

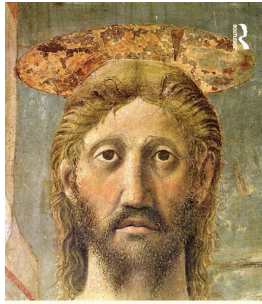
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AL-FARABI

Syed Nomanul Haq

Known as the ‘Second Teacher’ in the Arabic tradition – second to none other than Aristotle who is recognized as the ‘First Teacher’ – Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Fārābī (al-Farabi) (c.870–c.950) has received a resounding tribute from a leading contemporary scholar: this philosopher of the Islamic milieu “stands at the head of all subsequent philosophers who made Greek philosophy Western philosophy” (Gutas 1999b: 222).¹ This means that al-Farabi is a personage of global proportions and ought to be repositioned in the context of world civilization, so that he is no longer seen as irrelevant to what we now consider philosophy. Indeed, his works on (Greek) logic and its relationship to the grammar and usages of ordinary language, his political thought, his conceptual enrichment and expansion of Aristotle’s notion of God along Neoplatonic lines and above all his overarching theory of intellect, or noetics, with its epistemological and ontological implications, something we find centuries later in Descartes all constitute a milestone in the history of philosophy.

OBSCURE PERSONAL HISTORY

About al-Farabi’s personal life we know very little. One does not find any detailed biography until some two hundred years after his death. In fact, a major role in bringing him into focus at a later date is played by the ‘Grand Shaykh’ Avicenna (Ibn Sina, *d.* 1037), whose works had generated a feverish interest during the heyday of philosophical activity in Islam in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Avicenna had presented himself as al-Farabi’s follower and successor. Colourful tales about al-Farabi’s life were woven subsequently: sometimes depicting him as

1. I have drawn heavily in this chapter on the following works in particular: Black (1999), Druart (1999), Gutas (1999a,b). I also owe a special debt to Reisman (2005).

a polyglot who translated Greek texts into Arabic; sometimes as being of Turkish origin with a father named ʿArkhān;² sometimes as a judge who gave up his high position for the love of philosophy, which he read by the light of watchmen's lamps; and sometimes as one who studied in a Christian environment in Constantinople.³ All of these claims are suspect, and the safest course is to reconstruct elements of al-Farabi's biography out of that small body of data we are able to glean from the earliest manuscript annotations and sporadic biographical information found in his own writings, supplemented by biographical narratives closest to his times that are not contradicted by independent additional evidence.

We learn from al-Farabi himself, as reported in his *Appearance of Philosophy*, that he studied the Aristotelian *Organon* up to the *Posterior Analytics* under the Christian cleric Yūḥannā ibn Ḥaylan in Baghdad, and this must have happened somewhere around the early tenth century (Gutas 1999c). More specifically, al-Farabi is quoted by the biographer Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a (d. 1270) as having said that Yūḥannā taught him Porphyry's standard introduction to Aristotelian logic, the *Eisagoge*, followed by Aristotle's *Categories*, *De interpretatione* and *Prior and Posterior Analytics*, in that order (Gutas 1999a: 210). As Yūḥannā's pupil, then, al-Farabi read the logical texts according to the curriculum of the Greek neo-Aristotelian school of the third-century philosopher Ammonius in Alexandria. This Alexandrian neo-Aristotelianism was revived after the Islamic conquests among the Syriac clerics and thinkers in the centres of Eastern Christianity, and it is with this philosophical school that al-Farabi should be associated.⁴

Both politically and socially, al-Farabi's close association with Christian circles is quite certain. Like his mentor in logical studies, his chief student Yahyā ibn 'Adī too was a Christian who is reported by the well-known biographer Ibn al-Qiftī (d. 1248) to have been a Baghdad resident. Then, in Syria, where al-Farabi may have had some association with the Hamdanid ruler Sayf al-Dawla, Yahyā's brother Ibrāhīm also became his student; to this Ibrāhīm, according to a manuscript note, he dictated a commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*. Similarly, al-Farabi wrote a text on the defence of astrology for another Christian neighbour of his in Baghdad, the scholar and translator Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Baghdādī. Equally certain is al-Farabi's stay in the Abbasid capital until the last quarter of the year 942: he wrote his comprehensive work on music theory *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr* (The great book of music) for a vizier of the caliph al-Rāḍī (ruled 934–40); and his own notes on some manuscripts of his *Mabādi' Arā' Ahl al-Madīnat al-Fāḍila* (Principles of the opinions of the people of the excellent city; hereafter *Principles*)

