inner self (bi-sirrihi) save that of his Maker.” Al-Hujwīrī also emphasizes a simultaneous narrowing and broadening of vision, writing that “shutting the eye to the phenomenal world leaves the spiritual vision subsistent.” Al-Ghazālī echoes utter devotion as the essence of Sufism—“an expression of the heart’s singular attention to God Exalted, and disdain for all else.” As al-Rāzī later affirms, reaching the stage of ultimate union entails a complete unawareness of a lesser reality.

The Path

Of particular interest regarding the Path to God is the final faṣl of the ninth namat of the Ishārāt in which Ibn Sīnā writes that the Truth is accessible to only a few, and that the ignorant may find these sections of the Ishārāt laughable. Ending his commentary on the ninth namat, al-Rāzī writes:

What is meant is that there are only a very few who are worthy of this Path. Undoubtedly, the discussions contained in this section are laughable to the simple-minded. But let this be a warning: if one finds in one’s heart aversion to this, then he should understand that that is due to his own deficiency, not to any deficiency in this matter. Truly, Aristotle said as much when he advised, “Whoever wishes to begin in this discipline (ṣināʿa) must invent another fiṭra for himself.”

Who, then, are those few who are able to tread this particular Path (themselves named using Sufi terms for seekers, including, ṭālib, sālik, and murīd)? Al-Rāzī’s differentiation between various types of wayfarers, and the suitability of differing kinds of riyāḍa depending on the person, illustrates that there are few who would not benefit from riyāḍa at all. For any seeker who can progress along the path, some form of riyāḍa is essential to their preparation and progress, and may only be dispensed with (carefully, and if at all) once the heights of the experience of the Divine are achieved and maintained without continual practice.

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97. Al-Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn, 719.
We find additional clues as to al-Rāzī’s understanding of the ideal intellectual–spiritual path in his *Iʿtiqādāt firaq al-Muslimīn wa-l-mushrikīn* in which he elaborates on various types of Sufi groups, some of which he critiques and others of which he endorses. His descriptions are brief, but rich, and he is free with his opinion regarding the various approaches to the Sufi way. Al-Rāzī names one of the branches of the Sufis “The Companions of the Truth (*ḥaqīqa*),” and writes that they are “the best group of all humanity.”99 “They are a group,” he writes, “who, when they complete their religious duties, do not commence to complete supererogatory acts of worship but rather occupy themselves with reflection (*fikr*) and the abstraction of the soul (*tajrīd al-nafs*) from bodily associations.”100 In his introduction to his commentary on the *Ishārāt*, al-Rāzī clarifies that it is “the soul’s abstraction from the lowly bodily connections” that allows it “to be adorned with the embellishment of the Truth, the immaterial forms thus revealed to it (*tajallī la-hā*).”101 His emphasis on intellectual pursuits is further illustrated in the *Iʿtiqādāt* when he describes a group who have lost their way by subscribing to incarnation (*ḥulūl*)—a note of caution that also appears in the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*.102 These folk “lack the abundance of the rational sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyya*), and thus they imagined (*yatawahhamu*) that there occurred in them incarnation (*al-ḥulūl*) or divine identification (*al-ittiḥād*).”103 Thus, al-Rāzī maintains that the ideal path combines not only the spiritual practices characteristic of the Sufis, but also the intellectual pursuits of the philosophers.

Al-Rāzī’s melding of philosophical and Sufi conceptions of the same Truth is explicit in the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*. In his explanation of the nineteenth *faṣl* of the ninth *namaṭ*, in describing one of the stages of the ascent, he provides both the philosophical and Sufi terminology. He writes:

In the tongue of the Philosophers (*al-falāsifa*), they are “the degrees of negative practices (*darajāt al-riyāḍāt al-salbiyya*)”,104 and in the tongue of the True Sufis (*muḥaqqiqī al-ṣūfiyya*), they are “the levels of being shaped by the characteristics of Majesty.” “The degrees of positive practices (*darajāt al-riyāḍāt al-ījābiyya*)” are called by the True [Sufis] “rising through the ranks of beauty,” this being molded with the noble manners of God to the degree possible for the human being. That is, the human being becomes benevolent, beneficent, gentle, and compassionate, this being the station (*maqām*) of union (*jamʿ*).105

