

Al-Fārābī and His Concept of Epistemological Hierarchy

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The entire life of al-Fārābī (259-339/870-950), who came to be known as the “Second Teacher”, Aristotle being the First, was dedicated to the essence of knowledge and to the the methods of obtaining knowledge. In the present text we will try to demonstrate how al-Fārābī’s concepts of knowledge and of epistemological process become the unifying elements of all major themes in the Muslim philosopher’s works - ontology, philosophy, religion, man, human community and the philosopher-prophet as the perfect ruler.

In his works al-Fārābī poses two fundamental questions: how is it possible for man to gain knowledge and whether man can attain knowledge of an immaterial and transcendent being. The historical and conceptual context that frames al-Fārābī’s writings renders the answer to these questions even more complicated as the “Second Teacher” accommodates and reconciles in his philosophy diverse concepts of knowledge, stemming from diverging and conflicting sources.

On the one hand, al-Fārābī relies on the textual background he shared with his Christian teachers, students and friends in the tenth-century Baghdad. On the whole, the philosophical circles in the Abbasid capital upheld the notion of a direct continuum between the Alexandrian school of late Antiquity and Baghdad. Al-Fārābī himself claimed to be a direct representative of the academic tradition of the school of Alexandria in Baghdad¹. During his education he studied profoundly the writings of the “Firsts” and was deeply influenced by discussions and analyses of translated texts of Plato and Aristotle, their Neoplatonic commentators and the Neoplatonic writings, among them the pseudo-epigraphic writings of Aristotle².

In this context his epistemological intention embraced elements from Aristotelian cosmology and Neoplatonic concept of emanation³. On the other

¹ A critical review of sources, containing biographical and autobiographical notes about and by al-Fārābī, see: Steinschneider, *Alpharabius* 1-11. Gutas, *Biography* 208-13.

² About the philosophical sources for his writings see: Walzer's introduction and commentary in Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State*; Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect* 7-34; Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism* 10-40.

³ His friend and adherent is Abū Bishr Mattā (d. 329/940). Together with al-Fārābī he studied Aristotle’s writings. His student is Yahyā ibn 'Adī (d. 362/972). Both of them, although in different periods, were actively

hand, the strong Neoplatonic influences that tinge his interpretation of the First Teacher – Aristotle – are intertwined with his desire to present the philosophical way of life as fully compatible with the religious values of Islam. In result, the philosopher’s vision was combined with his original teaching about the intellect and its role in his cosmology and concept of prophecy.

The intellect is the unifying element of the three fundamental human realities: the divinely created universe, the human nature and the life of the human community. The intellect organizes these three realities, they are its manifestations. The intellect is the common element, shared by the three of them.

Al-Fārābī commences his analysis of the epistemological process with the superior reality and the cosmology of the supralunary world. The basic principle of his cosmology is the intellect. It constitutes the very substance of the First existent (*al-mawjūd al-awwal*). The First and the One is pure intellect and this intellect is not something different and outside the One⁴.

The most essential characteristic of this intellect is its actuality. Its intellection is an eternal ongoing act of actual cognition, through which the First contemplates and thinks its substance and knows it. In this act of cognition the subject of cogitation, cogitation itself and the object of cogitation are the same⁵.

The First, who holds the most superior position in the universe, is the One and only. At the same time, it is the eternal Source for the creation and the ultimate cause of every existence. The Second Intellect comes to existence through emanation from the One⁶. By contemplating the course of its being, it produces the Third Intellect. By thinking its own essence the Second produces a celestial body, which is called the First Heaven⁷. The dual thinking of the intellects is a productive act, which repeats itself and follows in a descending

involved in the translation process in the Abbasid capital and were prominent translators of Aristotle. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* 145-47; Janos, *Method, Structure, and Development* 260-62.

⁴ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 70-1: “The First is an actual intellect by its substance.”

⁵ An adapted reference to Aristotle’s concept of intelligence as developed in Book XII (*Lambda*) of his *Metaphysics*. Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 343; Merlan, *Monopsychism* 9.

⁶ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 94: “The substance of the First is a substance from which every existent emanates, however it may be, whether perfect or deficient”.

