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The Epistle of Yaʿqūb ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī on the Device for Dispelling Sorrows

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ABSTRACT *Although less technical philosophically than many of al-Kindī's known treatises, this Epistle remains basic for understanding the spirit that underlies his thinking. Socratic, yet very Kindian in spirit, this Epistle displays its author's tendency to harmonize Greek philosophy and Islam, particularly as this relates to ethics, and his belief in man's free will and reason. To him, sorrows may be caused either by our own actions or by the actions of others. It is up to us to choose to do or not to do what saddens us. Through reason we can eliminate some of the causes of sorrow when we perceive the intellectual world, and derive from it things desired. Though this Epistle has a significant share of the linguistic and stylistic complexities characteristic of al-Kindī's writing, it is hoped that the present translation will facilitate its comprehension. Its title in Arabic is* Risāla Yaʿqūb b. Isḥāq al-Kindī Fī al-Ḥīla li-Dafʿ al-Aḥzān.

Introduction

The manuscript of this Epistle is in Aya Sofya in Istanbul (no. 4832, folios 23a–26b). It was first edited and published with an Italian translation by H. Ritter and R. Walzer, 'Uno scritto morale inedito di al-Kindī', *Atti Della Reale Accademia Nazionale Dei Lincei, Anno CCCXXXV, Memorie Della Classe Di Scienze Morali, Storiche E Filologiche*, Series 6, Vol. 8 (1938), pp. 5–63. There is also a copy of the Aya Sofya manuscript in Cairo at the Institute of Arabic Manuscripts, *Maʿhad al-Makhṭūṭāt al-ʿArabiyya*, affiliated with the Arab League (no. 88, *falsafa*, folios 174b–178a of no. 111, *tawḥīd*); unfortunately, this copy is in a poor condition. The translation presented here is based on the editions of Ritter and Walzer, of Mājid Fakhrī, *Al-Fikr al-Akhlāqī al-ʿArabī: Al-Falāsifa al-Khuluqiyyūn* (Beirut: Al-Ahliyya li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzīʿ, 1979), pp. 16–26 and of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī in his *Rasā'il Falsafiyya li'l-Kindī wa'l-Fārābī wa-Ibn Bāja wa-Ibn ʿAdī* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1980), pp. 6–32. The differences among these editions will be noted where relevant. Charles E. Butterworth states that there is a 1962 edition of this Epistle by Muḥammad Ṭurayḥī, though this translator has not been able to locate it. Butterworth does not mention Mājid Fakhrī's edition. For a detailed discussion of this Epistle, see Butterworth 'Al-Kindī and the Beginning of Islamic Philosophy', in Charles E. Butterworth (ed.), *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.

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11–60. See also Thérèse-Anne Druart, 'Al-Kindi's Ethics', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 47 (1993), pp. 328–357.

Translation[1]

May God, oh laudable brother, preserve you from every error (*zalla*),[2] guard you from every shortcoming, and grant you success in the paths that lead to His satisfaction and abundant reward. I understand your request [to be that I] clarify [those] statements that [help to] overcome sorrows, warning against their debilitating effects and providing protection against the pain of their domination. The like of your virtuous soul and of just dispositions disdains from acquiring vices and asks for fortification against their pain and the tyranny of their rule. I will describe what I hope will be sufficient for you, and may God protect you from all worries.

For any pain, the causes of which are not known, no remedy exists. Therefore we ought to clarify what constitutes sorrow and its causes so that the existence of its remedies would be readily apparent and easy to use. We thus say: sorrow is psychological pain, occurring due to the loss of an object of love or the missing of things desired. If the causes of sorrow have become apparent from what has been said [to the effect that] it is an occurrence due to the loss of something loved or to the missing of something desired, we must therefore investigate whether it is possible for anyone to be free of these causes. For it is not possible for anyone to attain all that he desires or to be safe from losing all things loved. [This is] because constancy and permanence are nonexistent in the world of generation and corruption in which we live; rather constancy and permanence exist by necessity only in the world of the intellect, the perception of which is possible for us. If we do not wish to lose things loved or miss things desired, we ought to perceive the intellectual world and derive our loved things, acquisitions and desired things from it. If we do that, then we are safe from having someone usurp our acquisitions or having some hand take possession of them from us or being deprived of what we love of them, since these [intellectual] things are not touched by deformity or affected by death. And we will not miss what we seek since intellectual things sought after [logically] follow one another, neither moving nor ceasing to be; thus they are attainable and not transitory.[3]

As for sensory possessions, sensory objects of love and sensory desires, they are available to everyone and attainable by any hand. It is not possible to safeguard against their decay, extinction and change. All this, after the closeness of which has been [the source] of comfort, [now] becomes [the source] of desolation; after the trust in their obedience they become disobedient, and after advancing they will be retreating. Since the nature [of a thing] cannot be what is not in that nature, thus if we desire of the states and the dispositions of shared things that do not contain something belonging specifically to one [individual] rather than to another, being rather the possession of everyone, that they belong specifically to us, [and if we wish] from [the states] of the corruptible things that

[1] For insightful criticism and helpful comments on a draft of this translation, I am indebted to my mentor, Professor Michael E. Marmura. He, of course, bears no responsibility for any shortcomings in this translation.
[2] Ritter & Walzer have *dhilla*, 'humiliation'.
[3] The word *fā'ita*, can be translated 'missing', but in this context 'transitory' seems preferable.

