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Sebastian Günther

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Al-Fārābī and His Concept of Epistemological Hierarchy

Mariana Malinova

Al-Fārābī (259–339/870–950), known as the "Second Teacher" (Aristotle being the First), dedicated his life to the essence of knowledge and to the methods for obtaining knowledge. The present text aims to demonstrate that al-Fārābī's concepts of knowledge and the epistemological process become the unifying elements of all major themes in his works and that the concept of epistemological hierarchy plays a key role in his understanding of the virtuous city and the Philosopher-prophet as its perfect ruler.

Throughout his works, al-Fārābī poses two fundamental questions: How is it possible to gain knowledge, and how can knowledge of an immaterial and transcendent being be attained? The historical and conceptual context that frames al-Fārābī's writings renders the answers to these questions even more complex, since his philosophy accommodates and reconciles various concepts of knowledge that stem from diverging and conflicting sources.

Initially, al-Fārābī relies on the textual background he shared with his Christian teachers, students, and friends in tenth-century Baghdad. During his education, he rigorously studied the writings of the "Firsts," and was deeply influenced by discussions and analyses of the translated texts of Plato and Aristotle, their Neoplatonic commentators, and the Neoplatonic writings, among them the pseudo-epigraphic writings of Aristotle.[1] Overall, the philosophical circles in the ʿAbbasid 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 Baghdad.[2]

In this context, his epistemological intention embraced elements from both Aristotelian cosmology and the Neoplatonic concept of emanation.[3] There-

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[1] About the philosophical sources for his writings, see Walzer's introduction and commentary in Walzer, *Fārābī on the perfect state*; Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on intellect* 7–34; Fakhry, *Fārābī, founder of Islamic Neoplatonism* 10–40.

[2] For a critical review of sources, containing biographical and autobiographical notes about and by al-Fārābī, see Steinschneider, *Fārābī (Alpharabius)* 1–11; Gutas, Biography 208–213.

[3] His friend and adherent is Abū Bishr Mattā (d. 329/940). Together with al-Fārābī, he studied

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fore, 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. All these result in al-Fārābī's vision combining his original teaching about the intellect, and its role in his cosmology, with the concept of prophecy.

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

1   The Intellect and the Created Universe

Al-Fārābī commences his analysis of the epistemological process with the superior reality and the cosmology of the supralunar 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 is pure intellect, and this intellect is not something different or outside the One.[4]

The most essential characteristic of this intellect is its actuality, attained by the act of intellection. Its intellection is an eternal and ongoing act of actual cognition, through which the First contemplates, thinks its substance, and then knows it. In this act of cognition, the subject of cogitation, cogitation itself, and the object of cogitation are the same.[5]

The First is the One and Only, and it holds the most superior position in the universe. At the same time, it is the eternal Source for creation and the ultimate cause of everything in existence. The Second Intellect comes to existence through emanation from the One.[6] 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 Heaven.[7] The dual think-

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Aristotle's writings. His student is Yaḥyā b. ʿAdī (d. 362/972). Both of them, although in different periods, were actively involved in the translation process in the ʿAbbasid capital and were prominent translators of Aristotle. Gutas, *Greek thought* 145–147; Janos, *Method* 260–262.

4 "The First is an actual intellect by its substance." Walzer, *Fārābī on the perfect state* 70–71.

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

6 "The substance of the First is a substance from which every existent emanates, however it may be, whether perfect or deficient." Walzer, *Fārābī on the perfect state* 94.

7 As regards to the dynamics and nuances of the use of "celestial body," "heaven," as well as the cosmological and astronomical terms employed by al-Fārābī, see Janos, *Method* 115–119.

ing of the intellects is a productive act, which repeats itself and follows in a descending order. Subsequent to contemplating the First, each intellect generates the intellect of 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 emanates from the higher and follows it.

The foundations of this emanation process are provided by the cogitation process, the intelligizing of the intellects.[8] The intellects are ten in number. They are all separate (*mufāriqa*) from matter and share 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 al-thāniyya*) by following the One. Al-Fārābī identifies this First Cause for the existence of all things 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, form, and matter.[10]

This process of emanation performs the transition between the First Existent,[11] i.e., the One as a transcendental God, and the world, 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 complex.[12] At the same time, the pure intellects attain their perfect existence in this dual cognitive process, not only because they get to know themselves but also becausee they come to realize the underlying reasons for their own existence, as well as the otherworldly beginnings of each cognitive process.[13]

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8   Walzer, Fārābī on the perfect state 60.

9   Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 2.