2. Gutas (1999a: 209–10) has pointed out that the famous thirteenth-century biographer Ibn Khallikān was at pains to prove that al-Farabi was ethnically Turkish. ʿArkhān appears as his father's name in the same source. See Ibn Kahallikān (1842–71: vol. 3, 307–11).

3. This was the conjecture of Muhsin Mahdi (1971: 524a), brought to attention by Gutas (1999a: 212).

4. Gutas (1999c) represents a leading piece of research in this regard.

inform us that he began working on this treatise in Baghdad in 942, then interrupted the work and left for Syria at that time.

On the basis of al-Farabi's own testimony and the report of the contemporary historian al-Mas'ūdi (*d.* 956) it is possible to reconstruct a rough outline of the philosopher's life once he left Baghdad. Thus, we learn from a citation in al-Farabi's *Kitāb al-Milla* (Book of creed) that he continued working on the *Principles* in Syria and completed it in 943 in Damascus. A manuscript note indicates that he also stayed for some time in Aleppo, since according to the note it is here that he taught Ibrāhīm ibn 'Adī. And again, in the notes found in the manuscripts of the *Principles* we learn that he was in Egypt in the years 948–9 writing his six chapters in which he summarized the *Posterior Analytics*. Then, we are informed by al-Mas'ūdi that al-Farabi died in Damascus between 14 December 950 and 12 January 951; there is practically a complete certainty about this piece of information since the reporter, generally reliable as he happens to be, was a contemporary, writing no later than 955–6.

The name 'al-Farabi' would seem to declare in the first instance that his place of origin is in the region of Fārāb on the river Jaxtares in Turkistan. But this is not necessarily the case. For example, his younger contemporary, the redoubtable bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm (*d.* end of tenth century) states that al-Farabi's roots lie in Faryāb in Khurasan. Present-day experts are resigned here: they tell us that we do not have sufficient evidence to decide the question of al-Farabi's ethnic or regional origins. And yet, indeed, he is universally referred to by the appellation 'al-Farabi', whatever precisely this might indicate.⁵

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Following the lead of contemporary experts, it has already been remarked that the point of departure of al-Farabi's philosophical development ought to be sought in the Greek neo-Aristotelian tradition of the school of Ammonius. One finds in this school a particularly critical preoccupation with the Aristotelian *Organon*, a preoccupation that had placed language studies at the forefront, given that Aristotle's *Categories* and *De interpretatione* both open with linguistic discourses; in fact, these studies practically formed the core of the whole Alexandrian philosophical enterprise. Al-Farabi too is fundamentally preoccupied with language, but his historical context has the additional (and crucial) element of the intellectual milieu of contemporary Baghdad, where among the most powerful philosophical pursuits was one that had its focus on logic, language and grammar. Indeed, it was in the Baghdad of al-Farabi's times that the famous debate between the logician

5. Al-Farabi's biography is discussed in detail in Gutas (1999a: 208–12), where the serious reader will find references to the primary sources.

Abū Bishr Mattā and the grammarian al-Sīrāfī took place: a historic debate, studied by Mahdi (1970: 51–83), in which the grammarian argued that (Greek) logic really is Greek grammar, inapplicable to the Arabic language, linguistically limited and without a universal scope.

This brings us to a fundamental feature of al-Farabi's philosophy: his rigorous attempts to establish that logic is, indeed, universal grammar, and that logic is to intellect and intelligibles what grammar is to language and verbal expressions. The outstanding contribution of the Muslim philosopher here is to relate the ordinary grammar of the Arabic language to philosophical logic as this latter was conceived and constructed in the Greek and particularly Aristotelian tradition. This adaptation of Greek logic to a non-Greek linguistic context is a major philosophical and historical breakthrough. In his *Kitāb al-Qiyās al-Ṣaḡīr* (Small book of syllogism), al-Farabi declares his intellectual enterprise to be a striving "to express [Aristotelian syllogistic], as much as possible, by means of words familiar to people who use the Arabic language" (Rescher 1963: 49, quoted in Black 1999: 214). As a harvest of this striving, Aristotle's rather unelaborated and dispersed statements on the language–logic relationship were now set on a new, philosophically adventurous path.