they be not corruptible, that from those advancing and retreating to be only advancing, and that those which are transitory in every case to be constant in every case, then we are seeking from nature what is not in [that] nature. And he who seeks what is not in nature seeks what is not existent. And whoever seeks what is not existent will be denied his quest, and whoever is denied his quest will be unhappy. Thus he who desires transitory things and that his acquisitions and loved objects be of them will be unhappy. [But] one whose object of desires is fulfilled will be happy.[4]

We must therefore take care [to ensure] that we are happy and guard against being miserable. Rather, our desires and the things we love ought to be what is accessible to us. We should not regret what we have missed and [should] seek among sensory things only what is accessible. Indeed, we should be [such that] if we perceive in [our] mind the objects of love enjoyed by people, I mean [perceive them] to the extent needed in the soul to confirm their form, during the period allotted [for their transient existence] and to [allow for] the production of their like, [to establish, moreover,] that which repels pain [from the soul] and bequeaths to it rest, we would treat [what is accessible to us] in the noblest[5] manner, to the extent needed. We must neither long for them prior to our touching and observing them, nor, after their departure from us, burden[6] ourselves with regret or preoccupation of mind. For such [is the disposition that] belongs to the morals of noble kings. They do not [longingly] anticipate an arrival nor [regretfully] bid farewell to whatever departs; rather, they enjoy everything that is a [present object] of observation to them with the firmest action, and with the clearest [indication] of not needing it. The opposite of this are the manners of the low populace and those of mean spirit and stinginess. They would receive [with anticipation] every coming and bid farewell [with sorrow] to every departing. It is fitting of those endowed with intellect not to choose the manners of the low populace with meanness of spirit rather than the manners of sublime kings.

In the same vein we say: If what we desire is not existent, then we ought to desire what is existent. We should not choose the permanence of sorrow rather than the permanence of happiness. And he who is rendered sorrowful by the missing of things desired and the nonbeing of the nonexistent, his sorrow will never come to an end because in every state in his life he will be losing a loved thing or missing a desired thing. Sorrow and happiness are opposites that do not abide in the soul together. So if he is sorrowful, he is not happy; and if he is happy, he is not sorrowful. Therefore we should not be sorrowful for [missing] things desired or losing things loved, and make ourselves, by means of good habit, content with every situation so as to be always happy.

And so we can see that this exists and is apparent in the habits [of people]. We can also see this in people's situations and the differences in their desires and demands which make it clear. We see that he who enjoys food, drink, women, clothes and similar sensory pleasures is happy and delighted with them and sees everything else as shortcomings and disasters. We also see that

[4] Implicit in this statement is that true fulfilment of desire is the attainment of intellectual desires that are permanent.

[5] Fakhr̄ has *al-ajall*, 'sublime'; Ritter & Walzer have *al-ajmal*, 'graceful'. This may be simply a printing error, because Fakhrī has not noted it.

[6] *Nutbiʿ*, literally, 'overtake'.

he who is fond of gambling—despite the plundering of his money, the loss in vain of his days and the successive sorrows resulting from his gambling—is happy and delighted with his situation, and anything that contradicts or keeps him from it is a shortcoming and a disaster. We further see the scoundrel (*shāṭir*),[7] whose vicious methods and rough measures [cause] monstrous and brutal injuries as beating with a whip, cutting off parts [of the body], multiple and painful injuries, and continuing war until his demands end with [his] crucifixion. He regards these injuries as glorious and honourable, delights in them and [sees] whatever opposes them as disasters and shortcomings of [good] health.

We also find the effeminate with scandalous deficiencies and disgraceful manners, [such as] the deformation of the appearance by pulling out the hair and imitating women's shapes, which everyone [else] finds distasteful and every intellect rejects. [Such an effeminate] is delighted, cheerful and proud and sees himself as having surpassed all others who have been deprived and have missed the greatest fortune. He also sees himself as favoured over them with the most special happiness and the most honourable blessing and sees whatever opposes this [view] as shortcoming and disaster.

It is clear then that the hated and loved sensory things are not inherent in [human] nature but are [acquired through] habit and frequent use. Therefore if the way to using happiness from what we have seen, and forgetting what we have missed, is easy and clear by habit, as we have described, then we have to make ourselves accustomed to that and train ourselves until this becomes an inherent habit and an acquired manner; I mean to acquire that manner if it is not actually inherent in us from the beginning of our habit so that we can have a pleasant way of living all of our life.

If [in the case of the body] it is incumbent on us to dispel physical pains by distasteful medicines, cauterization, amputation, bandaging, dieting and similar things that heal bodies, and we endure the great cost [paid] to the one who heals such illnesses, then if sorrow is a pain of the soul, the superiority of the interests of the soul, and healing it of its pains over the interests of the body and healing it of its pains is like the superiority of the soul over the body, since the soul is the leader and the body is what is led; the soul is eternal and the body is temporal.[8] [Then if this be the case,] the interests of the eternal and the concern for correcting and straightening it are absolutely better and preferable to remedying and straightening the temporal which is imperfect by nature. Therefore straightening and healing the soul of its illnesses is much more required from us than remedying our bodies, since we are what we are through our souls, not through our bodies. The physical is common to everybody, but the animality of every living creature is in its soul. Our souls are personal to us and the interests of our personality are more important for us than the interests of the things strange to us. Our bodies are tools through which the deeds of our souls

[7] *Shāṭir* (plural *shuṭṭār*) means 'villain' or 'brigand'. The *shuṭṭār* were a group of outlaws who appeared in Baghdad and al-Karkh and created much havoc and fear among people through their vicious ways; no matter what they did, no one dared to refuse or oppose them, even when they kidnapped women and boys. Their deeds motivated the appearance in 201/816 of al-Muṭṭawwiʿa who led the fight against them; Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922), *Tārīkh al-Umam wa 'l-Mulūk* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988), Vol. 5, p. 136.

