

Platonic or Aristotelian Aspects of Life: A Harmonious World in Farabi's Utopian Thinking

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For about 2500 years, Plato and Aristotle have opened windows of knowledge which have inspired various philosophical schools in the world. It seems that there is no philosophical school not influenced by these two recognized philosophers. They have created two diverse mainstreams in world philosophy. Symbolically, Plato is known for his *Timaeus*, and his idealistic Theory of Forms; and, Aristotle for his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and his empiricist views in philosophy. While Plato's philosophy is associated with the heavenliness of life, Aristotle's philosophy is linked to an earthly aspect of life. Correspondingly, it is assumed that all human beings have both a Platonic aspect and an Aristotelian aspect within. These two ontological aspects are discernible in the painting of Raphael, *The School of Athens*. There one can see Plato and Aristotle together, at the centre of the painting; Plato with his *Timaeus* at hand, and pointing to the sky or the world beyond, the world of entities, „forms” or „ideas”. Ne Plato, we can see Aristotle with his *Ethik* at hand, pointing toward the earth or the terrestrial happiness of human beings.

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The philosophical ideas of Plato and Aristotle, have been very influential in Islamic culture and civilization in which both „concrete particulars“ and „abstract entities“ are very significant, albeit in the Quran, the moderate nation is admired. That is to say, the balance between Platonic and Aristotelian aspects in the human beings is the approved approach in the teachings of the Quran. Among the Moslem philosophers who tried to interpret the concept of moderation and harmony in their works and create a link between philosophy and the teachings of Islam, and also introducing a utopianism grounded on philosophy and religion, Farabi may be considered the best-known.

There is no biography of Farabi and very little is known about his life (Mahdi, 1; Walzer, 2). Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Tarkhan ibn Awzalagh al-Farabi (873? - 950) was born in Transoxiana (Uzbekistan), at Wasij, in the district of Farab, in the former Khorasan province in eastern Iran. Farabi did not belong to the ruling aristocracy like al-Kindi, the most influential philosopher of the preceding century, nor did he ever hold any political office like Avicenna (who was born thirty years after Farabi's death), nor did he become a high official in the religious hierarchy like Averroes in the 12th and Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century. Farabi spent the greater part of his life in Baghdad and he witnessed the reign of eight Abbasid caliphs from Al-Mutadid (892 - 902) to Al-Muti (946 - 974), a period marked by the break-up of the Abbasid Caliphate.

Farabi is reported to have studied logic in Baghdad under the Christian scholars Yuhanna ibn Haylan (d. 910) and Abu Bishr Matta (d. 940), one of the translators of Aristotle's works into Arabic (Mahdi, 3). Then Baghdad was not only the capital of one of the greatest empires of the world but included the greatest library in the world. Since the School of Baghdad was the principal heir in the Arabic world to the philosophical and medical tradition of Alexandria, Farabi's connection with these teachers formed one of the earliest links between Greek philosophy and the Islamic world (Black, 178). Farabi himself is listed as the teacher of Yahya ibn Adi (d. 974), another of the important Christian translators and a noted logician in his own right. Farabi is also reported to have taught logic to the grammarian Ibn al-Sarraj, who in turn instructed Farabi in the science of Arabic grammar (Ibn Abi Usaybiah 606; Zimmermann cxviii-cxxii). Farabi

„disagreed with the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad and felt like an exile and an alien“ (Walzer, 17), and appears to have left Baghdad for Syria in 942, travelling to Aleppo and Damascus, and perhaps also to Egypt, between 942 and 948. He then returned to Damascus, where he died in 950 (Fakhry, 125-6).