Another characteristic contribution of al-Farabi's is his Neoplatonic supplement to Aristotle's metaphysics whereby the scope of Aristotle's notion of God is widened and brought in line with Abrahamic conceptions of deity. Al-Farabi seems to indicate that Aristotle did not pay sufficient attention to the study of ultimate causes of things, that is, the study of God and immaterial beings, something subsequently undertaken by the Neoplatonists. The science of metaphysics was more than what one found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, since the latter did not contain a complete enquiry into the beings that were above and beyond natural things in the ontological order (see Vol. 1, Ch. 5, "Aristotle"). Such enquiry would lead us to the discovery of a being that was the first principle of all beings. This first principle, al-Farabi teaches, is the divinity: it is the efficient, formal and final cause of all other beings. Aristotle's unmoved mover, which was only the final cause of motion, has now been thrown into an active and creative mode, familiar to the religious believer of al-Farabi's milieu. We note here how al-Farabi extends Aristotle's ideas along Neoplatonic lines. But in fact al-Farabi's Neoplatonism runs deeper in that he fully espouses Plotinian emanationism, and not only that, he makes the theory of hypostases and emanation a foundational element of his grand cosmological system, with all its epistemological implications, innovatively remapping the third-century father of Neoplatonism, Plotinus (see Vol. 1, Ch. 15), onto the enduring planetary scheme of the famous astronomer, Ptolemy (*d. c.168*).⁶

6. See Druart (1999), where al-Farabi's metaphysics is discussed in the framework of what later became known as general metaphysics and special metaphysics; namely, the study of what is common to all beings, and the study of ultimate causes (i.e. God and other immaterial beings), respectively. This distinction is articulated in Frede (1987).

But it is al-Farabi's all-embracing noetics that serves as the robust anchorage holding his entire philosophical system in place as a coherent integral whole; in fact, it is this anchorage that uniquely defines the very drift and thrust of his thought. For example, logic is not merely a methodological tool for al-Farabi, but hides underneath a governing ontological noetics. This is so since the human mind, he tells us, can think only in the five ways in which the *Organon* divides arguments or propositions: the demonstrative, which he privileges, and the dialectic, sophistic, rhetorical and poetic. Quite remarkably, then, a relationship of bi-implication is made to exist between logic and ontology. Likewise, in al-Farabi's cosmology it is the creative act of *intellection* on the part of the superior sphere that causes the emanation from it of the sphere below in the hierarchical cosmic order of beings. In his practical or political philosophy, also, concerned as it is with individuals and society and with the delicate question of prophecy, philosophy and kingship, his discourses are equally anchored in noetics. We are taught that human beings are made for the sake of their intellect, human happiness lies in the life of the intellect, and the human individual who has reached perfection is the one who has *become* actually intellect (Walzer 1985: 241).

It is for good reasons that al-Farabi received the honorific title of the 'Second Teacher'. He was committed to introducing a comprehensive philosophical curriculum into a non-Greek, Islamic milieu with the latter's own cultural and intellectual dynamics. This curriculum remains neo-Aristotelian in its basic orientation, but it embodies a highly original synthesis that transformed Alexandrian philosophy: a synthesis highly sensitive to the faith of al-Farabi's co-religionists; a synthesis mediated by Neoplatonism, bringing order to the chaos of outstanding philosophical issues of contemporary society and responding directly to the intellectual ferment of Baghdad. Indeed, al-Farabi presents Muslims as the champions of (Greek) philosophy, observing that philosophy was revived in the Islamic period following the restrictions placed on it by Christians: they thought that it would harm Christianity, he writes (Gutas 1999c). We note here a major event in the history of philosophy, namely, al-Farabi's own revival of the study of all of Aristotle's logical writings, the entire *Organon*, including the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, thereby extending the later Alexandrian curriculum of Syriac Christian logicians that ended in the middle of the *Prior Analytics*.