[8] The order of the clauses of this long sentence has been changed for the sake of clarity.

are made manifest. Thus remedying our souls is much more essential than remedying our tools.

Therefore we should endure in remedying our souls through repugnancy of treatment, its hardships and bearing its manifold burdens which we bear in remedying our bodies, although remedying our souls is less repugnant[9] and much less burdensome than what is involved in remedying our bodies. [This is] because remedying ourselves lies in the strength of the steadfastness (*al-ʿazm*)[10] of undertaking what rectifies us, not in a medicinal liquid nor in the pain of iron or fire [in cauterization] nor in spending money [for remedies], but in forcing the soul [to follow] commendable habits in the smallest affairs, the adherence to which is easy, [from which point] it is elevated to the larger ones. If [the soul] becomes accustomed to this, it will be elevated in its adherence to that which is greater than this in continuous steps so that the habit in adhering to the greater thing becomes as necessary a concomitant as the adherence of the habit it has in adhering to the small ones, from the smallest to the largest issues. For the habit becomes easy, following what we have described, and with this the endurance of things missed becomes easy and there will be solace for things lost.

From among the easy remedies for that is to think of sorrow and to divide it into its [different] kinds. Hence we say that from which sorrow comes must be either our action or the action of others. If it is our action, then we ought not to do that which saddens us; thus if we do what saddens us, when stopping doing it is our prerogative, since acting and restraining are our prerogatives, we are then either doing what we want or what we do not want. If we do that which we want, and do not want to be saddened, then we will desire what we do not desire. This is a characteristic of one who has lost his mind; therefore we would be devoid of our minds. If what saddens us is of others' doing, then dispelling it is either up to us or not up to us. If dispelling it is up to us, we should dispel it and not be saddened. If dispelling it is not up to us, then we should not be sad before the occurrence of the saddening [matter], for perhaps the one whose prerogative it is to dispel it will dispel it before it occurs; and perhaps the one who causes sorrows will not sadden [us] and will not do what we fear. If we become sad before the occurrence of what is saddening, we would have acquired for ourselves the sadness that may not occur, because the one who causes sorrow may refrain from causing sorrows, or because the one who can dispel it may dispel it from us. Therefore we would have acquired sorrow for ourselves which no one had given to us; whoever saddens himself, harms himself, and he who harms himself is ignorant, crude, extremely unjust, having inflicted harm on himself. If he does this to someone else, he is ignorant and unjust; therefore doing it to himself is much worse. So we should not accept to be the most ignorant of the ignorant, the crudest of the crude, and the most unjust of all the unjust. If sorrow is inevitable, then what results from it, when what saddens occurs, is sufficient [for us to worry about] before[11] we proceed with [feeling sorrow] prior to the occurrence of what saddens; [feeling sorrow] before the occurrence of the saddening [thing] is a kind of evil

[9] *Aqall bashāʿa*, literally, 'less of repugnancy'.

[10] In his epistle *Fī Ḥudūd al-Ashyāʾ wa-Rusūmihā*, 'On Definitions and Descriptions of Things', al-Kindī defines the word *al-ʿazm* as *thabāt al-raʾy ʿalā al-fiʿl*, 'the steadfastness of the thought to act'.

[11] Fakhrī has changed the word *qabl*, 'before' into *lā yanfī*, 'does not negate'. This does not fit the meaning. Fakhrī states that the change was suggested by one of the publishers.

and low.[12] Also [feeling sorrow] at the time of the occurrence of what saddens us must not be felt before [trying] to dispel it, since there is harm in it, as we have stated, and dispelling it is a duty that must happen inevitably. Every sorrow is necessarily dispelled by solace in some period of time if the sorrowful one does not die from the sorrow or at the beginning of the sorrow.

If[13] the obliteration of sorrow is a natural disposition, since everything in the world of generation [and corruption] is transitory [and] not permanent in the particulars of things, then we should employ any device to soothe and shorten the period of sorrow. If we are unable to do that, we will be unable to do anything else,[14] [namely] dispelling the misfortune by pushing it away from ourselves. And this is the mark of the ignorant, miserable, crude and cruel; because the one with whom distress continues is cruel. The most miserable of all the miserable is he who is unable to push distress away from himself in whatever way he can. And we should not accept being miserable when we are able to be happy.

One of the good devices for this is to remember the things that saddened us, which we have long forgotten, and the things that saddened others, whose sorrows and their solace from them we have witnessed, and to compare what saddens us with what saddened us in the past, and the things that sadden which we have witnessed, and the manner in which they ended with solace. From this we will derive great strength in consolation as that with which Alexander, son of Philip, the Macedonian king, consoled his mother when he was dying. He wrote to her, among other things: 'Think! Oh Mother of Alexander, that all that is in the world of generation and corruption is ephemeral, and that your son has not accepted for himself the disposition of little kings. [Therefore] do not accept for yourself when he dies the dispositions of little mothers of kings. And order the construction of a great city when you receive the news of Alexander['s death] and send for people to be assembled for you in all the cities of *Lūbya, Arfā*, and *Asya*[15] on a certain day in that city for eating, drinking and merriment. And order that it be announced that anyone who has been afflicted by a disaster should not come so that the obsequies of Alexander will be [accompanied] by happiness, contrary to the obsequies of other people which are [accompanied] by sorrow.'