10   Ibid., 2.

11   Walzer, Fārābī on the perfect state 56.

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

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, *Fārābī on the perfect state* 117. "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." Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 40; English translation in McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic philosophy* 87.

This cosmological chain strings ten pure and separate intellects into a hierarchical line that ends with the Active Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl*), the guiding principle of the sublunary world. In spite of lacking the imperfections that ensue from matter and form, they are nevertheless all imperfect, as they owe their existence to something that is more perfect than they are.[14] 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.

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

Plurality is far more strongly expressed in its actions because, in order to achieve its perfection, it has to simultaneously intelligize three objects: the First, all the secondary causes, and its own essence.[15] This is the main difference in comparison to 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.

2   The Active Intellect and Its Role in Human Knowledge

From an epistemological standpoint, the level of the Active Intellect is the highest that can be achieved by man in the hierarchy of being. The Active Intellect itself plays a central role in human knowledge because of its connection to the rational human soul. Only through this connection can man know the universe.

The human mind is limited by matter and cannot attain knowledge about transcendent reality by itself. That is why the mind needs to be assisted from the outside. It has to be removed or separated from the material world by the Active Intellect, which gives it primary knowledge, the first step necessary for achieving happiness.[16] The Active Intellect initiates the process of thinking in man, thereby becoming the primary source of thinking in general, and every form of philosophical thinking in particular.

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14   "Their substance derives 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." Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 40; English translation in McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic philosophy* 86–87.

15   Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 34.

16   Ibid., 74.

Al-Fārābī defines the key role of the Active Intellect as "watching over the rational animal and endeavor[ing] to have him reach the highest level of perfection that man can reach."[17] Thus, he visualizes the relationship created between the Active Intellect and man through the religious image of the Holy Spirit (al-rūḥ al-amīn, rūḥ al-quds).[18]

Man steps up in the hierarchy of being through knowledge, thereby distancing himself from the material and getting closer to God.[19] The Active Intellect serves as a mediator between man and the celestial hierarchy, and also as a link between the worlds of the immaterial and the material, leading the potential human intellect to actuality.

All human beings, according to al-Fārābī, have a natural disposition, called potential intellect (ʿaql bi-l-quwwa), capable of abstracting form from matter. Every man possesses it at birth. In its initial stages, however, it is still undeveloped and weak. Al-Fārābī compares it to the child's limited capacity for walking, or to a weak and low flame that cannot set wood on fire.[20]

The actualization of the capacity of the potential intellect occurs when the Active Intellect illuminates it. In 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 material things and receives them as objects of thinking. Al-Fārābī calls these objects of thought "intelligibles" (maʿqūlāt). They are forms abstracted from their matter. Before these universal forms are abstracted from their matter, they are potential intelligibles. After their abstraction, they become actual intelligibles. As actual objects of thought, they acquire a new level of being through reason, and "they come to be among the existing things of the world and are connected, as intelligibles, among the totality of existing things."[22]

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17   "ʿInāya bi-l-ḥaywān al-nāṭiq." Al-Fārābī, al-Siyāsa 32; English translation by McGinnis and Reisman, Classical Arabic philosophy 82. There is an obvious contrast between al-Fārābī's Active Intellect, which is concerned with the human soul, and "the impassible Mind" in Aristotle's concept of the Intellect. For further details about combining Aristotelian and Neoplatonic interpretations of the Active Intellect, see Fakhry, Fārābi, founder of Islamic Neoplatonism 75–76; on the role of the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic register of epistemology in the construction of al-Farabi's epistemology, see Netton, Fārābī and his school 52–53.

18   Al-Fārābī, Siyāsa 3; "Protective spirit" or "Holy spirit" in McGinnis and Reisman, Classical Arabic philosophy 83.

19   Al-Fārābī, Siyāsa 36.

20   Al-Fārābī, Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿulūm 37.

21   Al-Fārābī, Siyāsa 35.

22   Al-Fārābī, Risāla 20, translated into English in McGinnis and Reisman, Classical Arabic philosophy 72.

At this stage of the cognitive process, the potential intellect, which has acquired the first level of abstraction, becomes an actual intellect (*al-ʿaql bi-l-fiʿl*). On this level, man obtains knowledge of first intelligibles common to all men. It is the first step in his process of acquiring perfection and knowledge.[23] In this process, the human intellect can master all forms in the existing world. Thus, they are transformed into objects of thought for the actual human intellect, which, in turn, reaches a new level of perfection and a higher level of abstraction. At this higher level, it becomes acquired intellect (*al-ʿaql al-mustafād*). The human intellect can now attain abstract forms that are immaterial. As another kind of intelligible, these forms are always actual because they are never material. They refer to the First Cause and the entire hierarchal order of separate intellects, ending with the Active Intellect.[24] Although al-Fārābī does not explicitly explain how these pure forms reach the human intellect, it is clear that they come directly as an emanation of the Active Intellect.

