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REASON AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE UNIVERSE IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL-THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE OF FAKHR AL-DIN AL-RAZI

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РАЗУМ И ЗНАНИЕ ВСЕЛЕННОЙ В ФИЛОСОФСКО-ТЕОЛОГИЧЕСКОМ НАСЛЕДИИ ФАХРА АЛЬ-ДИНА АЛЬ-РАЗИ

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Abstract. This article examines the role of reason in the knowledge of the universe within the philosophical and theological heritage of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1210). Using an IMRaD structure, the study reconstructs the epistemological mechanisms through which al-Rāzī connects perception, conceptualization, assent, logical analysis, natural philosophy, metaphysics, and Qurʾanic theology. Particular attention is paid to his revision of Avicennan epistemology, his critique of real definitions and faculty psychology, his relational account of cognition, his treatment of body, motion, time, place and causation, and his arguments from contingency and temporal origination. The study argues that al-Rāzī neither reduces knowledge of the cosmos to revelation nor grants autonomous supremacy to philosophical reason. Instead, he develops a critical rationality in which reason tests inherited doctrines, compares possible explanations, identifies the limits of human concepts, and moves from the observable structure of the world toward metaphysical questions concerning dependence, necessity and divine agency. His intellectual synthesis provides an important example of post-classical Islamic thought in which philosophy, kalām and tafsīr become mutually transformative modes of inquiry.

Аннотация. Рассматривается роль разума в познании мироздания в рамках философского и богословского наследия Фахр ад-Дина ар-Рази (1149–1210). В работе, выстроенной по структуре IMRaD, реконструируются эпистемологические механизмы, посредством которых ар-Рази связывает воедино чувственное восприятие, формирование понятий, принятие суждений, логический анализ, натурфилософию, метафизику и кораническое богословие. Особое внимание уделяется пересмотру им эпистемологии Авиценны, критике концепций «реальных определений» и психологии способностей души, реляционному подходу к познанию, трактовке таких категорий, как тело, движение, время, пространство и причинность, а также аргументам, основанным на понятиях контингентности (возможного бытия) и временного возникновения мира. В статье обосновывается тезис о том, что ар-Рази не сводит познание космоса исключительно к откровению, но и не наделяет философский разум автономным верховенством. Напротив, он вырабатывает критический рационализм: разум подвергает проверке унаследованные доктрины, сопоставляет возможные объяснения, определяет границы человеческих понятий и переходит от наблюдаемой структуры мира к метафизическим вопросам о зависимости, необходимости и божественном воздействии. Этот интеллектуальный синтез представляет собой важный образец постклассической исламской мысли, в которой философия, калам и тафсир становятся взаимообогащающими способами исследования.

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Keywords: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī; reason; universe; epistemology; cosmology; kalām; Avicenna; cognition; contingency; causation; revelation.

Ключевые слова: Фахр ад-Дин ар-Рази; разум; Вселенная; эпистемология; космология; калам; Авиценна; познание; контингентность; причинность; откровение.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī is one of the most influential representatives of post-classical Islamic intellectual history. Trained in Ashʿarite rational theology and deeply engaged with the philosophical system of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), he produced an unusually broad corpus encompassing logic, physics, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, law, theology, and Qurʾanic exegesis [1; 2].

His importance lies not simply in transmitting earlier doctrines, but in reorganizing and testing them. The modern Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy accordingly describes him as a thinker who reacted critically to Avicenna while developing distinctive positions on definition, existence and essence, physics, the unity of the soul, and ethical norms [1].

The problem of knowing the universe occupies a central position in this project. Al-Rāzī asks how bodies, motion, time, place, and change are known; whether the structure of the physical world is necessary or contingent; how causal explanation should be understood; and how rational inquiry into the cosmos relates to knowledge of God. These questions belong simultaneously to natural philosophy and theology. They therefore provide an especially productive field for examining the status of reason in his thought. The research problem is that al-Rāzī is frequently described either as an Ashʿarite theologian who criticizes philosophy or as a philosopher who imports Avicennan methods into kalām. Both descriptions capture part of the truth but obscure the methodological interaction among reason, revelation, and philosophical argument. The present study therefore asks: how does reason function as an instrument for knowing the universe in al-Rāzī's philosophical-theological heritage, and what are the epistemic limits of this function? The aim of the article is to reconstruct the principal stages of rational knowledge of the cosmos in al-Rāzī and to clarify the relationship between epistemology, physics, metaphysics, and theology. The objectives are:

1. To identify the structure of knowledge in his logic and epistemology.
2. To analyze his theory of the knowing subject.
3. To examine the application of reason to the physical universe.
4. To classify the principal cosmological and metaphysical arguments.
5. To evaluate the relationship between rational investigation and revelation.