When she ordered this, no one came at the time which she fixed, so she said: 'Why is it that people stayed away in spite of what we offered?' Then it was said to her: 'You ordered that no one who had suffered any disaster should come, and all the people had been inflicted by disasters, so no one has come.' Then she said: 'Oh Alexander! How much your end looks like your beginning! You desired to console me for the disaster of [losing] you with the perfect condolence, since I am not the first[16] to [suffer] disasters and I am not singled out by them from any [other] human being.'

[12] Badawī does not have *wa'l-khasīs*, 'and low'.
[13] Following Fakhrī, changing *idh* to *idhā*.
[14] Ritter & Walzer, Fakhrī, and Badawī change *ghayrih* into *ghayrinā*. I fail to see any need to do so.
[15] That is, Africa, Europe, and Asia. The word for 'Europe' in the copy of the manuscript I have is not clear. Ritter & Walzer, Fakhrī, and Badawī have *Arfā*. Yaqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977), Vol. 1, p. 287, writes *Awrafft*, stating that he found it vocalized thus in the handwriting of al-Bayrūnī.
[16] Ritter & Walzer have *mubdiʿ*, Fakhrī changes it to *bi-mubdiʿ*, and Badawī changes it to *bi-bidʿ*. Badawī's emendation is followed here because it fits best the syntactic and semantic context. See Qur'ān 46:9 for the meaning of *bidʿ*.

We also have to remember that everything we have missed or lost, has [also] been missed and lost by very many people. All of them accepted its being missed and lost, [becoming thereafter] clearly happy, far removed from sorrow. For he whose child has died, or who has no children, will [find] many people similar to him. Among them there might be one who did not have [any] children and is happy, and there might be one whose child has died, who has forgotten [his loss] and is [also] happy. The same happens with money, with all worldly, sensory possessions, and with all the desires of human beings. Therefore sorrow is by convention, not by nature; because if we find someone who has been deprived of a possession, he will be sorrowful, while many who do not have money are not sorrowful. Hence he has created that sorrow for himself, in place of what he has been deprived of or has missed. Therefore we should not create for ourselves a bad thing since sorrow [comes] from badness as we have stated.

He who creates for himself something bad is devoid of mind, and we should not be devoid of our minds because this would be the ultimate in lowliness. Because there is no difference between him who has lost his mind and the irrational animals. Rather, they are better than he is. Because each one of them has a timed, inherent and necessary property at the beginning [of its life], and it is accustomed to it in all its states. As for the one who has lost his mind, there is neither organization nor regularity in his deeds. [His deeds] reflect the confusion and the imagination of the mind, and we should be ashamed of being in this low state for he who exhibits it will be [the object] of sympathy by the rational and of laughter by the imprudent.

We also should bear in mind that if we desire not to be afflicted by a disaster, then we desire that we absolutely do not exist, because disasters exist due to the decay of things that are [subject to] decay. If there were no decay, there would be no being.[17] Therefore if we desire that there be no disasters, then we would have desired that the world of generation and corruption should also not exist in nature. Thus if we desire what is not in nature, then we desire what is nonexistent; and he who desires what is nonexistent will be deprived of his desire, and he who is deprived of his desire will be miserable. We should be ashamed of and disdain such a disposition, I mean ignorance and misery; for one of them, I mean ignorance, yields meanness, and the other, I mean misery, yields humiliation and malice.

We should [further] bear in mind that all the things attainable[18] are common to all people. They are close to us, [but] we are no more entitled to them than are others, and he who conquers them possesses them as long as he controls them.[19]

As for the things which are ours and not shared with others, they are not attainable by others and are possessed only by us. These are the acquisition of ourselves from the goodness of the soul. These are the ones for the loss of which we have an excuse to feel sorrow when we lose them from our souls. But for what is not ours, except through change, it will not be good on our part to feel sorrow about them, because he who feels sorrow that people should not own what is theirs by nature is envious. And we should not identify ourselves with

[17] The word *kā'in*, here translated 'being', has to be read in the context of the Aristotelian concept of generation and corruption where *kā'in* means 'generated being'.
[18] *Allatī taṣil ilayhā al-aydī*, literally, 'which hands can reach'.
[19] The sense is that he who wins them has no natural claim to them.

envy since it is the worst of evils. For he who desires that enemies be afflicted with evil loves evil, and he who loves evil is a scoundrel, and even more evil is he who desires that his friend be afflicted with evil. He who desires to deprive his friend of what he [the friend] longs to possess, and its acquisition is considered good according to him, desires for his friend a situation that he regards as evil. Thus he desires evil for friends. And he who desires that he alone possess [things], which are [also] for others to possess, then desires that no one, neither enemies nor friends, acquire possessions. Hence he who feels sorrow that someone else should acquire [these things] is envious, and he should not accept this meanness.