While the terminology cited by al-Rāzī differs, the signified remains the same. Al-Rāzī’s cosmology is a melding of the philosophical and theological, recognizing the material and immaterial realities presented by the philosophical tradition yet with union with God being the ultimate goal of the seeker’s journey. For al-Rāzī, *jamʿ*

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100. Ibid., 72–73.
104. In Ibn Sīnā’s *Kitāb al-Hidāya*, he describes moderation (*al-tawassuṭ*) of one’s lower faculties as in some sense “negative” (*salbun min wajh*) because it allows the soul to fully separate from the body and experience eternal pleasure, receiving the full impression of the eternal beauty of the intelligible realm. Abū ʿAlī Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Hidāya*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbduh (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhirah al-Ḥadīthah, 1974), 305.
DISCIPLINING THE SOUL, FREEING THE MIND 223

(union) signifies a “complete absorption” (istighrāq tāmm) in the Divine such that one’s attention to all else fades to nonexistence; along with farq (separation), he writes, it is a key concept (though interpreted in many ways) common to all Sufis.106

That true Sufis tread the Path to God is obvious. But what of the philosophers? We may return to his initial taxonomy of the four kinds of “seekers of the Path (ṭarīqa)” to further probe the way in which al-Rāzī understands philosophical pursuits to be part and parcel of the Path to God. Again, the first type of seeker is one who “practiced” metaphysics such that they were drawn to the loftier realm and carried, ultimately, to the practice of riyāḍa.107 In the initial taxonomy, al-Rāzī fully incorporates those who arrive at a super-rational connection with God through study of metaphysics into the Path.

Al-Rāzī chooses, too, to conclude his commentary on these sections on the stations of the seekers and the use of riyāḍa with a quote which he attributes to Aristotle: “Whoever wishes to begin in this discipline (ṣināʿa) must invent another fiṭra for himself.”108 This quotation resurfaces as a favorite in other works; in Taʾsis al-taqdīs, written roughly twenty years after the Sharḥ al-Ishārāt,109 al-Rāzī concludes his first chapter on the inability of the senses to prove the existence of God with the same quotation, which he there attributes to Aristotle’s book on metaphysics (al-ilāhiyyāt),110 and we will later discuss the citation of the same saying in his discussion of riyāḍa in his last work, al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya. We may speculate that the meaning of this new fiṭra is the turning, particularly of the intellectual seeker, towards the immaterial realm; in some, this orientation is innate, while in others, this new fiṭra is formed and developed through assiduous study accompanied, subsequently, with the use of riyāḍa.

In the continuous emphasis on this saying of the great Stagirite, al-Rāzī implies that Aristotle, too, was a seeker on this Path. Such an open-minded vision of the Path is stressed from the very beginning of al-Rāzī’s commentary, as he states in his introduction that the best of all humanity are those in possession of “true knowledge (al-ʿulūm al-ḥaqīqiyya) and certain pursuits (al-maṭālib al-yaqīniyya) which do not differ with variances in time and place, and do not change with the shifting of religious codes and religions.”111 Indeed, while the Divine object is singular and the Path moves in one direction, the ways are many.

Not all philosophers are welcomed into this elite fold. For one, the ultimate goal is not the knowledge of God itself, but purely God; knowledge of God is merely a means to the Divine.112 Knowledge, too, can be a form of excess, when what is

106. Ibid.
107. Ibid., 2:603.
108. Ibid., 2:629.
112. Ibid., 2:623. In this, al-Rāzī follows Ibn Sinā, who states in the twentieth section of the ninth namaţ that “he who
The division between rationality and wisdom is further emphasized in al-Rāzī’s consideration of the intellectuals’ (al-‘uqalā’) doubt of the efficacy of riyaḍa, as opposed to the view of those who have achieved truth (al-muḥaqqiqūn) on the matter. There, however, the muḥaqqiqūn endorse the philosophical ethics and psychology by which the external senses and the irascible and concupiscent faculties must be made submissive to the rational faculty, realizing that riyaḍa is a means to ensure the intellect’s domination of lower aspects of the self.\(^{114}\)