A review of Farabi's major works indicates that he is influenced by Plato, Aristotle and other Greek thinkers. However, while recasting their ideas, Farabi always keeps in view the Islamic tenets which have formed the inner links of his writings. From the lists of his works provided by the medieval biographers, Farabi's academic output appears to have been enormous, with over one hundred works being credited to him (Walzer 780). If these lists are accurate, only a small portion of Farabi's writings has survived. Many of these have only recently become available in modern editions, so the interpretation of Farabi's work is continually being revised. As Mahdi writes, until World War II, his most popular works were *The Harmonisation of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle Aristotle (Harmony between the Views of Plato and Aristotle)*, *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City (The Virtuous City)* which was translated into English by Richard Walzer in 1985, and *The Political Regime* (3-4). The latter, which was published in 1968 explains Farabi's view of the relationship between the city and religion (Mehdi, 6). *The Political Regime* was translated at the end of the nineteenth century and printed in the early twentieth century (Mehdi, 6). Farabi was also the first great theorist of music in the Middle Ages and wrote *Kitab al-musiqia al-kabir (The Great Book of Music)*. *Aphorism of the Statesman, Attainment of Happiness, Book of Letters, Epistle on the Intellect, Introductory „Risala“ on Logic, On the Purposes of Aristotle's „Metaphysics,“ On the Rise of Philosophy, Philosophy of Aristotle, Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, Plato's „Laws,“ Principles of the Beings, Rhetoric, Selected Aphorisms, Short Commentary on the Posterior Analytics, Summary of the Organon, The Utterances Employed in Logic.* Nevertheless, regarding his reflections on the ideal and harmonious state centred on philosophy and religion, he is best known for his two decisive works, *The Virtuous City* and *Harmony between the Views of Plato and Aristotle*.

Farabi, as the founder of Islamic philosophy, knew Plato and Aristotle and their ideas very well, and their differences, as well. In his *Harmony between the Views of Plato and Aristotle*, Farabi tries to explain that the views

of these two philosophers have a common essence although they seem different. In other words, Farabi claims that Plato and Aristotle's philosophical views are like the two sides of the same coin which complete each other. He believes that the harmony between Platonic and Aristotelian approaches in philosophy gives way to proper conditions for the life of human beings. In his *Virtuous City* he describes the features of the harmonious city which is grounded on co-operation:

In order to preserve himself and to attain his highest perfection every human being is by his very nature in need of many things which he cannot provide all by himself; he is indeed in need of people who each supply him with some particular need of his. Everybody finds himself in the same relation to everybody in this respect. Therefore man cannot attain the perfection, for the sake of which his inborn nature has been given to him, unless many (societies of) people who co-operate come together who each supply everybody else with some particular need of his, so that as a result of the contribution of the whole community all the things are brought together which everybody needs in order to preserve himself and to attain perfection³. (229)

Following both Plato and Aristotle, and combining their ideas with an understanding of Islamic teachings, various intellectual traditions in the Islamic world try to create harmony and place together these two ontological aspects of the human being. In Greek philosophy, Plato, in the *Laws*, alludes to the ancient age when Kronos „set up at that time kings and rulers within our cities – not human beings but demons, members of a more divine and better species . . . They provided peace and awe and good laws and justice without stint" (713c). However, it seems that acquiring such harmony has always been a perennial quest for human beings. Long before Plato and Aristotle, in the myth of the Golden Age the human realm considered as the terrestrial side and the divine realm, as a celestial side, are linked together and lived in harmony. This is portrayed in Hesiod's *Works and Days* in lines 108-130:

The gods, who live on Mount Olympus, first
Fashioned a golden race of mortal men;

3 Walzer wrongly uses *perfect* for the Arabic *fadhila*, but *virtuous* is the right word, as Muhsin Mahdi, the well-known Iraqi American Islamologist and Arabist of Harvard University, in his *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (2001), has also translated it.

These lived in the reign of Kronos, king of heaven,
And like the gods they lived with happy hearts
Untouched by work or sorrow. Vile old age
Never appeared, but always lively-limbed,
Far from all ills, they feasted happily.
Death came to them as sleep, and all good things
Were theirs; ungrudgingly, the fertile land
Gave up her fruits unasked. Happy to be
At peace, they lived with every want supplied,
[Rich in their flocks, dear to the blessed gods.]
And then this race was hidden in the ground.
But still they live as spirits of the earth,
Holy and good, guardians who keep off harm,
Givers of wealth: this kingly right is theirs. (62-63)

Likewise, in Plato's ideal city there was a relationship between the earth and the sky, and that city could provide the conditions for satisfaction of all different aspects of human life, and this was what Farabi was looking for in religion and philosophy. Plato's ideas made Farabi think about the relationship between philosophy and religion. It seems that both try to give a plan for different material and, at the same time, spiritual aspects of human life. Thus, religion and philosophy exist to give meaning to the life of human beings and to integrate this meaning based on a balancing harmony created between material and spiritual characteristics of life through which happiness is attained. This Platonic approach in philosophy which included diverse dimensions of life was a model for Farabi in his Islamic philosophy, mainly in his image of a utopian city. Furthermore, Farabi had an eye on Aristotle's philosophy that, like Plato's, encompassed a wide range of subjects in various facets of human life such as botany, biology, astronomy, mathematics, music, medicine, ethics, psychology, rhetoric, theology, physics, cosmology, metaphysics, the history of philosophy, government, political history and the arts. Thus, Farabi, on the one hand, had access to several philosophical models which claimed to be sufficiently inclusive to encompass numerous aspects of human life; and, Islam, a religion which embraced all material and spiritual aspects of human life, on the other hand. Consequently, Farabi's great pursuit was to find the relationship between Islam and philosophy.