We also should bear in mind that all that we have of common possessions is a borrowing from a lender, the Creator of the possessions, great be His praise, Who may reclaim His loan whenever He wishes and give it to anyone He wishes. For if He had not given it to anyone He chooses, it would not have come to us at all. And we may think that if He takes it from us by the hands of the enemies that He is harming us. We should remember that it is up to the Lender to take back what He lent, and to take it back by the hands of whomever He chooses. Thus there is no shame or disgrace for us in this. But there is shame and disgrace for us to be sorrowful if the borrowings are taken back. For these are of the manners of those who are greedy and stingy and of bad discernment. He who has been lent something may think it is his own, but this does not show gratitude; the least that [one] must do in gratitude for what he was lent is to return the borrowed thing [if the lender wishes to reclaim it] with a generous spirit and delight and [to respond quickly] to the desire of the lender in reclaiming it. Thus he who feels sorrowful in returning what he was lent is ungrateful. Accordingly we should be ashamed of ourselves for this attitude which departs from justice. We should [also] be ashamed of giving silly, childish[20] excuses for our sorrow for the lender's taking it back. Thus we must not say that we are sorrowful because the lender took back by the hands of our enemies what he lent us, because it is not necessary that the messenger of the lender [engaged] in reclaiming his loan should be as we like in the manner of his love towards us and the time [of his coming]. Since this is not necessary, we should not be sorrowful because of the difference of the messenger's appearance to us, for this is the manner of children and of all those who lack discernment.

We should also bear in mind that if the lender does not reclaim the most precious of what he had lent us, but the least of what he had lent us, then he has done us the utmost good, and we should be delighted with the greatest joy in having the best[21] of the noble loan remain with us and not be sad for losing what he has reclaimed from us. [This is so] since it is incumbent [on us], even if he were to reclaim all of what he had lent, that we not be sorrowful but delighted, for our delight is [part of] thanking him and agreeing with him for his love, since he has left the best and greatest [of our borrowings], I mean those which no other hand touches and no one shares with us. [We should also] return to ourselves,[22] even though we desire to keep what has been reclaimed. We say

[20] *Ṣibyāniyya*, literally, 'boyish'.

[21] *Zīna*, literally, 'ornament'.

[22] This is a Neoplatonic injunction we find in the *Theology of Aristotle* (wrongly designated as such, but with which al-Kindī was well-acquainted, for he encouraged its translation) and in Proclus, *Fi Mahd al-Khayr (Liber de Causis)* and in Avicenna's *Ishārāt* to the effect that we must return and contemplate our soul, making our soul the object of our noesis. See ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Aflūṭīn ʿind al-ʿArab* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1955), p. 22.

that if he had taken back the smallest and the least valuable part, he had left the most and the best as long as we live.

We should bear in mind that if it is incumbent on us to be sorrowful for the things that are lost and missed, then we must be [both] always sorrowful and not sorrowful at all. And this is an outrageous contradiction. This is because if the cause of sorrow is losing and missing possessions that are out of our hands,[23] it is hateful that sorrow would afflict us, and its cause being what we have mentioned, then if we do not have a possession and do not seek it, no sorrow would afflict us, since neither its loss nor its being missed would happen to us. Thus we should not possess [things] so as not to be sorrowful at all. If we should not possess, and without possessing we would [still] be sorrowful, then sorrow forever would be inevitable if we did not possess [things]. Hence lasting sorrow is inevitable if we either possess or do not possess. Therefore if we do not want to be sorrowful forever, we should not be sorrowful at all, neither if we possess nor do not possess, for all of it is a contradiction and a conclusion contrary to truth.[24]

Therefore it is not necessary to be sorrowful, and the rational man should neither think about nor use what is not necessary, especially when it is harmful and painful. But we must reduce possessions, since their loss or nonexistence, being out of our hands, is the cause of sorrows, which come from [possessions] alone. It is related about the Athenian Socrates that it was said to him: 'Why is it that you are not sorrowful?' He responded: 'Because I do not possess anything for the loss of which I will be sorrowful.'

It is also said about Nero, the Roman king, that someone gave him a gift of a uniquely crafted, precious, crystal dome, and that it was presented to him while he was receiving a group of people, among whom was a philosopher of [Nero's] time.[25] He [Nero] was so delighted with it, and the appreciation of its beauty by those present so great, that he turned to the philosopher and asked him: 'What do you say about this dome?' His response was: 'I say that it reveals poverty in you and indicates a great disaster known to you.' [Thereupon] Nero said to him, 'How is that?' The philosopher replied: 'Because if you lose it, then it is hopeless for you ever to own its like; thus owning it displays your poverty in [owning] its like. If any damage happens to it and you lose it, it will introduce a great disaster to you.' This statement, or in words similar in meanings, is related. It is also said that the situation developed as the philosopher [had foreseen]. The king went on a picnic during the springtime to some nearby islands and ordered that the dome be carried with what was transported and be put in his recreational area. The boat on which it was carried sank and [the dome] could not be recovered.[26] Thus because of that, a great disaster, recognized by everyone present, befell the king. [Though] he did his best to get its

[23] *Khārija ʿannā*, literally, 'external to us'. This translation is used repeatedly; hence this note applies wherever the phrase 'out of our hands' appears.

[24] Al-Kindi uses *khulf*, which he uses elsewhere as a synonym of *munāqaḍa*, 'contradiction', but he may be using it here in reference to *qiyās al-khulf*, where if one of the premises is known to be true, the conclusion is valid, but untrue. In this way the second premise, usually the opponent's, is proven false.

[25] The philosopher was Seneca, the tutor of Nero, who was forced to commit suicide because he was implicated in a conspiracy against Nero.

