The Notion of Good Governance in the Political Thought of Al-Farabi

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In our times we consider political thought within the framework of the history of ideological movements and their appraisal of the society of their times. We learn of their social and economic theories as well as their proposals and implementation of government and social reform. In the mediaeval world, on the other hand, the *terminus a quo* of political thought was metaphysical, whereas the point of arrival was *ethical*.

Cosmology and Ethical Thought

In line with Neoplatonic thought, the world of Late Antiquity and Mediaeval society, both East and West, thought of the heavenly and earthly realms as a hierarchical structure. God, being the First Cause and the cause of all causes, stood at the summit of this system. Between him and the terrestrial realm there lay a hierarchy of celestial beings (fixed stars and planets) emanating from him in descending order from the more perfect to the less perfect. At the bottom of the scale lay the Active Intellect who presided as intermediary between the heavens and the material world, the world of generation and decay, as well as presiding over the latter.

This system helped serve two main purposes:

1. It acted as a safeguard against attributing evil to God;
2. It ultimately portrayed the terrestrial realm as if it were a mirror that reflected the harmony and the perfection of the celestial. It was imperative that governance of society reflect the governance of the heavens and that the hierarchical structure of society be considered as a direct consequence of the hierarchical structure of the heavens. It is therefore not surprising that any form of dissent, whether of a religious, ethical, or of a civil nature, would have been brutally put down, since it was deemed to bring about disharmony and turmoil in society, thereby distorting its reflection of the celestial realm.

Thus, the world and, above all, the heavens provided ancient and mediaeval man with stark evidence that good is not only a possibility but a reality that could and must be achieved. Likewise, as Rémi Brague has correctly affirmed, the task of transferring such good into the world of generation and decay wherein we live enriched ethics with a cosmological dimension.[1] Thus, although metaphysics, cosmology and ethics were considered and studied as sciences distinct in their subject-matter, their objectives were interconnected. Metaphysics led to the Divine who presided over the harmony of the cosmos, and the cosmos was in turn reflected in human ethical action and, consequently, in human society. Man imitates the harmony of the cosmos through ethical action. The philosopher under discussion lived and worked within the framework of this system of thought; he embraced it and built upon it his vision of the Islamic political order.

A Biographical Note

Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Uzlāġ b. Tarḫān al-Fārābī (d. c. 950) lived at a time when the ʿAbbāsid caliphate was showing

tangible signs of weakening and the ʿAbbāsid empire was going through a steady process of decline and *de facto* dismemberment. He therefore worked, taught and wrote against a background of political instability which was at times coupled with intellectual atrophy. He is said to have been born in Fārāb in Transoxiana within a Turkic family. He grew up in Damascus, where he studied philosophy, but subsequently moved to Baghdad, where he studied logic under under Abū Bišr Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 911) and Yuḥanna b. Ḥaylān (d. 942), both of them Christians. Later in life he moved to Ḥalab (Aleppo), the seat of the Šīʿa Ḥamdānid sultans, where he became court musician as well as a member of the literary circle of the sultan Sayf al-Dawla, who was a renowned patron of the arts and letters.

He was profoundly influenced by Aristotelian ethics and Platonic political thought – the latter by way of the Alexandrian School of Neoplatonism – and sought to apply the ideas of these two classical thinkers to the current political situations in order to help revive the sagging foundations of the society in which he lived. In fact, his works reflect his lifelong determination to harmonize the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, and for this reason he wrote a work entitled *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: the Divine Plato and Aristotle*. It is therefore no small wonder that he was accorded the epithet 'the Second Master'.

Neoplatonism and Šīʿa Islam in al-Fārābī's Political Thought

Al-Fārābī appears to have nurtured an interest for social and political issues in the light of his philosophical concerns as well as of his affiliation to Ismāʿīlī Šīʿa Islam. Therefore both his ethical and his political philosophy were deeply rooted in the Neoplatonic vision that the nature and function of the state should mirror the harmony that exists in the heavens as well as the Šīʿa concept that the ruler of the Muslim community, the *Imām*, receives divine illumination inherited through his descent from the Prophet. These convictions led him to conceive a hierarchical structure similar to that envisaged by the Neoplatonic thinker Porphyry (d. c. 305), which is brought about by a process of emanation from the One [God] of a series of intellects that serve to order the movement of the stars and of the planets and leading to the establishment of the sublunary world by way of the Active Intellect (*al-ʿAql al-Faʿʿāl*). In harmony with Neoplatonic thought al-Fārābī situates the Active Intellect at the top of the sublunary world whereas prime matter lies at the bottom of the same realm. This sublunary world is, of course the material world, the world of generation and decay. Contrary to the celestial realm, it is subject to change due to the admixture of the four primary elements (air, earth, fire, water); it also possesses the four primary qualities (hot, cold, moist, and dry). This vision of the cosmos is developed in his most famous work *Kitāb ʾÂrāʾ Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍila* (*The Book concerning the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*). It would be wrong to consider this treatise as a mere restatement of Plato's *Republic* with an Islamic veneer. It is true that Plato's political thought, together with Aristotelian metaphysics and Neoplatonic cosmology, served as a basis upon which al-Fārābī constructed his ethical and political theory. Nevertheless, the overall construction and the way in which these elements have been interrelated should be considered as authentically his. Besides the two purposes mentioned above, which were served by the adoption of the Neoplatonic cosmological system, one might here add a third: the exposition of of Ismāʿīlī Šīʿa doctrines in a Neoplatonic format.

