

New research on Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's Atomism

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Abstract : Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's Atomism

Al-Rāzī is one of the few Arabo-Islamic medieval philosophers to endorse an atomistic conception of matter. That is, he thought that the four elements (fire, water, earth, water) as well as the celestial spheres consist of "parts" (ʿağzāʿ) that cannot be divided into smaller parts. In the Islamic world, the proponents of atomism were mostly theologians (mutakallimūn). In fact, al-Rāzī engaged with theologians on the subject of matter on one occasion at least: one of Rāzī's work about matter was a refutation of a Muʿtazilite theologian named al-Miṣmaʿī, against the latter's critique of the "proponents of matter" (ʿaṣḥāb al-hayūlā). However, the sort of atomism defended by al-Rāzī is rather different from that of the theologians.

Previous studies on al-Rāzī's atomism - for example the seminal studies by Shlomo Pinès and Carmela Baffioni - have focused on sources that were hostile to al-Rāzī, such as Nāṣīr-e Ḥusraw's Zād al-Musāfirīn. A fundamental source written by al-Rāzī himself has been overlooked until now, that is the section on Galen's Commentary to the Elements According to Hippocrates in Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's Doubts About Galen.

In this paper, I will first explore the intellectual lineage of al-Rāzī's atomism, and pay a particular attention to the influence of the Timaeus on it. I will also try to show that it is a central element of his medico-philosophical system: while it is closely related to his cosmological system, it also had a strong impact on his medical and pharmacological theories.