Given his curricular ambitions, al-Farabi wrote a large number of introductory works as well as commentaries on, and recastings and paraphrases of, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and all parts of the *Organon* – *Categories*, *De interpretatione*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, *Sophistical Refutations*, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* – and also Porphyry's *Eisagogē*. Among his introductory writings are naturally to be counted his *What One Ought to Know before Inquiring into the Philosophy of Aristotle* and his introductions to logic and Plato's teachings. But scholars also include in his introductory corpus the pedagogically conceived trilogy on ethics (*The Attainment of Happiness*, *The Philosophy of Plato* and *The Philosophy of Aristotle*) as well as the three related logical texts: *Directing Attention to the Way to*

Happiness, Vocables Employed in Logic (hereafter *Vocables*), and *Paraphrase of the Categories*. Belonging here too is the *Enumeration of the Sciences*, al-Farabi's best-known work which was widely read both in the Arabic and Latin traditions. Note that Marwan Rashed (2008: 58) has recently cast doubt on the authenticity of the tract *Harmony between the Views of the Two Sages, Plato the Divine and Aristotle*, a tract hitherto attributed universally to al-Farabi by modern scholars and generally classified among his introductory works.

Other than (i) introductory works and (ii) commentaries and paraphrases, many (iii) original works are also to be found in the al-Farabi oeuvre. The *Principles*, which has already been referred to, constitutes an example of an original synthesis, as does the *Political Regime (Al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya)*, also known by the title *Principle of Beings*. One would likewise classify under al-Farabi's original works his *Conditions of Certitude, Book of the One and Unity*, as well as the *Book of Particles* (the primary Arabic title *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf* is sometimes translated as 'Book of letters'). But this list is far from exhaustive.⁷ Also, one should hasten to add that the three categories (i–iii) are not mutually exclusive. Thus, for example, the *Vocables* is both an introductory and an original work. Indeed, al-Farabi's commentaries and paraphrases contain many original insights built around the core text, sometimes integrating outside elements, such as Stoic logic, into the explications. The three categories therefore overlap.

A SURVEY OF AL-FARABI'S LOGIC AND METAPHYSICS

Given both the Alexandrian tradition and the intellectual drift of Baghdad, it is hardly surprising that most of the writings of al-Farabi that have come down to us concern logic and philosophy of language. As noted already, he considers apodeictic demonstration to be the noblest part of logic, and this places a premium on the *Posterior Analytics* (known in the Arabic tradition as the *Kitāb al-Burhān* [Book of demonstration]) as the point of convergence of the entire *Organon*, lying at its centre. Thus four texts of the *Organon* lead to the *Burhān* and the remaining four guard it by showing how apodeictic certainty can be thrown off track by dialectic, sophistic, rhetorical and poetic arguments. With the *Posterior Analytics* occupying the centre, then, the curricular sequential scheme places *Eisagogē–Categories–De interpretatione–Prior Analytics* on its preparatory side, and *Topics–Sophistical Refutations–Rhetoric–Poetics* on its preventive–protective side.

7. Rescher (1962) prepared an annotated bibliography of al-Farabi's writings, but many other bibliographies have been compiled before and since. A survey appears in Gutas (1999a: 213). Black (1996: 194–5) has provided a list of modern editions and translations of the al-Farabi corpus. For English translations of the texts, see Hyman (1973: 215–21), Mahdi (1962), Najjar (1963: 31–57), Walzer (1985), Zimmermann (1981). Translations of some of al-Farabi's short logical treatises are listed in Reisman (2005: 71 n.32).

It is in the *Book of Particles* that al-Farabi presents one of his most elaborate disquisitions on his highly original constructs concerning the relationship between philosophical logic and the grammar of ordinary language. We note here Aristotle being naturalized into the Arabo-Islamic matrix, and this marks a process that expanded the scope of Hellenism beyond the Greek sphere in a manner that would prove to be decisive in the history of philosophy. So we see al-Farabi (i) classifying Arabic particles and constructing a system of correspondence to demonstrate how their everyday meanings are transformed into technical logical terms and express ideas related to the ten categories of Aristotle. Then, to this he adds his discourse on (ii) the origin of language and the history of philosophy and, what is particularly relevant here, the relationship between philosophy and religion. The work concludes with (iii) a classification of interrogative particles, again holding Aristotle as the point of reference, since this classification is based on the uses of these particles in philosophical enquiries of an Aristotelian kind as well as the relationship of these particles with Aristotle's four causes (Eskenasy 1988).