Al-Fārābī considered political philosophy as the leading science of human conduct, one which is based on psychology (i.e., knowledge of the soul) and which also has a moral aspect. It is a form of philosophy which is acquired and cultivated through long experience and observation. For this reason, as will be stated below, he frequently has recourse

to the science of medicine in order to draw comparisons. The philosophical path, however, is open exclusively to an intellectual élite. This perspective led to a sharp distinction between those who are capable of possessing "the science that encompasses the intelligible with certain demonstrations" (*al-ḫāṣṣa*) and those requiring "the methods of persuasion and imaginative representation"[2] laid out by religion, namely the general populace (*al-ʿāmma*). This was certainly an elaboration of Plato's views, but it also paralleled Šīʿa thinking on divine enlightenment and leadership by way of direct descent from the Prophet. In similar fashion al-Fārābī based leadership on knowledge (*maʿrifa*); the latter being derived from "certain demonstrative methods (*burḥān*)... is the superior science and the one with the most perfect (claim to rule or to) authority."[3] The term *maʿrifa* was already in common usage among the mystical confraternities of Islam wherein each individual master was acclaimed as *ʿarīf*.

The one who receives revelation from the Active Intellect is the true ruler. Thus al-Fārābī's concept of a virtuous city (which, as stated above, originally takes its cue from Plato's *Republic*) is divided into a philosophical élite, which acquires knowledge through demonstration, and the common people who require imagery and rules as primary (if not exclusive) means of instruction. For al-Fārābī, therefore, knowledge (*maʿrifa*) and leadership (*riʾāsa*) are entirely interdependent.

The ultimate goal of all human endeavour, as al-Fārābī constantly asserts, is happiness (*saʿāda*), which he identifies with the contemplative life or philosophical enlightenment. The means of attaining this goal, as al-Fārābī states in the *Attainment of Happiness* (*Taḥsīl al-Saʿāda*), are four, all of which are necessary for governance:

Therefore the prince occupies his place by nature and not merely by will. Similarly, a subordinate occupies his place primarily by nature and only secondarily by virtue of the will, which perfects his natural equipment. This being the case, *the theoretical virtue*, *the highest deliberative virtue*, *the highest moral virtue*, and *the highest practical art* are realized and equipped for them by nature: that is, in those who possess superior natures with very great potentialities.[4]

The "highest practical art", that is to say, political science serves the purpose of instilling and disseminating both knowledge and virtue. In line with the ancient Greek philosophical ideal, these are to be instilled in polities by way of instruction and the formation of character.

The Roots of Good Governance

Al-Fārābī seeks guidance also from Plato and Aristotle in matters of theoretical and practical philosophical discourse.

When reflecting on good governance he embarks upon a series of comparisons between the well-being of the soul with that of the body. As Charles Butterworth has correctly noted, for al-Fārābī the individual, who succeeds in understanding how a political community can be well ordered, will do for the citizen what the physician does for the individual sick persons and will accomplish for the citizens who follow his rules what the prophet accomplishes for those who follow his. At the same time full acquaintance with the soul as well as with political life are necessary preconditions. More precisely, the virtuous polity is the one in which the souls of all the inhabitants possess the best possible state of well-being.[5] In describing what constitutes the health of the soul and that of the body al-Fārābī affirms that the health of the soul consists in its capacity to always accomplish what is good as well as to carry out noble actions, whereas its sickness lies in those traits that incline it towards what is evil and wicked as well as to carry out vile actions. Butterworth further states that the strategy of juxtaposing the role of the physician to that of the ruler, insofar as the first cures bodies and the second cures

souls, provides al-Fārābī with the occasion to proceed beyond the individual level. The ruler seeks to establish a state of equilibrium in the city and is concerned with society at large, not with each individual human being [6]

At this juncture, al-Fārābī shifts his attention from the individual to the city. Here again he stresses the moral habits of the people of the city and compares them to the temperament of the individual body. His intention is to affirm the greater status (together with a greater responsibility) enjoyed by the ruler than that enjoyed by the physician. The purpose of the latter is physical; that of the former is ethical. The task of the physician is to heal the body; he should not be concerned with how a person whose health has been restored will act. The ruler, on the other hand, is concerned with how the fruits of his governance will affect the people who receive it. Souls are healed so that they might grow in virtue and act in the service of the city.[7] It is his duty to implement and disseminate morality by enacting laws, thereby becoming also a *legislator*. Since some persons are naturally inclined to excel in virtue and deliberation, the legislator must be a Philosopher by nature. In stating his case in this manner al-Fārābī is merging the roles of Ruler, Philosopher and Legislator as well as *Imām* into one single person:

Therefore the true prince is the same as the philosopher-legislator. As to the idea of Imam in the Arabic language, it signifies merely the one whose example is followed and who is well received...

