AL-RĀZĪ’S DISCUSSION ON THE MEANING OF SPEECH [KALĀM] & ITS ORIGINS: INTRODUCTION & TRANSLATION

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Headnote:

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was a Persian Sunnī of Arab origins. A Shāfiʿī1 and Ashʿarī2 scholar, he was born in Rey, Iran on 544/1150 and passed away in modern-day Afghanistan on 604/1210. Al-Rāzī authored more than a hundred works on a variety of disciplines, including but not limited to exegesis [tafsīr], principles of Islamic jurisprudence [uṣūl al-fiqh], theology [kalām], logic [manṭiq], astronomy [falak], cosmology, physics, anatomy, and medicine. Al-Rāzī wrote poetry in Arabic and Persian. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was a famous preacher and was also known for his debates with several scholars as well as having established good ties with local rulers. The following quote perhaps indicates the extent to which al-Rāzī was sought after, “It was said that wherever he rode, 300 of his students - who were jurists - accompanied him on foot.”3 He was acclaimed and attested for one of the most comprehensive kalām-oriented Qur’ānic exegesis works entitled: Keys to the Unseen [Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb] or The Prominent Volume of Exegesis [Kitāb al-Tafsīr al-Kabūr]. As stated, al-Rāzī was driven and motivated in many of his arguments by some of the foundations of kalām polemics which seems to have shaped his discourse on theology and even linguistics as well as literary theory. However, to sufficiently comprehend al-Rāzī’s arguments, it would be rather beneficial to examine the influence of kalām on al-Rāzī’s discourses by analysing the reason as to why it was dubbed the discipline of kalām:

1. It was named ‘Ilm al-Kalām after the argument around kalām, i.e., God’s eternal attribute of speech, which was one of the key discourses of this discipline and resulted in much contention and dispute. This led to battles and bloodshed.
2. It is because this discipline enables one to indulge in kalām, i.e., to become well-established in substantiating religious doctrines and refuting adversaries.
3. Al-Kalām is the first science that one ought to learn. It is learnt via conversing, hence the term kalām was assigned to this science and made exclusive to it.

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1 The Shāfiʿī school of thought was established by Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (died 820). He was a student of some of the prominent Muslims scholars of his era. Al-Shāfiʿī established a rudimentary legal methodology that attracted several students who, in turn, conveyed his teachings. His school of thought is followed and propagates by thousands of Muslims today.
2 In contrast with legal schools of jurisprudence, such as that of al-Shāfiʿī & al-Hanafī, a prominent theological/creedal school of thought stands out in Sunni thought, namely the Ashʿarī creedal school of thought, which was established by Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/936). His school of thought has been described as, “an attempt not only to purge Islam of all non-Islamic elements which had quietly crept into it but also to harmonize the religious consciousness with the religious thought of Islam.”
3 A. al-Adnahwī, Ṭabaqāt al-Mufassirīn (Cairo Maktabat al-ʿUlūm wa al-Ḥikam, 1997).
4. Another reason is because this science can only be established by dialogue and exchange of kalām between two parties. Contrary to other disciplines that could be studied by reflecting and reading books.

5. It is one of the most controversial and contentious of disciplines, hence there is a dire need to undergo kalām with the opponents and refute them.

6. Compared to all the other scientists it is the most significant of all discourses. For instance, the preponderant of two arguments is said to be: the kalām.

In one of his papers on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s contributions to scholastic theology, John A. Haywood sheds light on the extent to which kalām as well as al-Rāzī’s loyalty to the Ashʿarite theological school influenced his writings. He notes:⁴

He was a master of subtle argument, based on Greek philosophy and logic, and full of syllogisms. This was one of his main weapons in dialectics, though he naturally also used traditional material such as the Qur’an and the ḥadīth. He was thus able to make his opponents feel inferior and even stupid, when he was able to demonstrate the illogicality of their arguments. Yet the very means he used caused many to regard him as basically a critic and doubter, a master in putting his finger on the key point of an abstruse problem, yet unable to bring the matter to any final conclusion. Further, though at heart a reconciler in Islam, an Ashʿarite who avoided extremes.