At many places we see al-Farabi making demonstration (*burhān*) the *telos* of the whole logical process, and this is one of the many embodiments of the hierarchical nature of his metaphysical thinking whereby the *Posterior Analytics* remains at the pinnacle of all syllogistic arts. His own *Kitāb al-Burhān* opens with two notions, well-known and frequently discussed among present-day al-Farabi scholars, distinguishing what are considered to be the two basic cognitive acts of the human mind: *taṣawwur* (conceptualization) and *taṣḍīq* (assent; a verbal noun that literally means 'holding as true'). The former denotes any cognitive act by means of which the human mind knows simple, discrete concepts, the latter, that cognitive act which is complex by virtue of its very nature, involving a judgement of truth and falsehood. Perfect *taṣḍīq* is the aim of demonstrative syllogism (Black 1999: 214).

It has already been noted that al-Farabi supplements Aristotle's *Metaphysics* by means of Neoplatonic hierarchical constructs and introduces God and immaterial beings as a proper and not incidental subject matter of metaphysical enquiry. In fact, al-Farabi's *Aims of [Aristotle's] Metaphysics* opens with a discussion on the distinction between '*Ilm al-Kalām* (Science of discourse/enquiry; generally rendered somewhat misleadingly as 'Islamic theology') and metaphysics, but then ends up viewing Aristotle's project as inadequate and so widens the scope of metaphysics to include *kalām*. This is so because "God is a principle of absolute being, not of one being to the exclusion of another" (translated in Gutas 1988: 241). *The Attainment of Happiness* is another of al-Farabi's many writings where his metaphysical teachings are scattered. Here too Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is 'Islamized' so that it becomes theologically fuller and locally recognizable. We read that metaphysics is "the science of what is *beyond* natural things in order of investigation and instruction and *above* them in the order of being" (Mahdi 1962: 22). Metaphysical enquiry leads to the discovery of God, the first principle of being. One notes likewise al-Farabi's metaphysical leap in the *Particles*, where he affirms

the existence of beings outside the categories. His *Book of the One and the Unity* is also concerned with questions of divinity.

It is in his *Principles* and *Political Regime* that al-Farabi presents in earnest his integration of Aristotelian logical doctrines with Plotinian emanationism, giving this integral whole a further philosophical treatment by conceiving it in terms of the Ptolemaic order of the motion of celestial bodies taken over from the astronomer's *Planetary Hypotheses*. What we see here is Aristotle's causation of motion that accounts for the revolution of the spheres now becoming causation of being, crossing over from the domain of natural philosophy to that of ontology in a way that causally links the natural with the metaphysical. This was a hierarchical system where the intellection of a superior sphere causes the emanation of the sphere below it along with the latter's intellect and soul. Thus, having begun both works by elaborating the aims of metaphysics – namely, enquiry into beings that are neither bodies nor in bodies, as well as the study of the principles of beings existing in the natural world – al-Farabi affirms his six hierarchical principles of being in the *Political Regime*: (i) the first cause, (ii) the secondary causes (i.e. the first nine incorporeal intellects), (iii) the active or tenth intellect governing the sublunar world, (iv) soul, (v) form and (vi) matter.

The first cause is identified with God; it is also the first mover since the celestial sphere moves out of desire for it. By the creative act of intellecting itself, it emanates the incorporeal being of the first intellect; this is associated with the first heaven, which is considered the outer sphere of the universe. The first intellect intellects doubly: (a) by intellecting the first cause it emanates the second intellect and (b) by intellecting itself it emanates a soul and a body that constitute the celestial sphere of the fixed stars. This creative causal chain of the dual process of self-intellection and intellecting the immediately preceding superior intellect continues its descent: the process emanates seven more successive intellects as well as the ensouled spheres associated with seven heavenly bodies (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury and Moon), finally emanating the tenth intellect, called the active intellect, which governs the sublunar world (Davidson 1972).