This is suggested by the etymological connotation of the highest degree of the human intellect—the acquired one. Thus, we can explain the main difference between the Active Intellect and the other nine, pure intellects; in order to achieve the perfection of its existence, the Active Intellect 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.

At this point, 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: "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 [being] after being a material one."[26]

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23   "The thing is intellected [*yuʿqal*] initially" means, the forms that are in matter are extracted from their matter and acquire another existence, different from their initial existence. Al-Fārābī, *Risāla* 20; McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic philosophy* 73; Dieterici, *Alfārābī's Philosophische Abhandlungen* 71.

24   Al-Fārābī, *Risāla* 13–16, 30–31.

25   Merlan, *Monopsychism* 21.

26   Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 36; English translation in McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic philosophy* 84.

Unlike the other separate intellects, which, in this way, produce a lower ontological level, the human intellect is transformed into something different; it climbs up the hierarchy of being, achieving similarity to the rest of the separate things (*ṣāra shabīhan bi-l-ashīyāʾ al-mufāriqa*).[27] Thus, the acquired intellect becomes the substance of man and operates as a link between the human intellect and the transcendental Active Intellect.[28] In this way, knowledge, as an ontological concept, is connected with the epistemological state of man.

The final goals of human existence coincide with the final goals of man's reason, in other words, to reach the state of an immaterial pure intellect[29] 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. In order to achieve harmony with the whole, the highest goal of individual life is devotion to spiritual life and to immaterial and transcendent intelligibles. On the one hand, the individual human being becomes aware of himself as a part of the cosmological hierarchy. On the other hand, he becomes aware of himself as a part of the human community. Intellect and rational reasoning lead man to this harmony by intelligizing the three fundamental realities, the created universe, human nature, and human society.

Al-Fārābī does not provide an unambiguous definition of happiness.[30] The alternative images of happiness share this common idea; that is, the drive for its realization is an incessant process that mobilizes all the 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

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27   Walzer, *Fārābī on the perfect state* 206; al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 35. In *Siyāsa* 34, al-Fārābī refers to the separate things stating that "things that are intelligibles in themselves are separate from material bodies and do not subsist in any matter whatsoever. These are the intelligibles by virtue of their substances"; English translation in McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic philosophy* 83.

28   Al-Fārābī, *Risāla* 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 translation in Walzer, *Fārābī on the perfect state* 205.

30   For different interpretations of the nature of happiness, see Galston, Theoretical and practical dimensions 120–125.

the afterlife.[31] 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 outlined clearly:

> 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 actions.[32]

The attainment of happiness is defined as a conscious moral choice, mobilizing all spiritual strengths in assisting the rational part of the human soul. As a result, man consciously directs his actions to advance to the Good.[33]

Thus, in his concept of the human intellect, al-Fārābī subordinates practical reason to theoretical reason. The sole function of practical reason is to serve the theoretical by helping the human being attain happiness.[34] Human happiness can be fully realized by achieving perfection in theoretical and practical reasoning; this can be accomplished by performing good actions in society.

3 Knowledge and Its Role within Human Community

The individual who is completely devoted to contemplation, and is isolated from the community of man, is incapable of grasping the wholeness of the world. Only through interaction with other human beings can he overcome the limitations of individual existence and become aware of his place in the larger picture of society and the world. Only through assistance from others can he approach his own happiness, because the innate disposition of every single man is to join other human beings and to associate with other men.[35] Only within society can he fully develop the potential of his faculties.[36]

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31 Walzer, Fārābī on the perfect state 262–263.
32 Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 78; translated into English by Fawzi Najjar in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval political philosophy* 35.
33 Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 73.
34 Walzer, Fārābī on the perfect state 209.
35 Alfarabi, *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." Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 69, English translation by Fauzi Najjar in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval political philosophy* 32.

Al-Fārābī calls the social framework through which man can attain happiness "the virtuous city" (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*).[37] Within this society of excellence and in cooperation with other men, man can, in cooperation with other men, overcome the limitations of individual life, thereby reaching a 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 within the political community symbolize the universal cosmos, as a hierarchically structured and coherent whole.[38] The ontological hierarchy of the cosmos is reflected in the epistemological hierarchy of the virtuous city. All 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 order.[39] 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. Due to the causality that links the separate levels of being, the universe features both hierarchical order and coalescence. Likewise, the sciences are coalescent in terms of their object of study; at the same time, their various branches stem from each other in a causal sequence.