Not all philosophers, then, are wayfarers—and not all wayfarers are philosophers. The second type of seeker is unstudied and naïve, and yet their innate fiṭra naturally inclines towards the upper realm, a leaning further refined by certain types of riyaḍa (such as samā’ and fikr) and the guidance of a true Shaykh. At some points in his commentary, we see al-Rāzī referencing traditional Sufi figures as authorities in the Path. In doing so, he is following Ibn Sinā’s lead. When Ibn Sinā refers to Sufi terminology, he frames it in the third person plural (“they say,” “they call this,” etc.). In his commentary upon the text, al-Rāzī attributes these references to “the companions of this path.”\(^{115}\) This does not confer absolute reliability, for some “companions of riyaḍa” have gone astray from the Path and thus suffered from such false imaginings as incarnation (al-hulūl) and divine identification (al-ittiḥāḍ), and some supposed shaykhs are in fact false peddlers of religion.\(^{116}\) Al-Rāzī does reference, though sparsely, stories of Sufis past, and quotes some sayings of those to whom he refers as True wayfarers, though often without attribution—an unusual choice when it comes to relaying stories of the Sufi masters.\(^{117}\)

prefers knowledge (ʿirfān) for its own sake [stops short of the One]. Yet he who finds knowledge (ʿirfān) as if it is not found, but rather finds purely the object of knowledge, delves into the depths of arrival (wuṣūl).” Al-Rāzī, 2:623.

113. This sentiment echoes that of al-Hujwīrī, who balances a valuing of knowledge and warnings of the danger of ignorance with the simultaneous admonition that knowledge must always be coupled with action (and vice versa). Knowledge is obligatory insofar as it aids in correct action, yet so too should useless knowledge be avoided. Al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-Maḥjūb, 2:606. Al-Rāzī’s denial of ḥulūl (and īṭāḍ), and his implicit critique here of al-Ḥallāj’s legacy (though received more positively in his Taṣfīḥ), echoes al-Ghazālī’s ḥiyā’ ʿulīm al-dīn, in which he remarks that the stage of unveilings in which one’s self becomes like a mirror of the Divine can lead to the “imagining (khayāl) of those who claim incarnation (hulūl) and divine identification (ittiḥāḍ), and say, ‘I am the Real’ (anā al-ḥaq).” Al-Ghazālī, ḥiyā’ ʿulīm al-dīn, 765.


115. See also al-Rāzī’s treatment of the term awṣāf in the ninth section, ibid., 2:617.

116. Al-Rāzī, 2:606. Al-Rāzī’s denial of ḥulūl and īṭāḍ, and his implicit critique here of al-Ḥallāj’s legacy (though received more positively in his Taṣfīḥ), echoes al-Ghazālī’s ḥiyā’ ʿulīm al-dīn, in which he remarks that the stage of unveilings in which one’s self becomes like a mirror of the Divine can lead to the “imagining (khayāl) of those who claim incarnation (hulūl) and divine identification (ittiḥāḍ), and say, ‘I am the Real’ (anā al-ḥaq).” Al-Ghazālī, ḥiyā’ ʿulīm al-dīn, 765.