Again, al-Farabi not only engages in Neoplatonizing Aristotle but also restates his cosmological ontology and does so in terms that would be familiar to people of the Abrahamic faith. To begin with, he does not hesitate to say that one ought to call Intellects 'spirits' and 'angels', and the active intellect the 'Holy Spirit';⁸ indeed, this latter was subsequently identified in the Islamic tradition with the angel of revelation, Gabriel. Al-Farabi's whole emanationist scheme seems to be grounded in his concern that without such a causal chain of creative generation starting from God, the first cause, there was no way whatsoever of knowing the divine. He tells us that an examination of the first cause reveals that to it belong

8. Walzer (1985: III.3, notes) makes some very interesting observations here. This was brought to my attention by Reisman (2005: 58).

primarily and perfectly the universal notions – being and oneness – shared by all other existents, which derive their own being and oneness from it. In this connection, the unique characteristics al-Farabi gives to his active intellect, a construct that enjoyed a long career in Arabo-Islamic philosophy, are to be noted. While all other intellects in his emanationist chain generate in the rung below an intellect as well as the substantiation of a body and soul of a celestial sphere, the active intellect affects only the human intellect in the world of generation and corruption existing below the moon. Al-Farabi's active intellect, then, is a causal agency rather than a source of ontological multiplication; the equivalence with Gabriel thereby becomes highly plausible.

PRACTICAL ETHICS: QUESTIONS OF PROPHECY AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Scholars have considered al-Farabi a major representative of political philosophy in Islam. But the questions al-Farabi addresses ought not to be conflated with our contemporary discipline of political science. While it is true that in his writings he uses the term *siyāsa*, which can legitimately be translated as 'politics', it might be more appropriate to see his project as a practical ethics that covers issues of governance, civil virtues and community leadership: a comprehensive practical ethics that is referred ultimately to his noetics, which we shall examine below. Human beings are not born perfect, we are taught at the outset, nor are they eternally perfect since they are not divine beings. Perfection is a virtue to be achieved: it is to be achieved by leading a life guided by reason and rational understanding of the true nature of things. Ultimate perfection is the perfection of that power of the human soul that is present uniquely in human beings, namely, reason. And ultimate perfection is identical with supreme happiness. To be perfectly happy, then, is to be perfectly rational. So we read in the *Principles*, "Happiness [= perfection of reason] is the good desired for itself, it is never desired to achieve by it something else, and there is nothing greater beyond it that a human being can achieve" (*Mabādi' Arā' Ahl al-Madīnat al-Fāḍila* 1895: 46; trans. in Mahdi 1999: 225).

What is the virtuous regime? It is that regime in which people cooperate and come together with the aim of attaining happiness, that is, they all possess (or follow those who possess) correct similitude of the knowledge of divine and natural beings. Social reality, like metaphysical reality, indeed like all reality, is conceived by al-Farabi hierarchically. Thus, we are told that in practice there will always be a difference among the citizens of the virtuous regime with regard to the character of their knowledge about divine beings, and about the world and civic life, and thereby they will differ in terms of their share of perfection, perfection here meaning intellectual perfection, which is the same thing as happiness. Given this, al-Farabi systematizes the virtuous city as a cooperative collection of a tri-level hierarchy. The highest class of people, the rulers, consists of the wise

and the philosophers: these are the supremely virtuous individuals who know the true nature of things by demonstrative proofs or directly by revelation. Al-Farabi's wise, then, include prophets. Below this class are placed those who follow the philosophers and prophets: the class of those who apprehend demonstrative proofs presented by the philosophers, or indirectly grasp the reality of the teachings of a prophet. Finally, the third class is the body of those people who know things only by similitude, by imaginative reconstruction of philosophical truth. The ruler educates these citizens according to their abilities and capacities in a hierarchical manner. On their part, all citizens cooperate and sustain the virtuous regime just as the multiple entities of the cosmos sustain the universe.