[26] Reading *yuqdar*, passive, not *yaqdir*.

like, he died before he obtained it. Accordingly we say: 'He who desires that his disasters be reduced has to reduce his possessions of the things that are out of his hands.' It has [further] been said about the wise Socrates that one day he was staying in a broken jar in the camp where they were. An artist was present [when Socrates] said among other things: 'We ought not to own so as not to be sorrowful.' The artist then asked him what if the jar [he was sitting in] breaks? Socrates replied: 'If the jar breaks, the place will not.' What the philosopher said is true, because for everything lost there is a replacement.

Hence we say that the Creator of all, great be His praise, has not created anything which is by nature incomplete, but only [things] which are complete. We observe the great whale and the wondrously created elephant, who are in need of nourishing food, shelter, capability [of doing things] and all the requirements necessary for them, and all other creations are sufficed and provided for as much as needed for their living; their good life will not lack anything expected for this. All of them [enjoy] pleasant living and a relaxed mind as long as they are not affected by any tangible, painful thing, except for man. For, though enriched by the virtue of having been made sovereign over all animals, becoming thereby the manager and leader of them, he does not know how to manage himself, which is a sign of being devoid of mind, and [surely] we should be ashamed of being devoid of mind. For when [to man] was added rational discernment, he wanted to own many things not needed for providing for himself nor for the welfare of his life, such as different kinds of food and the scenery of animals and of other things, and beautifying and decorating what he sees, and also things he hears and smells that distract him from true benefits and separate him from relaxation in life. All of these will gain [for man] toil in pursuing them, pain in losing them and grief in missing them. For with everything lost of these desires there is disaster, and with everything missed there is grief and regret, and with the longing for things nonexistent there is sorrow and worry. And after every security there is fear, for the fearful are [always] preoccupied and worried. For this reason we say: he who occupies himself in increasing[27] [possessions] that are out of his hands, will not gain eternal life; his temporal life will be disturbed, his illnesses will increase, and his pains will not cease.

In their passage through this ephemeral world—of which the situations are changeable, serving[28] [only] it: its images are deceiving; its ends disprove its beginnings; he who trusts is disappointed, and he who is dazzled by it is in need of mercy—people are most similar to those who boarded a boat for a certain destination, their homeland. The captain[29] brought them to a landing place[30] for meeting some of their needs. [The captain] anchored his boat and the passengers disembarked to meet their required needs.[31] Some of them, having met their

[27] Ritter & Walzer and Fakhrī have *bi-tazyīn*, 'to ornament'. Badawī changes it to *bi-tazyīd*, 'to increase', which fits the context better.

[28] Ritter & Walzer have *al-munqiṣa*, 'decreasing', and Fakhrī has *al-munaghghiṣa*, 'disturbing'. Badawī's rendition, *al-munqaḍiya*, 'serving' seems to be the best in this context.

[29] *Qayyim al-markab*, literally, 'the person in charge of the boat'.

[30] Ritter & Walzer and Fakhrī have *marqā*, Badawī corrects it to read *marfa*'. The notion intended is apparently an unplanned landing prior to reaching the destination. Badawī supposes *marqā* to be a scribal error. If there is a scribal error, it is more likely to be a corruption of *marsā*. However *marqā*, in my view, should be kept. It suggests a place from which you ascend. *Marfa*' or *marsā* normally denote an inhabited seaport. The story indicates that this landing was at an uninhabited place.

[31] *To meet their required needs* means 'relieving themselves'.

needs, returned to their boat without stopping for anything. Thus on the boat they got the most spacious places with the most comfortable supports without anyone competing or pushing for these [places].

Others stopped to survey meadows blooming with various kinds of flowers with different types of blossoms and to inhale the different pleasant fragrances emanating from the blooming meadows and from the thickets of beautiful trees bearing wondrous varieties of fruit. They [also] stopped to listen to the beautiful singing of the birds hidden [in the trees],[32] observing in the soil of that land stones with different bright colours and attractive designs, and pretty shells with unfamiliar shapes and strange marks. [They perceived all this] without leaving the place where they met their needs. Thereupon they returned to their places on the boat, [others] having preceded them to occupy the best and most spacious places with the softest supports.

And some [others] eagerly occupied themselves in gathering the shells and stones and the nearby fruits and flowers, without going beyond the place where they had met their needs. Thus they returned, burdened by their load, servants of the stones of the earth and of its perishing shells, soon to be transformed from [their former conditions] that had deceived them, and of the fruits soon to become spoiled, repellent to [those] nearby. [On returning] they found that others had preceded them to the spacious places on the boat, and they had to remain in the narrow, rough and uncomfortable places, and what they valued of stones, shells, flowers and fruits became a heavy burden in the cramped and uncomfortable places [left] for them, preventing the comfort attained by others who had preceded them to the spacious places and who did not have stones nearby which further cramped their places and required them to guard and to protect and to prevent their being damaged. Thus most of their relaxation was devoted to [their worries about][33] these things not being near them and to being preoccupied with great concerns for [them] and with the intensity of the souls' clinging to their things being near them. Hence [these] acquisitions bequeathed unto them regret, sadness and sorrows, whenever they lost them or part of them.

And some of those [who left the boat] went far into the meadows and thickets, forgetting their boat and the place where they had intended to go in their homeland, occupying themselves with picking stones, shells and flowers, and penetrating into the thickets, distracted by their preoccupation with getting something to eat of the fruits from remembering their homeland and the grief that would meet them on returning to the boat. In all this they would not be able to forestall [impending] successive fears, continuous disasters and preoccupying pains from a fleeing predatory beast, a crawling snake, a terrifying noise, a hanging branch scratching their faces and the rest of their bodies with painful scratches, or thorns clinging to their feet, or mud holding them back, soiling and spoiling their clothes which covered their private parts, or a piercing branch tearing their clothes, or a clinging vine preventing them from proceeding and requiring a long time to cope with it.[34]

When the captain of the boat called for them to put to sea, some of them returned burdened with what they had collected and gathered, and hence suffered

[32] The term here is *bawāṭin*; the translation provides what is believed to be the intended meaning.