⁷ As regards the dynamics and nuances in the use of “celestial body”, “heaven” in particular as well as the cosmological and astronomical terms, employed by al-Fārābī, cf. Janos, *Method, Structure, and Development* 115-19.

order. Thus, contemplating the First, each intellect generates the intellect on the next level. Contemplating its own essence, it begets a new celestial body.

Thus, the world evolves into an ontological hierarchy where in descending order the lower in rank is emanating from the higher and follows it.

The foundations of this emanation process are provided by the cogitation process, the intelligizing⁸ of the intellects. The intellects are ten in number, all of them being separate (*mufāriqa*) from matter and sharing a common object of contemplation – namely, the First. At the same time, each of them contemplates its own essence. In the hierarchy of being they are also called “secondary” (*thawānī*)⁹, as they hold the second rank in the organized cosmos (*al-martaba ath-thānīya*) by following the One. This First Cause for the existence of all things al-Fārābī identifies with God. The *thawānī*, in their part, are the causes for the existence of celestial bodies.

Thus, the various levels of being are connected and ensue from each other by virtue of a hierarchic causality, in accordance with which the upper levels beget the lower ones and create an all-embracing cosmology. In this way the whole being follows six principles: the first reason, the secondary reasons, the Active Intellect, the soul, the form and the matter¹⁰.

It is this process of emanation that performs the transition between the First Existent¹¹, i.e. the One as a transcendental God, and the world, which is the realm of plurality. The dual object of contemplation of any of the intellects marks the transition from the first level of being, from the One, to the world of diversity and multiplicity, from the simple to the complex¹².

At the same time, the pure intellects¹³ attain their perfect existence in this dual cognitive process because they not only get to know themselves but

⁸ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 60.

⁹ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 2.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 56.

¹² al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 2; English translation in McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 82: "In the first level there cannot be many but rather only a single one. In each of the other grades, there are many".

¹³ "But none of them [the ten intellects] is sufficient in itself to attain excellent existence by thinking its own essence only, but it acquires perfect excellence only by thinking together with its own essence the essence of the First Cause": Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 117; al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 40; English translation in McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 87: "It is as though the excellence of its being [secondary causes and the Active Intellect, M.M.] is completed only through the support of a certain multiplicity".

also come to realize the underlying reasons for their own existence as well as the otherworldly beginnings of each cognitive process.

This cosmological chain strings into a hierarchical line ten pure and separate intellects and ends with the Active Intellect – *al-'aql al-fa'āl*, which is the guiding principle of the sublunary world. All of them, in spite of lacking the imperfections, ensuing from matter and form, are nevertheless imperfect as they owe their existence to something that is more perfect than they are¹⁴. The closer they are to the First, the more perfect they are, and vice versa – the further away from it, the less perfect their existence is.

The lower the level in this hierarchical structure, the more complex its constitution is. Accordingly, the Active Intellect is the least perfect one because it is at the remotest distance from the Prime Cause.

Plurality is much more strongly expressed in its actions because in order to achieve its perfection it has to intelligize simultaneously three objects: The First, all the secondary causes and its own essence¹⁵. This is the main difference in comparison with the other intellects. Neither another intellect, nor another celestial body emanates from it. In spite of the fact that it occupies the lowest and the most remote level from God, the Active Intellect rules the sublunary world.

From an epistemological standpoint that level in the hierarchy of being is the highest that can be achieved by man. The Active Intellect plays a central role in human knowledge because it connects with the rational human soul and only through this man can know the universe.

Human mind is limited by matter and cannot by itself attain knowledge about the transcendent reality. That is why it has to be assisted from the outside and taken away from the material world by the Active Intellect which gives it the primary knowledge as the necessary first step for achieving happiness¹⁶. The Active Intellect initiates the process of thinking in man becoming the primary source of thinking itself and every form of philosophical thinking in particular.

¹⁴ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 40; English in McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 86-7: "Their substance derive from something else and their existence is consequential to the existence of something else. The perfection of their substances does not extend so far that in themselves they do not need to receive existence from something else; it is rather the case that their existence is bestowed on them by something more perfect in existence than they are. This is a deficiency common to all existents other than the First".