In Farabi's time, Islam as a universal phenomenon was made manifest through conquest and invasion. However, Farabi was in search of a

knowledge which could answer various epistemological needs of human and create harmonious integrity therein. Greek philosophy was paramount among the alternative answers he was looking for. In tenth century, Farabi found new knowledge present in Islam itself. There he could see concepts tied the mission of the Prophet Mohammad and his exegetists, concepts such as religious duties, and Moslems' obligations concerning those duties, God as the lawgiver, Prophets as the executive agents and the guides who express the words of God and religion to the human beings who make their decisions for their happiness grounded on their will and choice. These significant concepts were proposed as decisive questions in a culture founded on revelation in a new intellectual epoch for Moslems like Farabi interested and curious in probing such subjects and concepts both in philosophy and Islam which as mentioned above had a common claim of being all-embracing with a wide range of numerous subjects in the earthly and heavenly aspects of human life. Farabi's great quest was uniting philosophy and religion or reason and revelation because he believed that they have considerable proximities, especially in ethics and politics albeit the social conditions he was experiencing were not favourable. He wanted to find if religion and philosophy had common principles and goals.

As a Moslem who was looking for knowledge, Farabi had found verses in the Quran that the Prophet had tried to enact during his short period of governance. Some of his goals are described in the Quran and *hadith*, sayings or traditions). „Our Lord, raise up in their midst a messenger from among them, who will recite Thy signs to them, and will teach them the Book and Wisdom, and purify them. Truly Thou art the Mighty, the Wise” (2:129). In this verse reciting the „signs” of God, teaching “the Book and Wisdom” and purifying human beings are some of the goals the Prophet tried to realize. According to Nasr, the „Book” mostly refers to the Quran, whereas the „Wisdom” is assumed to be the „Sunnah” (the representative sayings and doings of the Prophet) or as he believes „more generally knowledge and understanding of the religion, although the pairing of the *Book* and *Wisdom* has more universal import in the Quran and is also used in connection with Jesus (3:48; 5:110), the Children of Israel (45:16), and the House of Abraham (4:54)” (2:129). Moreover, in *The Peak of Eloquence*, one of the goals of the Prophet is „to unveil” for human beings „the hidden virtues of wisdom” (12). In another verse of the Quran the Prophet is venerated

because of his good character traits: „And truly thou art of an exalted character” (68:4). Nevertheless, some verses of the Quran admire moderation; and, it seems that harmony in life is one of the ultimate goals of Islam.

In the *Surah* the Cow of the Quran true believers are those who are known as „middle” people or „community” (143). „Thus did We make you a middle community, that you may be witnesses for mankind and that the Messenger may be a witness for you” (143). A proverb states that “The best of things is their middlemost.” Likewise, as Nasr claims in the commentary of this verse, „according to a *hadith*, the Prophet said that *middle* means ‘just;’ When one says that a man is the middlemost of his people, it means he is among their best and most esteemed people, a usage that perhaps comes from the fact that people huddle around their leader, thus placing him in the middle.” As he states later „in idiomatic Arabic, often the *wasat* (‘middle’) of a thing is the choicest part.” According to Nasr „to be in the middle means to avoid extremes.” Islam admires the existence of a balance or a harmony between „the concerns of this world and the demands of the Hereafter” (143). Farabi had found that the gist of the messages of the Quran, in theory, and practice was the creation of harmony between the worldly and heavenly aspects of life. To explain this harmony, he needed an epistemological system which could define the relationship between these two aspects of life. Farabi lived more than one thousand years after Plato and Aristotle whose numerous works were widely translated into Arabic. *The Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Law*, and *Timaeus* were among these. The Prophet and his close comrades opened such new epistemological horizons that philosophers like Farabi were highly motivated to understand them and later find their relationship with other teachings of their time when Moslems were extremely curious to find and obtain new knowledge in any corner of the world. *Timaeus*, *Republic* and *Nicomachean Ethics* were inspiring sources which discussed a wide range of subjects of human life.

