



فارابی و اندیشه های او
مجموعه مقالات نخستین کنگره جهانی
فارابی و فرهنگ و تمدن اسلامی



ویراسته
رضا ماحوزی



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(دهم تا دوازدهم اسفند ماه ۱۴۰۱)

ویراسته

رضا ماحوزی



کتابخانه
حسین‌علی‌بن‌الحسن
چهارمین کنگره علمی فارابی



پژوهشکده مطالعات فرهنگی، اجتماعی و تمدنی
وزارت علوم، تحقیقات و فناوری
(پمفات)



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ویراستار علمی: رضا ماحوزی (عضو هیئت علمی پژوهشگاه مطالعات فرهنگی، اجتماعی و تمدنی و دبیر علمی همایش)

ناشر: پژوهشگاه مطالعات فرهنگی، اجتماعی و تمدنی

طراح جلد و صفحه‌آرا: علی قربی

چاپ اول: پاییز ۱۴۰۲

شمارگان: ۴۰۰

قیمت: ۳۸۴۰۰۰ تومان

شابک: ۹۷۸-۶۲۲-۲۲۶-۱۷۶-۴

(الف)

تلفن: ۲۲۵۷۰۷۷۷

وبسایت: www.iscs.ac.ir

نشانی: تهران، خیابان پاسداران، خیابان شهید مؤمن نژاد (گلستان یکم)، شماره ۱۲۴.
پست الکترونیکی: publication@iscs.ac.ir
کلیه آثار منتشره این پژوهشگاه در جهت ایجاد فضای آزاد علمی و نظر شخصی نویسندگان محترم آن است و لزوماً مورد تأیید پژوهشگاه نیست.

سرشناسه: کنگره جهانی فارابی و فرهنگ و تمدن اسلامی (نخستین: ۱۴۰۱: تهران)

عنوان و نام پدیدآور: فارابی و اندیشه‌های او: مجموعه مقالات نخستین کنگره جهانی فارابی و فرهنگ و تمدن اسلامی (دهم تا دوازدهم اسفند ماه ۱۴۰۱) /

ویراسته رضا ماحوزی: [برای] جشنواره بین‌المللی فارابی ویژه تحقیقات علوم انسانی و اسلامی.

مشخصات نشر: تهران: پژوهشگاه مطالعات فرهنگی، اجتماعی و تمدنی، انتشارات، ۱۴۰۳.

مشخصات ظاهری: ۳۷۷، ۳۱۸ ص.

شابک: ۹۷۸-۶۲۲-۲۲۶-۱۷۶-۴

وضعیت فهرست نویسی: فیبا

یادداشت: زبان: فارسی-انگلیسی.

یادداشت: کتابنامه.

عنوان دیگر: مجموعه مقالات نخستین کنگره جهانی فارابی و فرهنگ و تمدن اسلامی (دهم تا دوازدهم اسفند ماه ۱۴۰۱).

موضوع: فارابی، محمدبن محمد، ۲۶۰-؟-۳۳۹ ق. -- نقد و تفسیر -- کنگره‌ها

موضوع: فیلسوفان اسلامی -- کنگره‌ها! Muslim philosophers -- Congresses

شناسه افزوده: ماحوزی، رضا، ۱۳۵۸ -، ویراستار؛ - Mahoozi, Reza, 1979

شناسه افزوده: پژوهشگاه مطالعات فرهنگی، اجتماعی و تمدنی، انتشارات

شناسه افزوده: جشنواره بین‌المللی فارابی

رده بندی کنگره: BBR۳۲۷

رده بندی دیویی: ۱۸۹/۱

شماره کتابشناسی ملی: ۹۶۵۲۳۸۱

وضعیت رکورد کتابشناختی: فیبا

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The philosopher-prophet as the ideal ruler

Al-Fārābī's justification of the right to govern

*Mariana Malinova*¹

Introduction

Though it is uncertain if there are perennial issues in the history of political thought there are some questions that seem to reappear since its beginning in Ancient Greece to the present day. In his classic "Two Treatises of Government" (1690) John Locke provides an insightful formulation: "The great question which in all ages has disturbed mankind and brought on them the greatest part of those mischiefs which have ruined cities, depopulated countries, and disordered the peace of the world, has been, not whether there be power in the world, nor whence it came, but who should have it". The settling of this point determines the security of princes and the peace and welfare of the people they rule.