117. In his treatment of the fifteenth section, for instance, al-Rāzī writes, “Those who have realized the Truth (al-muḥaqqiqūn) of this Path said, ‘We have seen nothing after which we did not see God.’ And when they ascended a bit, they said, ‘We saw nothing with which we did not see God.’ They ascended a bit more, then said, ‘We saw nothing before which we did not see God.’ They then ascended to the point at which they saw nothing save God. ‘ They then ascended a bit more, then said, ‘We saw nothing before which we did not see God.’ They then ascended to the point at which they saw nothing save God.” Al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-īshārāt wa-l-tanbīḥāt, 2:619. A similar description of levels of vision of seeing God in, or before, all else perceived is to be found in al-Kalābādhī; see al-Kalābādhī, Kāf al-Taṣawwuf al-tawīl al-awṣūl, 2:616; al-Qushayrī, al-Rišāla al-Qushayriyya, 400. He also paraphrases a story (a clever quip about the buying of cucumbers) told by both, though its phrasing is closer to that of al-Ghazālī; see al-Rāzī, Sharḥ al-īshārāt wa-l-tanbīḥāt, 2:617; al-Ghazālī, ḥiyā’ ʿulīm al-dīn, 755; al-Qushayrī, al-Rišāla al-Qushayriyya, 427.
Continued Influence and Development on Riyāḍa

Al-Rāzi’s commentaries on Ibn Sinā’s works are in some ways problematic. It is difficult at times to decipher whether al-Rāzi is giving his own opinion or merely elucidating what he understands to be Ibn Sinā’s position. Yet there are clues, even before we look to al-Rāzi’s absorption of these ideas in his later works, that he fully endorses the use of riyāḍa to strengthen the mastery of the rational soul in an intellectual-spiritual Path that leads one through the upper realm and to God.

Al-Rāzi introduces al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt as a text that is dense, terse, and obscure, but that also contains wonderous wisdom. The task of mining the secrets of this work is one taken up and failed by many, and it represents a challenge to which al-Rāzi rises after, he notes, having already studied much of Ibn Sinā’s corpus.118 Beyond his general praise for the Ishārāt, the ninth namat stands apart as particularly worthy of al-Rāzi’s interest. Describing this section in his later summary of the Ishārāt (Lubāb al-Ishārāt), he writes, “This chapter does not readily accept being excerpted, for it is already truly excellent. And what are the most beautiful parts of a thing that is entirely beautiful? We have, however, still gleaned the choicest sections of it.”119

His explorations in these sections of the Ishārāt grant an interpretation that is entirely centered within al-Rāzi’s, rather than Ibn Sinā’s, cosmology—this being a view that fully incorporates philosophical, theological, and Sufi concepts and ideas. Al-Rāzi adopts the philosophical understanding of distinct sensible and intelligible realms with the human being existing in between these worlds, and advocates for the use of riyāḍa to achieve closeness to God. The ultimate goal is not to arrive at uninterrupted conjunction with the Active Intellect to actualize a pure state of knowing (as some have interpreted the object of Ibn Sinā’s text to be), but rather the pure arrival at the Divine, losing consciousness of all else.

We also find meaningful developments in later texts that indicate the long life of the ideas explored in his Sharḥ al-Ishārāt. Written over twenty years after his Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt, al-Rāzi echoes many of the same notions regarding the various natures of human beings in these holy pursuits, and the use of riyāḍa to aid one in the Path, in al-Maṭālib al-ʻāliya. In a section of the introduction to the Maṭālib devoted to the question of paths (ṭariqa) to holy cognitions, al-Rāzi explicitly divides the way (ṭariq) into two routes (wajhayn) as revealed to “the masters of insight” (arbāb al-baṣāʾir). The first is the path (ṭariqat) of the companions of theoretical inquiry and inferential reasoning (al-naẓar wa-l-istidlāl), and the second is the path (ṭariqat) of the companions of spiritual practice and striving (al-riyāḍa wa-l-mujāhada).120 The first path is explicitly those of the philosophers, the “sages of metaphysics” who infer the existence of the Necessary of Existence by virtue of its Essence (wajib al-wujūd li-dhātihi) from the states of the contingent beings (al-mumkināt). Describing the second path of those who employ riyāḍa, al-Rāzi writes:

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It is the verified, conquering, wondrous path, for if the human being labors in purifying (bi-taṣfiya) their heart of the invocation (dhikr) of not-God (dhikr ghayr illāhi), and persists with the tongue of both their body and their spirit in the invocation (dhikr) [of God], light, illumination, an overpowering state, and a lofty power occur in their heart, and lofty lights and divine secrets are revealed to the substance (jawhar) of the soul.\textsuperscript{121}