The study uses a qualitative historical-philosophical methodology. The primary conceptual material is drawn from al-Rāzī's major philosophical-theological works, especially al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya, al-Muḥaṣṣal, Sharḥ al-Ishārāt, al-Arbaʿīn, and al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya, as reconstructed in contemporary scholarship [1, 3, 4].

Secondary literature includes studies of al-Rāzī's epistemology, psychology, Qurʾanic reasoning, and post-classical Islamic philosophy [5–10].

Four methods were combined. First, conceptual analysis was used to distinguish key epistemological categories, especially taṣawwur (conceptualization) and taṣdīq (assent). Second, comparative analysis was employed to identify points of continuity and disagreement between al-Rāzī and Avicenna. Third, reconstructive analysis organized dispersed arguments concerning nature and divine causation into a coherent model of rational cosmology. Fourth, contextual interpretation prevented anachronistic equations between medieval Islamic cosmology and contemporary natural science. The analytical unit was not a single treatise but a recurring argumentative pattern: movement from an observed or conceptual feature of the world to a logical distinction, then to a modal or causal question, and finally to a metaphysical or theological conclusion.

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This makes it possible to treat ‘reason’ not merely as a faculty but as a structured practice of inquiry. Al-Rāzī reorganizes the inherited Aristotelian-Avicennan presentation of logic around two modes of cognition: conceptualization and assent [1].

Conceptualization consists in entertaining a concept without asserting its truth, whereas assent involves accepting a proposition about reality. This distinction is fundamental for knowledge of the universe. The concepts of body, motion, time, place, cause, possibility and necessity do not by themselves constitute cosmological knowledge. Knowledge emerges when the mind establishes propositions concerning these concepts and evaluates their truth.

At the same time, al-Rāzī rejects excessive confidence in essential definitions. Against the Avicennan expectation that a complete definition can disclose the essence of a thing, he argues that definitions often clarify a meaning already present in the mind rather than reveal the external essence itself [1; 5].

Reason therefore has a double task: it forms and orders concepts, but it must also criticize the epistemic claims attached to them. Al-Rāzī’s theory of reason cannot be separated from his psychology. Avicenna had developed an elaborate faculty psychology in which external senses, internal senses, imagination, estimation, memory, and intellect perform differentiated cognitive functions. Al-Rāzī questions whether separate faculties are required to explain these functions. His critique of the internal senses is connected to a stronger thesis: the soul itself can be the unified subject of perception and judgment [1; 6].

The argument from ‘hybrid judgments’ is especially significant. A person can judge that honey is both white and sweet, thereby integrating information associated with different sensory modalities. More importantly, one can apply a universal concept to a particular individual. Such acts suggest a common cognitive subject capable of combining sensory and intellectual content [1].

Thus, reason is not an isolated mechanism positioned above sensation; rational cognition belongs to a unified soul that synthesizes multiple kinds of information. Tiryaki’s study of al-Rāzī’s critique of internal senses shows that the debate concerns not merely the number of faculties but deeper questions about abstraction, perception, the soul–body relation, and the cognition of particulars [6].

The result is a functional rather than rigidly compartmentalized account of cognition. A further result concerns al-Rāzī’s account of cognition as a relational state. He criticizes the idea that the immediate object of knowledge is merely a representation impressed in the mind. On his account, cognition establishes a relation between the knower and the object itself. This position has major implications for cosmology: the external world remains a genuine object of inquiry rather than being reduced to internal images. The relational model also serves his theology of divine knowledge. If cognition is a relation to external objects, changes in the objects known need not imply essential change in the knower. Al-Rāzī uses this framework to respond to Avicennan difficulties concerning God’s knowledge of changing particulars. Thus, a theory initially relevant to human cognition becomes part of a broader metaphysical account of the universe and divine knowledge. Al-Rāzī’s physics demonstrates how reason operates when inherited philosophical models conflict. He discusses the same basic themes as Aristotelian and Avicennan physics — body, motion, time, place, and void — but introduces arguments from kalām and sometimes favors atomistic positions against Avicennan continuism. This is not an abandonment of rational natural philosophy. Rather, rival explanatory models are placed into direct argumentative competition. The method is especially visible in his systematic use of disjunctions. Existence may be one or many, necessary or contingent, finite or infinite, self-sufficient or dependent [1].

Such contrasts transform metaphysics into a disciplined examination of logical alternatives. Reason maps the field of possibilities before deciding which explanation is strongest.