[33] Badawī adds the phrase, *wa'l-qalaq ʿalayhā*, required for the meaning of the sentence.

[34] Ritter & Walzer add the sentence *yaṭūl ʿilājuh*. Fakhrī and Badawī do not, viewing it as superfluous. However this sentence may help to explain the delay in returning to the boat.

the shortcomings that we have described. When they arrived at the boat, they found no places except cramped, uncomfortable ones that prevented comfort and led to the acquisition of fatal diseases. Some of the passengers did not hear the captain's call, because they had penetrated deeply into the dense jungles and had gone astray in the meadows with their intertwining [bushes]. Thus the boat sailed, cutting them off from their homelands, while they were [still] in the [jungles] amid deserted, dangerous, deadly places and [exposed to] horrible injuries. Some of them were preyed upon by predatory beasts; some were entangled in pleasures and trifles; some got stuck in the muddy grounds; and others were bitten by snakes. Thus they became deserted, disgusting, decaying cadavers, their limbs torn apart, their conditions horrible—a [testimony to God's] mercy for those who did not know them and a lesson to those who knew them—cut off from their homelands to which they had been going.

Those who reached the boat burdened with what they valued of what they had gathered—[which] deceived their minds, enslaved their freedom, wiped out their relaxation, cramped their places and caused distress in them—could not do anything but throw them into the sea,[35] [because] the flowers soon wilted and the colours of the stones darkened, having lost the freshening moisture that they and their colours had had. The shells [also], in undergoing change[36] and in the intensity of their putrid smell, became a burden and a harmful adjunct; [these difficulties] frustrated their endeavour [to return to their homelands], spoiled their lives, cramped their places, robbed their freedom, became a burden and left them empty-handed. By the time they had arrived at [their] destination, their illnesses had increased due to the effects on them of the putrid smells and the diminution of their strength due to the exhaustion they suffered [as a result] of their cramped and uncomfortable places and of their hard work as a result of the ruination and damages [which they suffered]. [In consequence] some died before arriving at [their] destination and some arrived ill and weak. As for those who stayed behind sightseeing and enjoying the fragrances [of nature], being pre-occupied [only] to this extent, they missed only the spaciousness and comfort of places [on the boat]. But those who returned to the boat without being preoccupied with anything except what their senses perceived while they were meeting their needs, arrived there before others and got the most spacious and comfortable places and reached their homeland relaxed.

This example is similar to our passing from this world to the 'world of truth'[37] and an example of the conditions of [all] who pass through this world. How disgraceful it is of us to be deceived by the little stones of the earth and the shells of the sea,[38] the flowers of the trees and the fragility of the plants, which readily become a burden on us; there is no escape from the discomfort of these things except to make them disappear in the ground, the depth of the sea or a blaze of fire. We [also have to] close our noses to their putrid smells, to lower our eyes so that we do not see them because of their repugnance, and to distance ourselves from them in aversion to their proximity and being repelled

[35] This phrase occurs later but has been placed here for clarity in the translation.

[36] Badawī changes *tawassunihā* into *ta'assunihā*, viewing the former as a mistake. Additionally he gives the meaning of *ta'assun* as 'having a putrid smell', though this is used only of water; see Ibn Manẓūr, (d. 711/1311), *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1992), Vol. 13, pp. 16–17. Thus *tawassun* is surely the correct word.

[37] 'World of truth' is the world where the souls properly belong.

[38] *Aṣdāf al-mā'*, literally, 'the shells of the water'.

by their sight. These are the things that sadden us and which indwell with us in this place. Thus if we are sorrowful, we should be sorrowful [indeed] because of being cut off from our true abode and being on the high seas from where our boat will not take us to our true homeland where there are no disasters, as there are no perishables, nor regrets, because there are no things missed, for there is nothing there but truth. There is nothing there that is desired that ought not to be desired, for what ought to be desired is there with the one who desires it, neither separated from [him] nor affected by any harm. We should be sorrowful if we are deprived of not being sad, for this is a property of reason; but sorrow at being deprived of being sad is a property of ignorance.

We should bear in mind that we should not hate what is not bad; rather we ought to hate the thing that is bad. If this is fixed in our mind, our capability is increased thereby to dispel sensory sorrows. We think that there is nothing worse than death, though death is not bad; fearing death is bad. As for death, it is the completion of our nature; for if there were no death there would be no human beings existing at all. The definition of man is that he is a living, rational, mortal being. A definition is based on [the] nature [of the thing defined]; I mean the nature of man is that he is living, rational and dying. Therefore if there is no death there will be no human being, for if he does not die then he is not a human being, because if he is not mortal then he is not a human being. Therefore it is not bad to be what we are. What is bad is to be what we are not. Thus the bad thing would be that there be no death, for if there were no [death] there would not be a human being, hence death is not bad. Accordingly if what is thought to be bad by all is not bad, then what is less than it of sensory things missed and lost is not bad. Therefore, that which makes us believe death is bad, after it has been made evident that it is not bad, is ignorance of the state of life and death.