As in the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, al-Rāzī writes of the varying innate capacities for these holy pursuits, with some naturally inclining towards the spiritual realm, and others towards that which is lowly and material. He compares these innate natures to the contents of mountains, with some harboring deposits of various types of material, from the precious to the base, and some void of any deposits entirely. Depending on the value of their innate natures, *riyāḍa* may prove much work and little gain—yet it is still the tool of choice by which to mine the valuable spiritual inclinations and cognitions within.\textsuperscript{122}

In this section of the *Maṭālib* in which al-Rāzī describes the inculcation of innate inclination towards the immaterial, al-Rāzī refers to the same quote from Aristotle as is cited in the conclusion of his commentary on the ninth *namaṭ* of the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*. In the *Maṭālib*, he writes:

*Aristotle said that whoever wishes to begin seeking these divine cognitions (al-maʿārif al-ilāhiyya) must invent another fiṭra for themself. His intending meaning is that the person exerts themselves in abstracting their intellect from the connections of sensation, estimation, and imagination.*\textsuperscript{123}

A clear continuation between the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* and al-Rāzī’s last work is evident in this section, both in the use of the same saying and in the framing of *riyāḍa* as working to subordinate the lower faculties to the intellect. The parallels continue in the *Maṭālib*, as al-Rāzī details the soul’s disengagement with the body and the material realm in the second station to allow it to become occupied solely with God.

As in the *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*, in which al-Rāzī writes that the ideal seeker combines the metaphysical pursuits with innate capacity, in the *Maṭālib*, he notes that the ideal way combines the path of theoretical inquiry with that of *riyāḍa*. He writes:

*As for the third station of those considered in this matter: if the master of *riyāḍa* were lacking the path (ṭariq) of theoretical inquiry (al-naẓar) and inferential reasoning (al-istidlāl), then perhaps, in [their traversing] the degrees of *riyāḍāt*, powerful unveilings and lofty, overpowering states may be revealed to them, which they would be convinced represented the absolute end of the unveilings, and the terminal states of the degrees [of cognitions]. And that [conviction] would become a hindrance for their arriving at that which they seek. But if they were to practice the path (ṭariqat) of theoretical inquiry (al-naẓar) and inferential reasoning (al-istidlāl), and were to distinguish the station that is impossible from that which is possible, they would be preserved from this deception. If the person were destined to be perfect in the path of intellectual reasoning,*

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 1:54.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 1:55–56.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 1:57.
was blessed with perfection in the path of self-purification (al-taṣfiya) and riyāda, and their soul was innately (fī mabdaʾ al-fiṭra) supreme in aptness for these states, then that human being would reach the absolute heights in these paths of ascent. It was transmitted from Aristotle that he said, “I was drinking without being sated. When I drank from this sea, I was sated with such satisfaction that after that there was no thirst.”

Thus, al-Rāzī’s explorations in the Sharḥ al-Ishārāt of two ways on the Path to God are born out again in his last work. While he does not detail the kinds of riyāda to be practiced in the Maṭālib, we may look back to the Sharḥ al-Ishārāt for clues as to the types of Sufi practices that he theorized one could adopt to produce the inner harmony required for the fullest achievements of these metaphysical pursuits.

Conclusion

Al-Rāzī’s development of a two-fold path to knowledge of God accessible through both the intellect and spiritual striving integrates riyāda as a fundamental practice for both the intellectual and spiritual ways on the Path to God. While a source of tension in his later writings, al-Rāzī maintained the possibility in his Sharḥ al-Ishārāt for the intellect, when aided by riyāda, to delve into the Divine presence and attain the singularly transformative knowledge of God.