¹⁵ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 74.

Al-Fārābī defines the key role of the Active Intellect as „watching over the rational animal and endeavor to have him reach the highest level of perfection that man can reach“¹⁷. The relationship thus created between the Active Intellect and man is visualized by al-Fārābī by the religious image of the Holy Spirit (*ar-rūḥ al-amīn, rūḥ al-quds*)¹⁸.

Through knowledge man steps up in the hierarchy of being, getting away from the material and close to God¹⁹. The Active Intellect serves as a mediator between man and the celestial hierarchy and as a link between the world of immaterial and material leading the potential human intellect to actuality.

All human beings according to al-Fārābī have natural disposition called potential intellect - (*‘aql bi-l-quwwa*) capable of abstracting forms from matters. By birth every man possesses it although it is undeveloped and weak in its initial stages. Al-Fārābī compares it to the limited capacity of a child to walk or to a weak and low flame that cannot set wood on fire²⁰.

The actualization of the capacity of the potential intellect occurs when it is illuminated by the Active Intellect. Describing the correlation between the Active Intellect and the human potential intellect al-Fārābī uses the metaphor of “light which the sun provides to the sight of the eye”²¹.

By the medium of the Active Intellect the human intellect abstracts forms from the material things and receives them as objects of thinking. Al-Fārābī calls these objects of thought intelligibles – *ma ‘qūlāt*. They are forms abstracted from their matters. Before these universal forms were abstracted from their matters they are potential intelligibles. After their abstraction they become actual intelligibles. As actual objects of thought they acquire new level of being through reason and "they come to be among the existing things of the

¹⁷ "ināya bi-l-ḥaywān al-nāṭiq": al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 32; English by McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 82. There is an obvious contrast between al-Fārābī's Active Intellect that is concerned with human soul and "the impassible Mind" in the Aristotle's concept of the Intellect. For further details about combining Aristotelian and Neoplatonic interpretations of Active Intellect see: Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī* 75-6; on the role of the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic register of epistemology in the construction of Al-Farabi's epistemology see: Netton, *Al-Fārābī and His School* 52-3.

¹⁸ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 3; "Protective spirit" or "Holy spirit" in McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 83.

¹⁹ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 36.

²⁰ al-Fārābī, *Iḥṣā' al-'ulūm* 37.

²¹ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 35.

world and are connected, as intelligibles, among the totality of existing things”²².

At this stage of the cognitive process the potential intellect that has acquired the first level of abstraction becomes an actual intellect – *al-'aql bi-l-fi'*. On this level man obtains knowledge of first intelligibles common to all men and that is the first step in his process of acquiring perfection and knowledge²³.

In the process of acquiring knowledge and perfection human intellect can master all forms of the existing world. Thus they are transformed into objects of thought for the actual human intellect, which in its turn reaches a new level of perfection and a higher level of abstraction. At that higher level it becomes acquired intellect – *al-'aql al-mustafād*. Now the human intellect can reach abstract forms that are immaterial. As another kind of intelligibles these are forms that are always actual because they are never in matter. They refer to the First Cause and the whole hierarchal order of separate intellects ending with the Active Intellect²⁴. Al-Fārābī does not say explicitly how these pure forms reach human intellect. It is clear however that they are coming directly as an emanation of the Active Intellect.

This is suggested by the etymological connotation of the highest degree of human intellect – the acquired one. Thus we can explain the main difference between the Active Intellect and the other nine pure intellects: to achieve the perfection of its existence it has to intelligize three instead of two objects of thought. Through intelligizing the rest of the higher separate intellects it provides the human soul with knowledge of the hierarchical order of the universe to which it itself belongs.

Here we are referred to the problem of self-knowledge that al-Fārābī formulates as the guiding principle in the organization of the universe. On its highest level as an acquired intellect the human mind repeats the cognitive act of the rest of the separate intellects. In this „ecstatic act of knowledge”²⁵ it intelligizes itself and in the process of acquiring self-knowledge an identity between the knower and the known is achieved:

²² al-Fārābī, *Risāla fī l-'aql* 20; translated into English in McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 72.