The difference between the outer world and the inner world or the world of genesis and the world of revelation was another context for the communication of these two civilizations. Farabi in his plan for the unification of sciences paid great attention to the correspondence between these two worlds. In this unification, he had a great interest in all of the

problems in Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy in so far as he had access to them. His primary interest in unification was such that he neglected the differences between Plato and Aristotle.



The School of Athens, the beautiful painting by Rafael on a wall in the Pope's residency in Vatican, painted in the period of 1510 to 1511, is one of the most prominent masterpieces of art in the world. In this picture, Aristotle is holding *Ethics* with his left hand and pointing forward with his right hand, and beside him, Plato holds *Timeous* with one hand and points to the sky with his other hand. The painting can be construed as follows: for Plato, the world of Ideas is authentic and the virtuous is the individual who has the opportunity to meet the ideal forms, while Aristotle directs his interest more to the sensible and considers the universals as the concrete and within the particulars (*Nicomachean Ethics* and Copleston). According to Aristotle, the individual whose deed is following the most perfect virtues has the happiest life (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098). He believes that the most perfect virtue is wisdom which concerns the part of intellect which deals with permanent beings (11399). Definitely, in practical wisdom, Aristotle gives priority to Politics because the purpose of politics is an end in itself (1095). He believes that the purpose of politics is the goodness of man

(1095). The political systems in the area of practical wisdom should provide the conditions in which humans could direct the drives of their desires under the governance of intellect in so far as they can form the good habits corresponding to their living conditions. This is what Aristotle considers as the „median“ of one's state (1104). According to Aristotle, in the realm of ethics and deed, „there is no decisive judgment ... there is neither a science nor a generally justified tradition for this. This is why it is the practitioner who should think in each case and considers the circumstances of his deed“ (1104).

To investigate the issues regarding politics, Aristotle examined a number of the political systems of different cities because he believed that the preciseness of an investigation depends on the nature of its subject (1094). Hence, any considerable investigation in the area of politics underlies attention to numerous cases of actualized politics in different states. In this way, one can find out which political system is successful and which one is not. In contrast, Plato in his *Republic*, instead of taking a countable and inductive method, initiated a metaphysical attempt to establish a political system according to the hierarchical order of truth. Aristotle's endeavour to negate the existential relationship between the Idea of good and the moral act based on virtue indicates well the difference between his philosophical system and that of Plato. In the first book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle criticizes Plato's thesis arguing that it is enough to know the good to establish a good and perfect governing system. Unlike Plato, Aristotle reaches for a distinction between theory and practice. According to Aristotle, politics and ethics are the forms of practical knowledge and they do not depend on theoretical knowledge. In this sense, ethical knowledge is like medicine which is not knowledge with a value in itself; we practice medicine only to attain health. In the same token, the aim of ethics is finding guidance for our practice (Klosko 138).

Now, we ask why Farabi attempts to unify different aspects of human life about universal principles. He is aware that Islam as the ultimate religion is presented in so far as it can present its universality for the different areas of human life. Farabi finds this capability in the relation between religion and philosophy. In this regard, he believes in the unification of these two areas in so far as he considers philosophy as the

hidden depth of religion and considers religion as the appearance of philosophy (Boer and Jones 648). If this is true, there would be correspondence and analogy between the elements of philosophy and religion. Farabi believes that only the philosophers and prophets must take the leadership of our political and ethical life and lead us toward happiness. In this regard, it is the philosopher who can relate the appearance of human life and its relation to the rational principles that indicate how religion enjoys the support of philosophy and theoretical knowledge. This belief in the relation between religion and philosophy provides us with the conditions based on which we can introduce Farabi as the founder of Islamic philosophy in Islamic civilization. Now, we deal briefly with the analogical aspects of the philosopher and the prophet in Farabi's thought to clarify this relationship.

Farabi in chapter fifteen of *The Virtuous City* notes that the prophet, with the favour of his extended imagination, can receive the particulars from the „Active Intellect“ (245). This connection with the „Active Intellect“ is possible through the faculty of intellect. According to Farabi, the prophet as the leader of the virtuous state can present his intellectual perceptions of the „Active Intellect“ to the people in analogical language (247). This is because the people have no direct access to the philosophical intellect. He declares, „for the people, imagination takes the place of intellect“ (*Iḥṣāʾ Al-ʿulūm* 67). Therefore, one of the most important roles of the faculty of imagination is to make it possible for people to grasp the relationship between the upper and the mundane world, and in this way, they deal with the political and moral details of social life through the imaginative expressions of the prophets. Thus, the prophets can lead people to participate in the intellectual truth and help them to reach truth and happiness.