Following this logic, al-Fārābī places philosophy above all the sciences because its task (i.e., to give "account of the beings as they are perceived by the intellect with certain demonstrations"[40]) guarantees the foundation for the development of the other sciences. Its method, surpassing all the rest, represents the only path for obtaining certain knowledge about corporeal and incorporeal beings. As such, 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,

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37   Walzer, Fārābī on the perfect state 231.
38   On the metaphysical background of the political community and its structural principles, see O'Meara, *Platonopolis* 187–189; Smirnov, Understanding justice 288–292.
39   Al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* 24–25.
40   Ibid. 83; translated into English by Mahdi in Alfarabi, *Philosophy* 41.

and discover the means for its realization. Therefore, they are the best citizens and occupy the upper ranks of society.

According to al-Fārābī, the Philosopher is endowed with the highest theoretical and practical virtues because real philosophy, in contrast to defective philosophy (*falsafa nāqiṣa*),[41] gives the real Philosopher an 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, the natural bodies, the place of man in the universe, and his connection to the Active Intellect.[42] The paths to obtaining such theoretical knowledge differ according to the different intellectual capacities of men. The majority of citizens need both teacher and instructor.[43]

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, does his acquired intellect become matter for the Tenth celestial intellect—the Active one. He is the mediator, passing 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 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 powerful"[45] and developed to perfection in him. The main activity of this fac-

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41   Al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* 87.
42   Walzer, *Fārābī on the perfect state* 276–278; al-Fārābī, *Milla* 44–45.
43   Al-Fārābī, *Siyāsa* 78.
44   Ibid., 79–80; English translation by Najjar in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval political philosophy* 36–37.
45   Walzer, *Fārābī on the perfect state* 223.

ulty of imagination is to receive the intelligibles by representing or imitating them. Through his perfect imagination, the Prophet transforms the metaphysical truths into images, stories, and symbols, in order to persuade and instruct those who are less perfect than him when grasping the intellectual truths. The language of imagination, imitation, and persuasion is the language of religion. For example, in order for ordinary people to understand better the process of revelation and the transformation of the human intellect, these can be translated, via religious symbols and images, and may be presented in the encounters of the Prophet with the Angel of Revelation (Gabriel).

Therefore, the perfect ruler of the excellent community must be a person who is "a wise man and a philosopher and an accomplished thinker who employs an intellect of divine quality, … and a visionary prophet: who warns of thing to come and tells of particular things which exist at present."[46] This 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. Further, he possesses the knowledge and means to attain this goal. As such, 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 society.

Pertaining to the Philosopher-prophet, al-Fārābī incorporates the main characteristics of Plato's true philosopher and of the Prophet of Islam. This 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 contradictions, and creates a universal paradigm of human knowledge. It provides the unifying pattern for all 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 subjects and deal with the same reality.[47] However, religion 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."[48] Consequently, religion is deemed for the masses, since their intellect

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46　　Ibid., 245–247; al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* 92.
47　　Al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* 89.
48　　Al-Fārābī, *Milla* 43; translated into English by Butterworth in Alfarabi, *Political writings* 93.

finds it difficult to grasp the principles of beings, their hierarchy, and the real goal of human life. Therefore, masses rely on imitations of real knowledge in order to approach and get closer to it.

4   Conclusion

Through this relationship between philosophy and religion, al-Fārābī reproduces the dynamics of a deep cultural transformation within Muslim society in the tenth century.[49] Philosophy had ceased to be a servant of religion,[50] which was its role at the time of al-Kindī (d. ca. 252/866). Within the translation movement of his time, the problems posed by "foreign" philosophy were woven into religious, monotheistic discourse and became part of rational theology in Islam. In addition, philosophy emancipated itself from theological discourse. Inspired by the Greek classics, al-Fārābī persuaded his contemporaries that philosophy is not only an autonomous science but also a universal one that precedes religion, since it is the oldest science. 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 Arabs.[51]

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 suggest that the period of the early *umma*, ruled by the Prophet Muhammad, may be considered as an example of this political ideal.

Al-Fārābī's understanding that ultimate happiness can be attained in the afterlife (albeit only because of the efforts of man during his earthly existence) bears the mark of the conflict between the two major tendencies in his thought—that is, 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 of these tensions.

Al-Fārābī's philosophical pathos leads to a unified vision of the structure of all beings, culminating in a social utopia that has an epistemological founda-

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49   Gutas, *Greek thought* 151–187.
50   Walzer, New studies 180.
51   Al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* 86.

tion—a vision not only for his contemporaries, but one that should be shared with and striven for by every human community.

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