²³ al-Fārābī, *Risāla fī l-'aql* 20; "The thing is intellected [*yu'qa*] initially" means that the forms that are in matters are extracted from their matters and acquire another existence different from their initial existence": McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 73; Dieterici, *Alfārābī's philosophische Abhandlungen* 71.

²⁴ al-Fārābī, *Risāla fī l-'aql* 13-6, 30-1.

²⁵ Merlan, *Monopsychism* 21.

*Man who is a potential intellect becomes an actual intellect in itself after he was not, and an object of thought in itself after he was not and he becomes a divine after being a material one*²⁶.

Unlike the other separate intellects which produce in this way a lower ontological level human intellect is transformed into something different; it climbs up the hierarchy of being achieving similarity to the rest of the intellects (*ṣāra shabīhan bi-l-ashīyā' al-mufāriqa*²⁷). Thus the acquired intellect becomes substance of man and operates as a link between the human intellect and the transcendental Active Intellect²⁸. In this way the knowledge as an ontological concept is connected with the epistemological state of man.

The final goal of human existence coincides with the final goal of man's reason, i.e. to reach a state of an immaterial pure intellect²⁹ and to devote human life to pure contemplation. The very stages of the epistemological process confirm the conclusion that human perfection is not something static but a process, an incessant progress in knowledge getting closer and closer to extreme happiness.

Thus al-Fārābī corroborates the thesis that through reason man naturally enters a hierarchy that goes beyond his earthly existence. The highest goal of individual life is devotion to spiritual life, to immaterial and transcendent intelligible in order to achieve harmony with the whole.

The individual human being becomes aware of himself as, on the one hand, a part of the cosmological hierarchy and, on the other hand, as a part of the community of man. Intellect and rational reasoning lead man to this harmony by intelligizing the three fundamental realities: created universe, human nature and human society.

Al-Fārābī does not provide an unambiguous definition of happiness³⁰. The alternative images of happiness share the common idea that the drive for

²⁶ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 36; English in McGinnis and Reisman, *Anthology* 84.

²⁷ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 206; al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 35.

²⁸ al-Fārābī, *Risāla fī l-'aql* 27.

²⁹ "Felicity means that the human soul reaches a degree of perfection in its existence where it is in no need of matter for its support, since it becomes one of the incorporeal things and of the immaterial substances and remains in that state continuously forever.": English in Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 205.

³⁰ For different interpretations of the nature of happiness see: Galston, *The Theoretical and Practical Dimensions of Happiness* 120-25.

its realization is an incessant process that mobilizes all mental and spiritual strengths of man. The final goal of human life lies beyond the material world because only the souls of those who have lived a spiritual life can survive in the afterlife³¹. Consequently what matters in this world is following the path to attain perfect knowledge which is the supreme happiness. The steps on this path are clearly outlined:

Since what is intended by man's existence is that he attains supreme happiness, he – in order to achieve it – needs to know what happiness is, make it his end, and hold it before his eyes. Then, after that, he needs to know the things he ought to do in order to attain happiness, and then do these actions³².

The attainment of happiness is defined as a conscious moral choice mobilizing all spiritual strengths in assisting the rational part of human soul; as a result man consciously directs his actions to advance to the Good³³.

Thus al-Fārābī introduces in his concept of human intellect another subordination: the theoretical and the practical reason, the sole function of the latter is to serve the former one helping him to bring man to happiness³⁴. Human happiness can be fully realized by achieving perfection of theoretical and practical reasoning; this can be accomplished by good actions which take place in society.

The individual who is completely devoted to contemplation and is isolated from community of man is incapable to grasp the wholeness of the world. Only through interaction with other human beings he can overcome the limitations of individual existence and to become aware of his place in the big picture of the society and the world. Only through assistance by the others he can approach his own happiness because the innate disposition of every

³¹ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 262-63.

³² al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 78; into English translated by Fawzi Najjar in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy* 35.

³³ al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 73.