The power ascribed to the intellect when combined with riyāda proved the source of considerable tension with contemporary Sufi thinkers. Included in the polemic against al-Rāzī is one popular story that al-Rāzī searched out the great Sufi Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā (d. 618/1221) and asked that he guide him, yet when al-Kubrā began to extract al-Rāzī’s knowledge that he had gained by book learning from his soul, al-Rāzī could not abide it and fled. While the details of such a meeting are of doubtful authenticity, we do have access to two letters written to al-Rāzī by two important Sufi thinkers of the time, Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and Shihāb al-Dīn ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234). In his letter to al-Rāzī, al-

125. Al-Rāzī does, however, write in the Maṭālib of dietary restrictions as a tool for self-purification. One who seeks to perfect this science must be vegetarian, and should also limit intake of bread, salt, and vegetables, for limiting enjoyment of food allows the soul to separate from this-worldly desires and to return to its original nature (fiṭra). Ibid., 8:164.
126. As Rustom notes, al-Rāzī had “become a sort of representative of the excessively cerebral scholar who was blind to spiritual truths because he could not see past his bookishness.” Mohammed Rustom, “Ibn ʿArabī’s Letter to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: A Study and Translation,” Journal of Islamic Studies 25, no. 2 (2014): 115. For instance, while also recognizing his intellectual prowess, Rūmī’s (d. 672/1273) spiritual guide, Shams-e Tabrizi, dismissed al-Rāzī as the most arrogant of apostates, for al-Rāzī would say “Mohammed-e Tāzi”—Mohammed the Arabian, i.e., the Prophet—“says this, and Mohammed-e Rāzī says thus” (Rūmī M4:3354–7 as translated in Franklin Lewis, Rumi: Past and Present, East and West (Oxford; Boston: Oneworld, 2000), 58). Rūmī himself alludes to al-Rāzī as a prideful hyper-rationalist in two poems in his Masnavi. In the first, he refers to “the philosopher” who repented on his deathbed (as al-Rāzī debatably did, but famously so, in his waṣiyya) and admitted that “We charged our mental steed too hard and fast / In pride we raised our head above all men / and swam in vain imagination’s sea / But nothing here, in the vast sea of soul, / can swim; Noah’s ship’s the only savior.” (M4:3354–7, Lewis, 59). The second refers to al-Rāzī by name. Rūmī writes: “If reason clearly saw its way along, / then on faith’s truth had Rāzī zeroed in! But ‘he who has not tasted does not know,’ / and so his fancy reason just confused him” (M5:4144–5, ibid.). Nor did Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-Dīn (d. 661/1262) approve of al-Rāzī, specifically finding fault with his closeness to various rulers; Bahāʾ al-Dīn referred to both al-Rāzī and the Khwarazmshah as theological “deviants” (mobtadeʿ) (Bah 1:82, 245–6, ibid.).
127. Rustom, “Ibn ʿArabī’s Letter to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 1. Shihadeh treats two accounts of this meeting, one recorded by Musammatkaf, a descendent of al-Rāzī, and another by Ibn Taymiyya, who relied on the account of al-Maqdisi. He concludes that there can be little doubt that al-Kubrā and al-Rāzī did meet at an earlier stage in al-Rāzī’s life, though he doubts that this had a lasting influence on al-Rāzī’s later Sufi developments. See Shihadeh, “The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 103–6.
Suhrawardī subtly exhorts al-Rāzī to join knowledge with action, and action with knowledge; his intellectual understanding should not exist abstracted from the world but should be manifested as lived expression. He also writes against apodictic demonstration in favor of observing the rites of the community, saying, “For apodictic demonstration (burhān) is for thoughts, and witnessing (ʿiyān) is for [divine] secrets. No demonstration-sign (burhān dalāla) nor demonstration-reason (burhān ʿilla), but rather, observance is for the rites (shaʿāʾir) of the community (umma).” He stresses humility, writing that one must undergo exoneration and atonement to ascend the ladder of apology, and only then dive into the secrets of the divine.