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Table 1

RATIONAL QUESTIONS IN AL-RĀZĪ'S INVESTIGATION OF THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE

Object of inquiry	*Rational question*	*Competing possibilities*	*Epistemic function*
Body	What constitutes physical reality?	Continuity / atomism	Comparison of ontological models
Motion	How is change explained?	Intrinsic causal structure / created dependence	Analysis of causal assumptions
Time	Is time dependent on motion?	Relational measure / independent principle	Testing inherited physical definitions
Place and void	Can empty space exist?	Plenum / void	Logical and physical possibility
Cosmos	Must this world have its actual form?	Necessity / contingency	Transition from physics to metaphysics

Among al-Rāzī's most influential contributions is his taxonomy of arguments for God's existence. He distinguishes four principal proofs: from the contingency of essences, from the temporal origination of essences, from the contingency of attributes, and from the temporal origination of attributes [1].

Table 2

FOUR PRINCIPAL ROUTES FROM THE COSMOS TO ITS METAPHYSICAL GROUND

Argument	*Starting point*	*Rational operation*	*Conclusion sought*
Contingency of essences	Existing things are not self-necessary	Necessary / contingent distinction	A necessary ground of existence
Temporal origination of essences	The world or things begin to exist	Origin requires an explanation	A Creator
Contingency of attributes	Things possess one determinate state among alternatives	Actualization of one possibility	A specifying cause
Temporal origination of attributes	States and properties change	Dependence of change	A cause of temporal determination

The first develops an Avicennan line of reasoning from contingent beings to the Necessary Existent; the second corresponds to the classical kalām cosmological argument; the remaining two focus on the determinate features and changing states of things. The intellectual importance of this classification lies in its structure. Reason does not leap directly from observation to theology. It first identifies a feature requiring explanation. If a thing could have failed to exist, or could have possessed different attributes, the mind asks what accounts for its actuality rather than an alternative. The universe becomes intelligible through modal analysis. Al-Rāzī's discussions of causation reveal a complex interaction between Avicennan metaphysics and Ashʿarite theology. He accepts the principle that what exists contingently requires a reason that 'preponderates' existence over non-existence, and he employs strongly deterministic reasoning in several contexts [1].

Yet he resists treating nature as an autonomous explanatory domain detached from divine agency. This produces an important distinction between regularity and self-sufficiency. The rational intelligibility of an event does not require that its natural cause be metaphysically independent. A chain of explanation can be coherent while remaining ontologically dependent. Reason, therefore, investigates causal order, but theology asks about the ground of that order.

Al-Rāzī's Great Commentary on the Qurʾan (Mafātīḥ al-ghayb) demonstrates that philosophical reasoning and scriptural exegesis are not separate intellectual worlds. Jaffer has shown that al-Rāzī's Qurʾanic interpretation is deeply shaped by theological reasoning and philosophical problems [7].

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Cosmological verses become occasions for analyzing creation, divine power, causal order, and the structure of the heavens. This integration is methodologically significant. Revelation supplies authoritative theological claims and conceptual prompts, while reason examines their implications, resolves apparent conflicts, and evaluates competing philosophical interpretations. Conversely, philosophical doctrines are not accepted merely because they belong to an established tradition; they remain open to criticism in light of logical analysis and theological commitments. The centrality of reason does not imply epistemic triumphalism. Al-Rāzī's critique of real definitions limits the claim that the human mind can grasp essences exhaustively. His engagement with Meno's paradox likewise raises the question of how genuinely new knowledge can be intentionally acquired [1; 5].

In his Ashʿarite framework, even conceptualization and assent ultimately depend on conditions not fully controlled by the human knower. This tension is productive rather than destructive. Al-Rāzī devotes enormous effort to syllogistic reasoning despite questioning voluntary acquisition of knowledge. Reason remains indispensable as a discipline of testing arguments, exposing contradictions and distinguishing stronger from weaker explanations. Its limitation concerns sovereignty, not usefulness: human rationality does not create truth and cannot guarantee exhaustive possession of it.

Table 3

PRINCIPAL FUNCTIONS AND LIMITS OF REASON IN AL-RĀZĪ'S COSMOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Function	*Description*	*Cosmological application*	*Limit*
Conceptual	Forms and differentiates concepts	Body, motion, time, possibility	Concepts do not guarantee knowledge of essences
Propositional	Produces and evaluates assent	Claims about the structure of reality	Assent depends on epistemic conditions
Critical	Tests inherited doctrines	Critique of Avicennan physics and psychology	Criticism may leave several options open
Modal	Distinguishes necessity and contingency	Why this cosmos rather than another?	Logical possibility is not empirical actuality
Causal	Seeks explanatory grounds	Origin, change and determination	Natural explanation is not ultimate self-sufficiency
Theological	Relates cosmic dependence to God	Arguments for a Creator / Necessary Existent	Divine reality exceeds complete conceptual capture

The results indicate that al-Rāzī's rationality is best understood as critical, synthetic, and multi-level. It is critical because he does not accept Avicennan doctrines merely on philosophical authority. It is synthetic because logic, physics, psychology, and theology are repeatedly brought into a common argumentative field. It is multi-level because the same inquiry can move from sensory experience to propositions, from propositions to modal distinctions, and from physical order to metaphysical dependence. This interpretation helps avoid two reductive readings. The first presents al-Rāzī as a theologian whose commitment to revelation simply overrides philosophical reasoning. The second treats him as an Avicennan philosopher with theological additions. His actual practice is more dynamic. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that he critically revises Avicennan logic and metaphysics while reshaping the curriculum of the sciences [1, 3].