We recall here al-Farabi's criticism of Aristotle for paying inadequate attention to divine beings in his metaphysics, beings that transcend the categories. Once again, in his discourses on civil society al-Farabi combines divine and social science to underline the same concern: the need in community life for sound belief about divine beings. Rulers are mediators between divine beings and the citizens, who do not have direct access to the knowledge of these beings. The fundamental qualification of the rulers is that their rational faculty is developed to the highest level: this supreme perfection of rulers consists of the rational faculty's correspondence to or contact with the active intellect. But most people, those lying at the third level, come to know the nature of virtuous social behaviour only through imaginative representation of truth rather than through a rational conception of it; they understand divine things not in themselves but only their imitations. And this is precisely the role of religion: to teach the truth to the common folk in the form of imaginative similitudes and imitations. One may say that for al-Farabi those who are qualified to rule – and this would include both prophet-rulers and philosopher-rulers – know divine beings *primarily* through the active intellect, while those who are ruled over are the ones who know these beings *derivatively* and, in the case of the majority, figuratively (Macy 1986).

It is evident that al-Farabi conceives of an epistemological as well as a political equivalence between the prophet and the philosopher. But there is a difference. While in the general run of things it is only the human rational faculty that has access to the knowledge of divine beings, it may rarely happen that a human individual's faculty of imagination is so powerful, attaining such perfection, that it overwhelms the rational faculty; the imaginative faculty then proceeds directly to the active intellect to receive images of divine beings and knows the nature of things without the mediation of the rational process. This extraordinary phenomenon is prophecy, al-Farabi tells us. Speaking in an emanationist, quasi-theological vein, he writes that imagination and intellect are the two powers by means of which human beings are able to communicate with the active intellect (i.e. the 'Holy Spirit'): when they communicate with it by means of imagination they are prophets; when they do so by means of intellect, they are wise human beings, philosophers.

It is interesting that the Islamic belief in the cessation of prophecy after Muhammad, an issue that became highly sensitive in subsequent centuries, also

seems to make its way into the system of al-Farabi. He states that ordinary people are not capable of understanding the rational basis of virtuous behaviour; they are taught social virtues by prophets through persuasion and compulsion, and are prescribed rewards and punishments that they accept as true and eternal. All of this constitutes a necessary requirement for the founding of the virtuous city, but *not* for its survival. The virtuous regime can continue after the absence of the prophets through the teachings, legislation and political rule of philosophers, or by the rule of jurist-rulers who act as shadow philosophers. But al-Farabi also appears to believe that wisdom or philosophy is a necessary requirement both for the founding of the virtuous regime and for its survival.

A NOTE ON NOETICS

All the various streams in al-Farabi's philosophical system, grand as it is in its theoretical proportions and curricular scope, ultimately fall into the ocean of his noetics, as we have been observing above. It is by means of the particular drift of these streams and their final convergence into a single body that the philosopher has managed to construct a coherent *system*, a system in which all else is in the end reducible to one principle, namely intellect. Take, for example, al-Farabi's very notion of being, a notion that flows proximately from his doctrine of certitude. For him it is a cosmic law that certitude is arrived at through the intellectual process of logical demonstration, but he then adds to it a firm cognitive requirement: "Certitude requires both that we know some proposition to be true and that we know *that* we know it". Now comes the core ontological pronouncement, which echoed some seven hundred years later in Cartesian chambers: "Necessary certitude and necessary existence are convertible in entailment, for what is verified as necessarily certain is necessarily existent" (quoted in Black 1999: 215).

We have also seen how noetics lies at the centre of al-Farabi's cosmological emanationist hierarchy, for it was the generative act of the intellection of a superior, logically prior being that caused the emanation of another, logically posterior being to occupy its immediately following rank. So, once again, we note al-Farabi's metaphysical theory of the *intellectual* causation of being. Furthermore, the contact between the transcendental world and the natural world, we are to learn from him, comes to pass by means of the emanation of intelligibles from the active intellect to the human intellect, and it is on receiving these intelligibles that the latter is actualized. Once actualized, the human intellect begins to know the active intellect. Indeed, an identity of the knowing intellect and the object of knowledge is here admitted: an identity of the knower and the known. This epistemological subject-object equation can certainly be traced back to Aristotle, but the centrality and the intense epistemological focus it now acquires is al-Farabi's own contribution, which opened up many a mystical vista for post-Avicennan philosophical developments in Islam.