³⁴ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 209.

single man is to join other human beings and to associate with other men³⁵. Only within society he can fully develop the potential of his faculties³⁶.

The social framework where man can attain happiness is called by al-Fārābī “the virtuous city” (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*)³⁷. In this society of excellence man can in cooperation with other men overcome the limitations of the individual life and to reach state of perfection through his inborn nature. This city is organized on the basis of the same metaphysical principles that organize the wholeness of being emanating from God

The order and the various ranks in the political community symbolize the universal cosmos as a hierarchically structured and coherent whole³⁸. The ontological hierarchy of the cosmos is reflected in the epistemological hierarchy of the virtuous city. All the citizens of the virtuous city are divided according to their ability to develop their virtue through participation in social life and their level of education. Social hierarchy is a natural one since the position of every individual is predetermined according to his natural disposition to know and to learn things. Thus the natural hierarchy in the ideal virtuous society is a replica of the heavenly order³⁹. It is derived from the epistemological hierarchy which contains a hierarchy of the sources and the methods of acquiring knowledge.

The hierarchical structure of human knowledge is determined by the subject of each science and thus it is ontologically founded since the very structure of human knowledge mirrors the structure of the universe. The universe features both hierarchical order and coalescence due to the causality that links the separate levels of being. Likewise, the sciences are coalescent in terms of their object of study and at the same time their various branches stem out from each other in a causal sequence.

Following this logic al-Fārābī puts philosophy on top of all sciences because its task, i.e. to give „account of the beings as they are perceived by the

³⁵ Mahdi, M. (trans.), *Alfarabi's Philosophy* 23.

³⁶ "Man belongs to the species that cannot accomplish their necessary affairs or achieve their best state, except through the association of many groups of them in a single dwelling -place.": English translation by Fauzi Najjar in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy* 32; al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa* 69.

³⁷ Walzer, *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* 231.

³⁸ On the metaphysical background of the political community and its structural principles see: O'Meara, *Platonopolis* 187-89; Smirnov, *Understanding Justice* 288-92.

³⁹ al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-sa'āda* 24-5.

intellect with certain demonstrations⁴⁰, guarantees the foundation for the development of the other sciences whereas its method surpasses all the rest being the only path for obtaining certain knowledge about corporeal and incorporeal beings. All the other sciences are its subordinates.

That is why the highest position in the virtuous city is specifically assigned to the Philosopher. Philosophers can grasp by themselves the idea of happiness and discover the means for its realization. Therefore they are the best citizens and occupy the upper ranks of society.

The Philosopher is endowed with the highest theoretical and practical virtues, because for al-Fārābī real philosophy, in contrast to defective one (*falsafa nāqīṣa*⁴¹), gives the real Philosopher the opportunity to intervene in the life of society by sharing his knowledge and helping others. All citizens of the virtuous city ought to have knowledge of the metaphysical truths about the First Cause, the separate intellects, the celestial spheres and so on until the natural bodies, the place of man in the universe and his connection with the Active Intellect⁴². The paths to obtaining such theoretical knowledge differ according to different intellectual capacities of men. The multitude of citizens needs teacher and instructor⁴³.

Only the real Philosopher can answer this need and be the actual ruler of the virtuous community. As such he has achieved the perfection of his theoretical wisdom. His intellect, becoming an acquired one, is capable of contemplating the Active Intellect. Only when man attains this highest rank and when there is no intermediary between him and the Active Intellect his acquired intellect becomes matter for the Tenth celestial intellect – the Active one. He is the mediator that passes on the revelation from God to man. Al-Fārābī writes:

This emanation that proceeds from the Active Intellect to the passive through the mediation of the acquired intellect, is revelation. Now because the Active Intellect emanates from the being of the First Cause, it can for this reason be said that it is the First Cause that brings about revelation to this man through the

⁴⁰ Ibid. 83; into English by Mahdi, *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* 41.

⁴¹ al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-sa'āda* 87.

⁴² Walzer, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* 276-78; al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Milla* 44-5.

⁴³ al-Fārābī, *as-Siyāsa* 78.