A presentation of the selected text:⁵

Al-Rāzī’s discussion on the origins of speech, languages and terminologies is highly relevant to field of linguistics & literary studies, as the author attempts to explore the nature of speech and in which manner words, sentences and phrases have been established. Al-Rāzī explores theoretical arguments and attempts to tackle a few across different books. However, one of the most important works on sharīʿa and uṣūl al-fiqh is al-Rāzī’s fiqh manual What can be Obtained in the Science of

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the Principles of Jurisprudence [al-Maḥṣūl fī Ḫīm Uṣūl al-Fīqḥ]. It is one of the most well-known and utilised texts in Shāfiʿī fiqh in general, and uṣūl al-fiqh more specifically. Al-Rāzī’s Maḥṣūl derives from four key uṣūl books: al-Juwaynī’s The Evident Proof [al-Burḥān], al-Ghazālī’s The Purified Book of Legal Theory [al-Mustaṣfā], al-Hamadhānī’s The Covenant [al-ʿAhd] and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥusayn al-Biṣrī’s The Reliable Corpus [al-Muʿtamad]. As an uṣūl text, al-Maḥṣūl delves into several linguistic topics such as: literalism [ḥaqīqa] and figurative [majāz] methodologies and their categories as they appear in Qurʾān, ḥadīth and poetry as well as its investigation into linguistic derivation [ishtiqāq], synonymity [tarāduf] and an array of other topics. The text deals with philosophy of language, more in particular, with the foundations of language, and this was of immense importance, as language is the key to understand the divine revelations, particularly the Arabic language for understanding the Qurʾān. Al-Rāzī’s discourse delves into the relation of theology [kalām] and its relation to the notion of words [kalima], as well investigating into ‘ilm al-wad’ [semantics], on the relation between meaning and language. As a philosopher, theologian, and exegete, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s was one of the most outstanding scholars of the sixth century. However, his contributions to Islamic thought have not been fully appreciated despite his undisputed eminence.

Suggested reading:


Keywords:

Translation:⁶

The Discourse Pertaining to Languages, Comprising Nine Chapters.
Chapter One: The Holistic Rules Concerning Languages

(Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī states:) Know that this discourse either targets the nature of speech [kalām], or that which it is indicative of. Therefore, since its indication has been composed, the investigation either targets the composer [wāḍī'], the topic [mawdū'], the one for whom the topic is presented, or the path through which this indication is known.

Investigation I: Analysis of the Term Kalām.

Know that the term kalām according to us, researchers, is commonly used to refer to the sense that exists in the mind and it is also utilised in reference to the intermittent audible sounds. As regards the first definition, there is no need to investigate into it in usūl al-fiqh. Instead, the definition that relates to our discourse is the second one. As such, Abū al-Ḥasan said (about speech) that “It refers to what is composed of audible letters that are distinct and meaningful” [al-muntazim min al-hurūf al-masmū’a al-mutamayyiza al-mutawāda’ ʿalayhā]. Perhaps the following could also be added: and only if it appears from a single individual. As for our statement: composed [muntazim], know that it is among the attributes of bodies, because niẓām means composition, and this exclusively applies to bodies. Consequently, the sounds that intermittently occur to one’s hearing are likened to it. Hence, it was metaphorically labelled as: “the authored” [muʾallaf] and the composed [muntazim]. Furthermore, our saying “[composed] of letters” excludes the single letter, because linguists stated that the least of kalām is what has been outwardly or originally composed of two letters, such as saying: qi [i.e., protect], shi [i.e., report] and ‘i [i.e., understand], as they were originally qī, shī and ʿī. Therefore, it is said when they are in dual mode: qiyā and iyā, however the yā’ was omitted for the purpose of easing (the pronunciation). Our statement “audible” [masmū’a] is mentioned to exclude the written letters, and our saying “distinct” [mutamayyiza] is to exclude the sounds produced by many birds. As for our statement “meaningful” [mutawāda’ ʿalayhā], it excludes the meaningless (terms).

⁶ M. al-Rāzī, Al-Maḥṣūl fī ḫal Uṣūl al-Fiqh (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1979)
Furthermore, I previously stated: “only if it appears from a single individual” to exclude the case if every letter is uttered by more than one individual [independently]. Such as if the first person uttered the nūn (ن) from naṣara [i.e., grant victory], the second the șād [ص] and the third the rāʾ [ر]; for this is not said to be speech. Additionally, know that this definition entails two matters.

The first: is that the single word is deemed as kalām and this is the opinion of the usūl scholars. As for the grammarians, they unanimously agreed upon this (view) to be invalid. They said that the term speech strictly refers to the meaningful sentence. They also reported an explicit statement in this regard from Sībawayh. The statements of the linguists [al-nuḥāt] in a linguistic context outweigh the statements of others.