Ibn ʿArabī’s letter to al-Rāzī explicitly chastises him for theorizing the intellect’s access to God through discursive thought. He echoes al-Rāzī’s impulse that obtaining knowledge is the height of human perfection, but writes that he should not waste his life in the pursuit of knowledge (maʿrifa) of that which is created and its intricacies. Ibn ʿArabī exhorts al-Rāzī to recognize the weakness of the single human intellect, and its inability to ascend to the Creator through rationality alone. Knowledge of God is different from knowledge of the existence of God, and “God (great and glorious) is too exalted to be known by the intellect’s [powers of] reflection and rational consideration (naẓar). An intelligent person should empty his heart of reflection when he wants to know God by way of witnessing (mushāhada).” Specifically addressing al-Rāzī’s understanding of the mechanics of divine inspiration, Ibn ʿArabī insists that the intellect, whose knowledge is illuminated through the Universal Soul (al-nafs al-kulliyya), is a poor substitute for knowledge of God revealed through unveiling (kashf). Further, knowledge of God cannot be attained by the intellect; one should rather commit oneself to “the path (ṭarīq) of self-discipline (riyāḍa), inner-struggle (mujāhada), and spiritual retreat (khalwa).”

Ibn ʿArabī’s letter goes to great lengths to convince al-Rāzī by a number of arguments attempting to illustrate that his faith in the power of rationality is misplaced. The letter firstly clarifies Ibn ʿArabī’s own understanding of the role of intellect as well as the trend among Sufis of limiting the role of intellectual inquiry in spiritual practice. Yet it also serves as confirmation that even in his own lifetime, al-Rāzī was perceived to be actively attempting to merge the spiritual with the intellectual in his pursuit of knowledge of the divine.

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129. Ibid.
133. As Shihadeh has noted, the letter also portrays al-Rāzī as one plagued by uncertainty, as it includes an anecdote relayed by a trusted mutual acquaintance who witnessed al-Rāzī weeping due to recognizing the falsity of a position he had held for thirty years, and thus becoming plagued by self-doubt. Shihadeh, “The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” 102–3.
Such contemporary accounts of al-Rāzī help us to clarify both his intersections with other thinkers, and his innovations. He pursued an active merging of philosophy with Sufism, carefully considering the ways in which Sufi forms of riyāḍa can strengthen the intellect’s control over lower, material aspects of the self as per Avicennian psychology, and increase its access to the intelligible realm, as per Neoplatonic cosmology. In its melding of Sufi concepts with the psychology and cosmology of the falāsifā, al-Rāzī’s commentary on the Ishārāt is far more nuanced than previously noted. These sections of his commentary further underscore the importance of Ibn Sīnā as a spiritual and intellectual leader for al-Rāzī, as the intellectual-spiritual ṭarīqa encompassed in the Ishārāt left a lasting imprint on the development of al-Rāzī’s particular philosophical theology.

The merging of Sufi concepts and practices with Avicennian philosophy that emerges in al-Rāzī’s early commentary represents nascent ideas that al-Rāzī continues to ponder and develop over a lifetime. In particular, al-Rāzī’s later writings exhibit a tension in his view of the capacity of the intellect to access spiritual heights, and, as Shihadeh has noted, an increasing propensity towards skepticism with an acknowledgement of the limits of syllogistic reasoning.134 This early commentary demonstrates, however, that the intellectual-spiritual approach to the Path to God that is a robust feature of al-Rāzī’s philosophical theology takes root early in his career, along with concrete practices (details of which are largely absent in later theoretical discussions) that viscerally connect Sufism with Avicennian philosophy.

We may lastly note that al-Rāzī’s early creative reinterpretation of key Sufi practices and concepts through synthesis with the philosophical tradition should also caution our approach to his use of Sufi terms in his later works. Given that the Sufi tradition itself is so broad as to defy simple definitions, we should be all the more meticulous as we read al-Rāzī’s use of such terms as sirr, maʿrifa, al-nafs al-ammāra, and al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna, or his prescription of such forms of riyāḍa as ‘uzla and fikr, all of which are provided a unique interpretation in his Sharḥ al-Ishārāt.

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