For example, I [might] say: If nourishment[39] possessed a mind, being in the liver, and had not witnessed anything else, and it[40] were to be moved from there, it would have been saddened even if it were to move from there to a structure with a shape and a mind[41] as close as possible to perfection. When [the nourishment] has arrived at the testicles and become seeds, if it were to be moved to the womb, which is more spacious than its place in the testicles, it would be immensely sorrowful. If it were to be said to it after it had been in the womb that it should be returned to the testicles,[42] it would have been much more sorrowful than the previous sorrow, [indeed] several times as much because of its remembrance of the narrowness of the testicles and their being far from human perfection, when its situation in them is compared to its situation in the womb. Similarly if it were intended to move it from the womb to the spaciousness and width of this world, this would have saddened it very much. When it had gone to this spacious world with its perfection and had in its possession all the earth and what is therein, and it had then been said to it that

[39] That is, nourishment now hypothetically possesses a mind. From this point on, the reference seems to shift from nourishment to mind, to the human possessing a mind.

[40] In this and the following paragraph, when there is a reference to 'it', see note 39.

[41] Badawī changes *nuhā*, into *naḥw*; the latter seems to be meaningless in this context.

[42] In Fakhrī's edition, the sentences *la aḥzanahu dhālik ḥuznan shadidan. wa-law qīla lah: baʿd an tuṣayyara ilā al-raḥm turadda ilā al-unthayayn* ('it would be immensely sorrowful. If it were to be said to it after it had been in the womb that it should be returned to the testicles') have been omitted; a typographical error?

it should be returned to the womb, it would have given [everything] in order not to be returned to the womb.

Similarly, while in this place, which is this world, it would be immensely fearful about departing from it. If it were to arrive at the rational place, which annuls sensory pains and possessions, that are sequential of all sensory and psychological pains, [the rational place] wherein reside all the good things[43] that cannot be touched by [other] hands or by defects, then whatever possesses [the rational place] will not lose anything at all of its possessions. If it were said to it that it might be returned to this world in which it had been, its worry would be many times greater than when it was said that it was going to be returned from this spacious, mundane [world] to the womb.

It has thus become clear how the souls, feeble in discernment and inclined to the sensory, have erred about death, believing it reprehensible when it is not. Therefore the loss of all sensory possessions in this worldly life is not bad. Rather, the sorrow of [losing] them is bad because they are pains which we bring upon ourselves and are not inevitable. Thus if we were like that, we would then be bad-natured and [living] a bad life. For him who accepts this, his choice is bad and he is devoid of reason, because reason puts things in their [proper] places; whereas the lack of reason puts things in other than their [proper] places and thinks of them to be contrary to what they are as different from what they [actually] are.

We should remember, when anything has been lost or missed, what has remained for us of our sensory and rational possessions, and distract ourselves from the former by remembering and counting them, for there is solace from disaster in remembering what remains. We should also remember, whenever we are saddened because of things missed or spoiled[44] of sensory [possessions], that what has been left for us in anticipating disasters due to the loss of our sensory possessions has been eliminated, [which] will lessen the saddening things. If this is fixed in our memory, it will transform the saddening things from having the nature of disasters into that of blessings. Thus whenever we are overcome by a disaster, it will become a blessing for us. For if such disasters lessen our disasters, then they are blessings, because if a disaster is saddening in our belief, then whatever lessens the saddening things is a blessing. Hence whatever lessens the sensory possessions is a blessing, [because] whenever we lose any of them, we acquire a disaster for ourselves.

Therefore we say: He who does not own what is out of his hands controls the things that enslave kings, I mean anger and desire, the sources of vices and pains. Hence the worst illnesses are the illnesses of the soul; they are worse than the illnesses of the body, as we have said before. For he who is not influenced by anger and desire with their ugly effects will not be dominated by their power, [whereas] he who is influenced by anger and desire will be dominated by their power and they will control his actions at will. Thus, indeed, he who does not own what is out of his hands controls what enslaves[45] kings and conquers most

[43] Ritter & Walzer note only that something has been deleted from the text. Badawī supplies the phrase: 'has all the good things in it'. Fakhrī, on the other hand, does not note the deletion, rendering the sentence in his edition meaningless.

[44] Ritter & Walzer and Fakhrī have *ta'āluf*, 'intimacy, familiarity', which does not make sense in this context. Badawī changes it to *tālif*, 'spoiled', which fits the context better.

[45] Fakhrī changes *mustariqqī* into *istarraq*, though there is no apparent need to do so; indeed the former seems more appropriate.

of the enemies staying with him in his fortress, [enemies] which cannot be protected against the dangers of their weapons by hot irons [i.e., other weapons]; by living with them, one is not secure from the most abominable sins and momentous ruination.

So, oh laudable brother, keep these pieces of advice as a permanent model for yourself and you will be saved from the injuries of sorrow and through them will arrive at the best home, the abode of permanence and the dwelling place of the righteous. May God perfect happiness for you in both your worlds [i.e., this world and the world to come] and may He [grant] you the greatest beneficence in both of them. May He [also] make you [one] of the guided, blessed by reaping the fruits of reason and keep you far from the humiliation of the lowliness of ignorance. This [answer] to your request should be sufficient, even though the varieties of discourse about it are abundant. Hence if the required objective has been attained, then the goal of what has been desired has been achieved, though there are many, almost infinite, ways [for arriving] at the objective. May God protect you from what worries you in the affairs of your worldly life and the hereafter, with the protection needed to reach the utmost comfort and the best of life.

The Epistle is completed and praise be to God, the Lord of all beings.