The second: the statement “the least of kalām is what has been outwardly or originally composed of two letters” is problematic and this is evidenced by the lām of ownership, the bāʾ of association and the fāʾ of succession. Because they are classed as the letters which compose a name, and each letter is a kalima [word] and each word is kalām despite it not being a composition. If you were to say that the diacritical mark (ḥaraka) is a letter, because if the diacritical mark were to be added to the letter, then the outcome would be a composition, I say [in response], this – despite it being farfetched – if we were to accept it, one problem remains. That is the yāʾ from ghulāmī [my boy], the nūn of nunation and the lām which is a definite article. As all the aforementioned are single letters that are void of any diacritical marks despite them being meaningful. Therefore, we ought to help the grammarians by saying: every utterance that technically indicates a meaning, is a word [kalima]. Therefore, this includes the letter that is devoid of the diacritical mark, the letter that has a diacritical mark as well as that which is composed of letters.

As for kalām, it is the meaningful sentence which could either be a nominal sentence, such as our saying: “Zayd is standing” or a verbal one such as our saying: “Zayd stood”. Also, it could either be composed of two sentences which is the conditional sentence. For instance, one would say: “If the sun was rising, then the day would be present”. Ibn Jinnī7 said: “Speech could no longer be classed as speech either due to a reduction or due to an addition” As for reduction, if you say: Zayd stood, then you would have omitted the word Zayd and then limited the statement to merely: stood, then this would no longer be considered as speech.

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7 Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1002) was a renowned Muslim Arabic phonetician.
As for the case of addition, if you add to that sentence a conditional term it would become: “If Zayd were to stand”, then due to this addition it will no longer be considered as speech, because it would not be meaningful unless something else is added to it.

Investigation II: Analysis into the \( Wādī \) ['Establisher']

The fact that a term denotes a meaning is either due to its own right or due to assigning a meaning to it \([\text{wa}\d']\), whether that be from God, the Exalted, or the people, or whether a portion of it from God and another from people. Hence, there are four possibilities: the first of which is the opinion of ‘Abbād b. Sulaimān al-Samīrī. The second view is that it is through revelation (from God) \([\text{tawqīf}]\), and this is Ash'arī’s opinion and that of Ibn Fūrak. The third is the view that it is by human convention \([\text{iṣṭīlāḥ}]\), and this is the view of Abū Hishām and his followers. The fourth opinion is that a portion of it is through revelation and another portion is through human convention. Here, there are two views; some opined that the establishment of languages is through human convention, and some expressed no objection to the view that it might take place through revelation.

On the other hand, some (scholars) reversed this by saying that the necessary portion by which communication is established is (attained) by revelation and the remainder is through human convention, and this is the opinion of the scholar Abū Isḥāq. As for most other scholars, they admitted that all these views are, in fact, possible, but they refrained from making a definitive judgement. Furthermore, what indicates that ‘Abbād b. Sulaimān’s view is unsound is that if a term is self-indicative of its meaning, then it would not differ at all depending on regions and nations, and all people would have (theoretically) arrived at one language. Thus, the invalidity of the implicate \([\text{lāzīm}]\) entails the invalidity of the implicans \([\text{malzūm}]\). As part of his argument, ‘Abbād claimed that had there been no relation whatsoever between the names and the nominatums \([\text{musammayāt}]\), i.e., the object or concept to which a noun refers, then specifying a particular name with specific nominatums would be impossible. However, if a relation is established between both, then this would be satisfactory. (Al-Rāzī says in) Response: if it is argued that God, the Exalted, is the establisher, then assigning one name would only apply to a single nominatum. As such, God has the power to create within people a necessary knowledge inclusive of the terms and meanings and thereafter an assignor would establish (different) meanings to those terms.
Hence, according to this opinion, the (origins of) languages are provided through revelation. So, those who opined that it is through revelation, referred to the textual resources as well as intellectual proofs as evidence. Regarding textual resources, they referred to three citations: the first of which is what God, the Exalted revealed: “And he taught Adam the names of all things”\(^8\). This indicates that all names are received through revelation. If this applies to names, then it certainly applies to verbs and letters.

Here is what could be derived from the three interpretations: the first is that no one claimed that there is any distinction whatsoever (between them). The second is that conversing with names, exclusively, is difficult and therefore the teaching of names (to Adam) must also incorporate the teaching of verbs and letters. As for the third, it is that a name is considered a name because it is an indication of the thing named. This also applies to verbs and letters, thus proving that they are also names \(asmāʾ\). As for specifying the term \(ism\) [lit. name] with certain classifications, it is due to the convention of the scholars of language \(lugha\) and grammar \(nahw\).

The second (textual reference) is that God, the Exalted, dispraised individuals for assigning names to some objects without prior revelation, this is indicated by what He, the Exalted, revealed (in meaning): “They are not but mere names that you and your forefathers have made up - a practice that God did not authorise.”\(^9\) As such, had it not been the case that the terms used were in fact assigned for other objects, then this dispraise would not have been deemed valid.