So let it be clear to you that the idea of the Philosopher, Supreme Ruler, Prince, Legislator, and *Imam* is but a single idea. No matter which one of these words you take, if you proceed to look at what each of them signifies among the majority of those who speak our language, you will find that they all finally agree by signifying one and the same idea.[8]

Once more the impression is gradually given that al-Fārābī had to some extent in mind the Šīʿa community and its leadership. Given the situation the Philosopher-Ruler could also occupy the role of *Imām* since for both Šīʿa and Philosophers true authority comes from superior knowledge. This approach reflects a certain kinship that has always existed between Philosophy and Šīʿa Islam. Whereas the Šīʿa believed that their leaders received divine illumination (by way of their belonging to the family of Muḥammad [*Ahl al-Bayt*]) through which they could accede to the esoteric interpretation (*bāṭin*) of the Qurʾân, the Philosophers claimed that they received divine truth which flowed directly from the Active Intellect.

Furthermore, the way al-Fārābī interrelates the features which describe the Philosopher-Ruler, the Guide (*al-Mahdī*), the *Imām* and the prophet correspond to those found in Šīʿa writings:

[The perfect man and ruler of the perfect state] is the recipient of revelation and God grants him revelation through the medium of the Active Intellect.[9] That which emanates from God to the Active Intellect is emanated from the Active Intellect to the passive Intellect through the intermediary of the acquired intellect; then it emanates to the representative faculty. This man is a philosopher by virtue of that which emanates from the Active intellect to the passive intellect...; and he is, by virtue of that which emanates into the representative faculty, a prophet, a warner of particular events that will happen or are happening, and an informer of divine things [in mimetic form].[10]

In order to bring to fruition all these features in the political realm the ruler must be apt at persuading the masses; he is required to be an outstanding orator capable of rousing other people's imagination by carefully-chosen words. Since most people are not capable of grasping philosophy, this means that he must excel in forming similitudes and images of the objects of knowledge he receives from the

Active Intellect and capable of applying persuasive arguments. This combination of demonstrative knowledge and the application of persuasive imagery appropriate to particular audiences is the mark of the true Prophet.[11] Both images and persuasive arguments "are a religion for others, whereas, so far as he is concerned, they are philosophy. Such, then, is true philosophy and the true philosopher."[12]

Conclusion

Al-Fārābī's works emerge as an attempt to integrate two ideal types – Neoplatonism and Ismāʿīlī Šīʿism. One need not limit the purpose of his works to mere faithful adherence to Šīʿa Islam. He lived in troubled times fraught with political and religious upheaval. It would not be improbable to state that al-Fārābī might have attempted to draw up a plan that would re-establish a renewed Islamic regime in the territories formerly belonging to the declining ʿAbbāsid caliphate; nor would it be an improbable conjecture to affirm that he was proposing a Šīʿa alternative to Sunni rule. Whatever the case al-Fārābī has bequeathed to Islam and to human civilization a metaphysical-ethical-political theory that continues to fascinate many and which bears witness to the genius and the multi-faceted character of Islamic civilization and culture.

NOTE:

[1] See Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, (trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003, p. 121. See also *op. cit*., pp. 130ff.

[2] Al-Fārābī, *The Attainment of Happiness*, IV:5I, in Arthur Hyman & James J. Walsh, Philosophy in the Middle Ages (Second Edition), Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1973, p. 227. The text was reproduced from Muhsin Mahdi (trans.), *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, The Free Press of Glencoe, New York 1962.

[3] Id., *op. cit*., IV:52 in Arthur Hyman & James J. Walsh, *op. cit*., p. 227.

[4] Id., *op. cit*., II:37 in Arthur Hyman & James J. Walsh, *op. cit*., p. 222. Italics mine.

[5] See Charles E. Butterworth, "Ethical and political philosophy", in Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005 p. 276.

[6] *Op. cit*., p. 278.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] Al-Fārābī, *op. cit*., IV:57.58 in Arthur Hyman & James J. Walsh, *op. cit*., p. 230.

[9] For al-Fārābī the angel Gabriel, who is believed to have handed the Qurʾân to the Prophet, is nothing less than a symbolic portrayal of the Active Intellect.

[10] Al- Fārābī, *Mabādiʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila* (*Treatise on the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*), in R. Walzer (ed. and trans.), Al-Farabi on the Perfect State, Oxford 1985, chapter 15, pp. 240-246 quoted in Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi and Andrew Rippin (eds and trans), *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook for Religious Literature*, (second edition), Routledge, London 2013, p. 245.

[11] See al-Fārābī, *Treatise on the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, chapter 25.

[12] Id., *The Attainment of Happiness*., IV:57.59 in Arthur Hyman & James J. Walsh, *op. cit*., p. 230