It would seem that there exists a relation of reciprocal implication between the various strains of al-Farabi's system. His fivefold taxonomy of logical syllogisms – the demonstrative, being the noblest, and the dialectic, sophistical, rhetorical and poetic – is followed by the claim that these are five ontologically fixed modes in which human intellect immutably functions; and further, that the objects of these ways of reasoning conform to the hierarchy of beings. All of this is then linked to psychology: the five logical modes are associated with the faculties of the corporeal human soul. Ontology, then, has implications for logic and psychology. But then one can say with equal legitimacy that it is the other way around: it is logic and psychology that have ontological implications. All of this ultimately culminates in noetics, since the very ground on which being itself is affirmed is nothing other than certainty, the supreme stage of intellection: “what is ... necessarily certain [in the mind] is necessarily existent”. It is hard to resist thinking about Descartes here.

Indeed, human beings were made for the sake of their intellect, and the ultimate happiness of the human being consists in the continuous and actual act of knowing. The degree of perfection of human communities, al-Farabi frequently states, is measured by the extent to which they actualize their intellects, receive intelligibles from the active intellect and hold correct opinions regarding divine and natural entities. Dimitri Gutas has brought into focus the noetic basis of the *Opinions*, al-Farabi's major work on individuals and social organizations or, rather, on practical ethics. The *Mabādi' Arā' Ahl al-Madīnat al-Fāḍila* (Principles of the opinions of the people of the excellent city), Gutas explains, “is *not*, as it is often elliptically but misleadingly referred to, the ‘excellent city’, but ‘the *principles* of the opinions of the people of the excellent city’” (1999b: 222). Gutas has also brought to light an interesting passage from Ibn Khaldūn (*d.* 1406) – the “always perspicacious ... conscious originator of political philosophy in Islam” (*ibid.*) – in which the pre-modern sage points out the theoretical nature of al-Farabi's social and political discourses and their fundamental noetic thrust.

Following Gutas, it is worthwhile quoting Ibn Khaldūn again. Opening his section on political leadership by pointing out that all social organizations require a ruler who exercises a restraining influence over people, Ibn Khaldūn also speaks of two types of rule: one based on divine sanction and the other on rational politics. He then goes on to say:

We do not mean here that which is known as ‘political utopianism’ [Ibn Khaldūn here employs al-Farabi's book title and term *siyāsa madaniyya*]. By that the philosophers mean the disposition of soul and character which each member of a social organization must have, if, eventually, people are completely to dispense with rulers. They call the social organization that fulfills these requirements the ‘ideal city’ (al-Farabi's terms *al-madīna al-fāḍila*). The norms observed in this connection are called ‘political utopias’. They do not mean the kind

of politics (*siyāsa*) that the members of a social organization are led to adopt through laws for the common interest. That is something different. The ideal city (of the philosophers) is something rare and remote. (Ibn Khaldūn 1958: II, 137–8)

And, finally, the writer expressly declares that such an ideal city exists only in the mind: “They discuss it as a hypothesis” (*ibid.*: II, 138).

FURTHER READING

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On ARISTOTLE see also Chs 10, 11. On COSMOLOGY see also Chs 10, 16; Vol. 1, Chs 6, 8, 14, 17. On ETHICS see also Ch. 8; Vol. 1, Ch. 11; Vol. 3, Ch. 9; Vol. 4, Chs 13, 19; Vol. 5, Chs 12, 15, 21. On HIERARCHY see also Vol. 1, Chs. 15, 20. On LANGUAGE see also Chs 11, 12; Vol. 3, Ch. 14; Vol. 4, Chs 3, 8; Vol. 5, Chs 13, 20. On LOGIC see also Chs 2, 17; Vol. 3, Ch. 3; Vol. 4, Ch. 19. On NEOPLATONISM see also Ch. 3; Vol. 1, Chs 19, 20; Vol. 3, Ch. 9; Vol. 4, Chs 4, 9. On PROPHECY see also Ch. 5.

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