Madness and other mental disorders have clear epistemological implications. When people hallucinate, thinking that they are earthen jars, or seeing things that do not actually exist, their judgments are obviously impaired. Therefore, their opinions about the outside world cannot be relied upon, nor do they correspond to reality. But more fundamentally, madness poses an even greater problem, as the madman often does not realise that he is mad: he constructs his own, alternative reality that possesses internal cohesion and therefore remains unchallenged. A vivid example for this phenomenon is provided in the novel *Shutter Island*, recently turned into a blockbuster film.\(^1\) The protagonist has taken refuge in an alternative reality owing to the traumatic experience of finding his own children killed by his delusional wife, and then killing her in an act of desperation. Both in the novel and the film, one only discovers gradually that the protagonist’s alternate reality is a phantasy, a fabrication from which he cannot escape. But if this is the case, how can we then be certain that the reality that we experience is not also a similar fabrication?

This question underlies the arguments made by an anonymous opponent and refuted by Miskawayh (d. 1030), the great historian and Neo-Platonic philosopher. Interestingly, these arguments centre around the notion of scholarly melancholy as Rufus of Ephesus developed it in his treatise *On Melancholy*. In the present article, I propose to investigate Miskawayh’s melancholy, so to speak, in both medical and philosophical terms. In order to do so, it will be necessary to provide some background information about Rufus of Ephesus’ scholarly melancholy first, and then turn to Miskawayh’s anonymous opponent and Miskawayh’s own conception of melancholy as he uses it to confute this opponent’s ideas.

\(^1\) Lehane 2003.
Rufus of Ephesus’ Scholarly Melancholy

Rufus of Ephesus, who lived towards the end of the first century AD, wrote many medical monographs on a wide variety of topics. He had a particular interest in Hippocrates, and generally adhered to the principles of humoral pathology, that is, the theory of the four humours that includes black bile. Rufus wrote a monograph in two books on the topic of melancholy, but unfortunately, it has only come down to us in fragments in Greek, Arabic, and Latin. According to Rufus, the disease melancholy is unsurprisingly caused by black bile (mélaina cholē in Greek), which occurs both naturally and as a product of yellow bile being burnt. It is a type of madness that occurs in different manifestations, ranging from general despondency and fear to hallucinations, ravings, and aggressive streaks. But Rufus also records a case where melancholy is caused by the traumatic experience of drowning. And, famously, he claimed that too much thinking leads to melancholy. It is this last point around which the argument between Miskawayh and his anonymous opponent hinges.

In the famous Aristotelian problem 30.1, the author links great achievements in philosophy, politics and the arts to melancholy. Rufus draws on this Aristotelian tradition, but also develops it further. ’Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā’ ar-Rāzī (d. 925) reports Rufus as saying:

قال وأصحب الطبائع الفاضلة مستعدينً للمالانخوليا لأن الطبائع الفاضلة سريعة الحركة كبيرة الفكر.

He said: People of excellent nature are predisposed to melancholy, since excellent natures move quickly and think a lot.

Rufus thus postulates a causal link between excessive thought, to which great people are prone, and melancholy. To put it differently, their excellent nature (ṭabīʿa fāḍila, corresponding to Greek εὐφυΐα) involves also an extreme use of their mental faculties, which in its turn leads to melancholy.  

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3 Pormann 2008 and Pormann, forthcoming for a number of new fragments; see also Fischer 2010, 180–183.
5 F 11 § 24 ed. Pormann 2008. All subsequent references to Rufus are to this edition.
6 F 69.
7 FF 33–36.
8 van der Eijk 2008b.
9 F 33; the fragment also appears in a later author, al-Qumrī (fl. 960–980s), who probably quoted from ar-Rāzī rather than having direct access to the Arabic translation here (F 34).