Farabi in his *Tahṣīl Al-Saʿādāt* renders education as one of the tasks of the ruler and defines two essential elements in each education: understanding and verification. Understanding is itself in two kinds: thinking the essence of things and imagining it in the faculty of imagination (89). Verification is also in two kinds: one issue from reasoning and the other from conviction (89). According to Farabi, the prophet deals more with imaginary conviction rather than reasoning (89). Farabi holds that people can be educated through imaginative forms because the emergence of Islam and its

universal doctrines made it possible to do so. Flaturi noted that the transference of rational culture to a society which is equipped with the imaginative tools results in a superficial education (Flaturi, 39). Farabi, referring to the great Greek thinkers and rereading their philosophy in the cultural background of Islam, made it possible for the Islamic culture to have a dialogue with other cultures and provided a context for the future of the Islamic sciences. Davari holds that the origin of Mulla Sadra's transcendental philosophy in which different movements in Islamic culture and civilization find a unification based on a foundation which is established by Farabi (Davari 132-3).

It seems that Farabi's aim to unify religion and philosophy is only possible if there is a unity in philosophy itself. If all religions are parts of Islam, and Islam can respond to the theoretical and practical questions of other religions, it should also be possible to resolve the divergences between the great thinkers in the framework of an ideal philosophy and reconcile their different ideas. This is the great task which is performed by Farabi in his *Harmony between the Views of Plato and Aristotle*. Thus, Farabi must demonstrate that the great philosophical systems are based on a unified ground and the differences between them are accidental and unessential.

Harmony between the Views of Plato and Aristotle is Farabi's attempt to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. For example, he believes that we cannot consider Plato as a cynic and Aristotle hedonic (33). He tries to explain why it seems that Plato retreats from life and Aristotle does not consider this. In this work, Farabi discusses the other differences between these two great thinkers in the areas of epistemology (40-41), ethics (51), and other subjects. Farabi gives a construal of these claims in order to reconcile them. Farabi attempts to establish philosophical thought in Islamic terminology so that on its basis one can give a reading of religion that brings reasoning and verification to human life.

Conclusion

Farabi should be considered as a thinker who, following the prophet of Islam's famous saying that „search for knowledge, even if it is in China“, investigated many lands to provide a complete image of science based on unifying principles. He found what he was looking for in philosophy and indicated how the great philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle were able

to provide an acceptable image of human life in the form of articulated philosophical system, and in so far as they do not contradict religious doctrines, and are construable in different manners. Farabi's attempt at the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle returns to the belief that the authentic human being is the one who is equipped with harmony and the correspondence between theory and practice, that is to say, he/she can easily cross the borders of cultural differences and communicate them. Farabi believes that both prophets and philosophers seek to harmonize the seemingly contradictory realms of human life. He believes that the univocity of being rejects any conflict between the degrees of the unified being. To reach this univocity, it would be enough to approach the existential capacities of human life, which is exemplified in the prophetic perceptions which are elaborated in philosophy.

As a final point, in Farabi's unification of philosophy and religion, and his cosmology, he identifies the First Existent (*al-mawjud al-awwal*) with God or the creator, who is the perfect being and source of revelation for Rational Animals (human beings) through the Active Intellect (Farabi 1985 57-60). Through the emanation process the existence of every being proceeds from the First Existent, which is perfect, eternal, everlasting, uncaused, free of matter and without form, with no purpose or aim external to itself, with no partner or opposite, and indivisible (89-91). He divides the world into the (higher world) „World above the Moon“ (101), and „Sublunary Existents“ (107) or mundane world. Since God thinks his truth, the world is created from him. The second existent is „the most excellent of the 'separate' (immaterial) existents“ (115) and the cause of the motion of the great sphere. „The third and the bodies which follow until the ninth contain each of them one body only“ which is „celestial“ (122-123). The Active Intellect acts like the Holy Spirit whose activity is extended in the human world. This is the Intellect that connects the higher world to the mundane world and governs it and provides the perfection of this world. The Active Intellect actualizes the potential human intellect and upgrades it to the level of Acquired Intellect and connects to it its capacity for giving the forms. The ruler of the city (the philosopher and the prophet) is the one who can receive the emanations and revelations of the Active Intellect in both his articulating and imaginary faculties; so that he can create harmony between the „World

above the Moon" and the „Sublunary" world by persuasion and reasoning in two realms of ethics and politics (439).

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