*mediation of the Active Intellect. The rule of this man is the supreme rule; all other human rulerships are inferior to it and are derived from it*⁴⁴.

This person becomes a Prophet when the Active Intellect has an impact on another faculty of his soul – the faculty of representation, which is “extremely powerful⁴⁵” and developed to perfection in him. The main activity of this faculty of imagination is to receive the intelligibles by representing or imitating them. Through his perfect imagination the Prophet transforms the metaphysical truths in images, in stories and in symbols in order to persuade and instruct those less perfect than him in grasping the intellectual truths. The language of imagination, imitation and persuasion is the language of religion. For example in order to be better understood by the ordinary people the process of revelation and the transformation of the human intellect can be translated in religious symbols and images and may be presented in the encounters of the Prophet with the Angel of Revelation – *Jibrīl*.

The Philosopher-prophet directly receives the revealed laws of God that should organize the life of human community. He is the lawgiver as well as the ruler who knows how to use theoretical wisdom to promote the happiness of the community and knows the means how to attain this goal. So the Philosopher-prophet is not the passive thinker withdrawn from active social life - on the contrary, he acts as an organizing and structuring principle of the society.

Within the Philosopher-prophet al-Fārābī incorporates the main characteristics of the true philosopher of Plato and the prophet of Islam; that suggests that his basic intention was to integrate two different concepts of knowledge and to provide a coherent and universal epistemological framework.

Combining two completely different epistemologies, al-Fārābī reconciles their controversies and creates an universal paradigm of human knowledge. It provides the unifying pattern for all the major themes of his philosophical legacy.

In a challenging and provocative fashion for his contemporaries al-Fārābī wants to "rationalize" religion and provide a philosophical explanation of prophecy. He believes that philosophy and religion comprise the same

⁴⁴ al-Fārābī, *as-Siyāsa* 79-80; English by Najjar in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy* 36-7.

⁴⁵ Walzer, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* 223.

subjects and deal with the same reality⁴⁶. Religion however serves philosophy because it is only its imitation. Religion deals with "opinions and actions, determined and restricted with stipulations and prescribed for a community by their first ruler"⁴⁷. Consequently it is for the masses since their intellect finds it difficult to grasp the principles of beings, their hierarchy and the real goal of human life. So masses rely on imitations of the real knowledge as the only way to come closer to it.

Through this relation between philosophy and religion al-Fārābī reproduces the dynamics of a deep cultural transformation within Muslim society in X century. Philosophy has ceased to be a servant of religion as was its role at the time of al-Kindī (d. ca. 252/866). It has emancipated from theological discourse. Inspired by the Greek Classics al-Fārābī persuaded his contemporaries that philosophy is not only an autonomous science but is also an universal one. Being the oldest science it preceded religion. In the course of history philosophy had been embraced by the most enlightened and best developed societies. A permanent body of universal philosophical knowledge had been preserved and transferred by the Chaldeans, the Ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, the Syrians and the Arabs⁴⁸.

Although al-Fārābī mentions particular societies devoted to philosophy he does not make clear whether the virtuous city ruled by the Philosopher-prophet had existed in the past or existed in his own epoch. Bearing in mind the uncertainty and instability of his own times we may suggest that the period of the early *umma* ruled by the Prophet Muḥammad and the rule of the Four Righteous Caliphs may be considered as an exemplary of this political ideal.

Al-Fārābī's understanding that the ultimate happiness can be attained in the afterlife but only as a result of the efforts of man during his earthly existence bears the mark of the conflict between the two major tendencies in his thought - the demand to surpass the limitations of the material world and the demand to engage man in its organization. It is the concept of the perfect political order of the virtuous city governed by the Philosopher-prophet that fully reconciles all these tensions. Thus his philosophical pathos leads to a unified vision of the structure of all beings culminating in a social utopia with

⁴⁶ al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-sa'āda* 89.

⁴⁷ al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Milla* 43; into English translated by Butterworth, *Alfarabi: The Political Writings* 93.

⁴⁸ al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-sa'āda* 86.

an epistemological foundation that not only his contemporaries but every community of men should strive for.

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