Furthermore, the third (textual reference) is what He, the Exalted, revealed (which means): “And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours.”\(^10\) It is not possible for it [i.e., the difference of \(lisān\)\(^11\)] to refer to the difference in the (physical) composition and structure of the tongues, because when (this difference) is applied to other than tongues, it would reflect a more articulate and beautiful meaning. Hence, the (literal) tongues are not inferred by this statement. So, what only remains is the difference in languages.

As for the intellectual reasoning, it is derived via two methodologies. The first of which is that human convention takes place once one informs his fellow of what is in his mind, this is only known by the means of producing terms and writings.

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\(^8\) The Qurʾān, 2:31.
\(^9\) The Qurʾān, 53:23.
\(^10\) The Qurʾān, 30:22.
\(^11\) The Arabic term “\(lisān\)” refers to both language and physical tongue.
In any case, these means are not meaningful, in their own right, except if human convention is applied. Therefore, the previous argument would apply here, and this leads to infinite regress. This leaves the possibility of revelation, and this is the sound one.\(^{12}\) The second (intellectual proof) demands that if it were through convention, this would result in lack of trust in the religious law, because they [i.e., the terms utilised] might have been associated with a meaning that is contrary to what we believed, because languages have changed. If you claim it would become widely known should the above were to happen, I say (in response) that this is based on the argument that a significant incident must become renowned, this will be refuted in the forthcoming chapter relating to reports, God willing.

Regarding those who opined that it is (exclusively) through human convention, they relied on the religious explicit texts as well as intellectual proofs. As for the text, they cited what God, the Exalted, revealed, “And We did not send any messenger except (speaking) in the language of his people”.\(^{13}\) As such, this necessitates that the language would precede the advent of the Messenger’s mission, so if the language was through revelation – and revelation only takes place after mission – this would lead to the circular argument, which is in itself impossible.

In reference to the intellectual rationale, it is as follows: if it was through revelation, then one would argue that God would create the necessary knowledge within them that He, the Exalted, assigned the terms to specific meaning, or that He did not. According to the first [argument], one would either claim that God creates that knowledge in a sane or an insane individual. It would be invalid to assert that He, the Exalted, would create it in a sane person because the knowledge that He, the Exalted, assigned that term to that meaning would necessitate knowing about God. So, if that knowledge was said to be necessary knowledge ['ilm ʿdarūrī], then knowing God would also be necessary. This is because, if one had the necessary knowledge about the attribute of an entity then it would be more worthy for one to have the necessary knowledge about the entity. Therefore, if knowing God, the Exalted, was said to be necessary, then no one would be held accountable, but this is invalid since every sane person must be accountable. Furthermore, it is invalid to assert that He created it within sane persons because it is far-fetched for someone who is insane to acquire the knowledge about these extraordinary languages as well as their rare and elegant compositions.

\(^{12}\) This clearly indicates that al-Rāzī himself was in favour of option 2, i.e., that the original languages were revealed by God.

\(^{13}\) The Qurʾān, 14:4.
As for the second probability: which is that God did not create the necessary knowledge through which specific terms are assigned to specific meanings, in this case the listener would not know that they have been assigned for those meanings except through an alternative channel. The argument pertaining to this case resembles the first argument, thereby either leading to infinite regress or resorting to human convention. This is the summary of what Ibn Mattuwayh relied upon in (his book:) *The Reminder* [al-Tadhkira]. Abū Ishāq refuted his statement by arguing that human convention cannot take place except that everyone would inform his companion of what is in his mind. Hence, if he informs him of another conventional matter, this will lead to infinite regress. Therefore, it is confirmed that, at the first instance, it must have been via revelation. After that, it is possible that many languages might come into being through human convention. In fact, this is known by necessity. Do you not notice that people in each era converse with terms that they had not uttered prior to that? In conclusion, these are the proofs stated by the parties who made a firm judgement on one of the possibilities.

The response to those who have clung to what God, the Exalted, revealed: “And he taught Adam the names of all things”,¹⁴ is to say: why is it not possible that what is meant by teaching is that He, the Exalted, inspired to him that these terms are needed, and He provided him with the sciences through which he was able to establish this composition?¹⁵

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¹⁴ The Qurʾān, 2:31.
¹⁵ Overall, al-Rāzī methodology reveals his commitment to the Ashʿarite argumentative discourse. As such, he remains loyal to utilising intellectual reasoning in support of religious texts. Certainly, parallel to this is the Ashʿarite intellectual method to clear Allāh from any of the attributes of His creation. The argument entails that anything that is bound by time and space, needs them – in other words: the one who occupies place needs that place, and he one who is in need of others, is not God, therefore God exists without a place.