His works contributed to a post-classical intellectual culture in which kalām absorbed philosophical techniques without losing its theological identity. The unity of the soul is particularly important in this respect. If cognition belongs to a unified subject, the boundary between sensation and intellection becomes less mechanical than in a strict faculty model.

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Reason can integrate particulars and universals because the same soul is related to different objects and cognitive contents. This strengthens the epistemological basis for a unified inquiry into nature. Al-Rāzī's relational theory of cognition also gives his cosmology a realist orientation. The mind is directed toward things themselves, not merely toward mental replicas. Yet his critique of definitions prevents this realism from becoming epistemic absolutism. Reality is knowable, but human conceptual schemes do not automatically exhaust it. His modal analysis has a further philosophical consequence. Asking whether the world or its properties could have been otherwise transforms cosmology into a question about explanation. The contingency of the actual world is not simply a statement of ignorance; it becomes a rationally articulated reason to seek a ground beyond the contingent configuration itself. This is where philosophical cosmology becomes natural theology.

From a contemporary perspective, it would be misleading to present al-Rāzī as anticipating modern cosmology in a scientific sense. His universe is discussed within medieval physics, metaphysics, and theology, and his arguments do not employ experimental methods or mathematical models comparable to modern science. Nevertheless, his method exhibits philosophically enduring features: comparison of explanatory alternatives, attention to modal distinctions, criticism of inherited concepts, and explicit reflection on the limits of knowledge. A further point concerns the relation between reason and revelation. Modern discussions sometimes assume that the two must function as competing authorities. Al-Rāzī's work shows another possibility: rational inquiry can be embedded within a theological worldview while retaining genuine critical force. His sustained objections to Avicenna, his revisions of kalām positions and the complexity of his Qurʾanic exegesis demonstrate that theological commitment does not eliminate intellectual contestation. This is particularly evident in the structure of his major summae. Rather than treating metaphysics solely as discourse about God, al-Rāzī organizes general metaphysical questions through systematic disjunctions before turning to philosophical theology [1].

The architecture of the sciences itself therefore expresses a conviction that disciplined rational analysis has a legitimate domain. The study also reveals a productive epistemic humility. Because definitions may fail to disclose essences and because the acquisition of knowledge is not wholly under voluntary control, the rational investigator must distinguish demonstrative confidence from conceptual familiarity. Such humility does not entail skepticism. It encourages careful argumentation precisely because the human knower is fallible. Accordingly, the phrase 'knowledge of the universe' in al-Rāzī should be interpreted broadly. It includes knowledge of physical structures, but also knowledge of the conditions of intelligibility: modality, dependence, causation, cognition and divine agency. The cosmos is not merely a collection of objects. It is an ordered field whose existence and determinate character generate philosophical questions.

Conclusion

The study concludes that reason occupies a foundational but non-autonomous place in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's philosophical-theological knowledge of the universe. It organizes concepts, evaluates propositions, compares rival physical theories, analyzes necessity and contingency, investigates causal dependence and formulates arguments concerning the metaphysical ground of the cosmos. Al-Rāzī's epistemology simultaneously empowers and limits rational inquiry. His distinction between conceptualization and assent provides a structure for logical knowledge, while his critique of essential definitions warns against confusing conceptual clarification with exhaustive access to reality. His psychology places cognitive acts within the unity of the soul, and his relational account of cognition preserves the external world as the direct object of knowledge. In natural philosophy, reason operates through critical comparison rather than passive reception of Aristotelian or Avicennan doctrine. In metaphysics, it transforms the observable features of the world into questions of contingency,

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origination and explanation. In theology and Qurʾanic exegesis, rational analysis becomes a means of articulating the dependence of the universe on divine agency without ceasing to examine the logical coherence of particular interpretations. Thus, the distinctive feature of al-Rāzī's heritage is not a simple reconciliation of 'faith and reason' but a sophisticated intellectual ecology in which philosophy, kalām and revelation continually test and reshape one another. Reason is indispensable for knowing the universe, yet its highest function includes recognizing the boundaries of human conceptual mastery. This combination of rational rigor and epistemic restraint explains the enduring significance of al-Rāzī for the history of Islamic philosophy and theology.

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