Al-Fārābī is the first thinker who provides a detailed and philosophically grounded answer to "the great question" within the context of Islam². This text examines the epistemic foundation for the right to govern and the figure of the philosopher-prophet as the central element in al-Fārābī's political philosophy.

I.

The Prophet Muhammad was not only the religious but also the political leader of his followers; he personified the unification of spiritual and political authority. This fusion brought to life a power, which possessed a divine sanction and was exercised in the name of God by His Prophet. It can be argued that at that moment in history no ruler on earth could match the level of legitimacy and devotion that Muslims

1. New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria

2. Locke, John, *Two Treatises of Government* 218-219.

cherished for Muhammad. With the foundation and government of the city of Medina he provided a political ideal that Muslims revered and followed from then on up to the present time. His indisputable authority was bound to create after his death the problem of succession, dividing Muslims into Sunni and Shi'a. Thus, the first conflict in Islam was not "about the nature of the divine, but about who should lead and how the leader should be appointed"¹.

The preservation of the religious-political unity demanded the formulation of convincing criteria for the selection of the ruler, his obligations, his relations with the ruled and the general goals of political association. Al-Fārābī was the philosopher who systematically elaborated on these topics; three centuries after the death of the Prophet he was aware not only of the turbulent history of Muslims but also of the new possibilities for political theorizing opened by the legacy of the ancient Greek philosophy.

Being fully aware of this political predicament, al-Fārābī advocates the idea that the right to rule within the ideal human community is vested in the individual possessing scientific knowledge of universal truths and mastering the methods to attain it. This knowledge encompasses metaphysical comprehension of the world's structure, the fundamental principles of existence, humanity's place in the created universe, understanding of human nature, and insight into the societal framework. Essentially, it pertains to philosophical knowledge, which, owing to its subject matter, is supreme and universal. Al-Fārābī perceives it as a comprehensive and unchanging body of knowledge that has been nurtured and transmitted by diverse societies throughout the centuries². He maintains that the preservation and transfer of this universal and "certain knowledge" can only be achieved through a scientific understanding of the world, necessitating the acquisition of philosophical learning and mastery of methods of logic. According to al-Fārābī, there is no doubt that the

1. Black, A., *The History of Islamic Political Thought* 14-15.

2. In his discourse, al-Fārābī provides a definition of philosophy as "the science that encompasses the intelligibles with certain demonstrations". He asserts that while the historical origins of philosophy can be traced from the Chaldeans up to his Arab contemporaries, the entirety of this science was originally expounded in the Greek language. However, through the process of translation, this body of knowledge became accessible in the Arabic language as well. *Attainment of Happiness* 42-43; see also: Germann, N., "How do we learn? Al-Fārābī's Epistemology of Teaching" 148.

attainment of this "certain knowledge" represents the highest level of human knowledge and the ultimate purpose of human existence, which he terms as "supreme happiness"¹. This objective of human existence lies beyond the confines of the material realm, in the realm of the hereafter characterized by eternal bliss, exclusively accessible to the souls of the enlightened². These are the souls of individuals who have led a spiritually elevated life, with their thoughts and actions dedicated to the cultivation of the human intellect, directing it towards the realization of this highest level of comprehension of the universe and one's own being.

However, al-Fārābī argues that this cognitive process of attaining happiness cannot be fully accomplished by the individual alone³. It requires an interactive process within a community where individuals consciously align all their actions and endeavours towards the ultimate goal of achieving happiness. Emphasizing the significance of the life in society, al-Fārābī asserts that the highest level of perfection can be achieved within the societal framework of the virtuous city. Its metaphysical purpose is to pursue and preserve philosophical knowledge in its soteriological dimensions. This city is defined as a society that fosters the necessary conditions for the attainment of ultimate happiness and actively encourages efforts towards its realization. The members of this community adhere willingly ("by choice and will") to moral and social principles that ensure its survival.⁴

This community is depicted as hierarchical society, wherein the distinction and the division between elite and common people is a natural hierarchical structure based on

1. Al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya* 78; *The Political Regime*, transl. into English by Fawzi Najjar in Lerner/Mahdi, *Medieval political philosophy* 35. 31-57.

2. Happiness is characterized as a state in which „the human soul reaches a degree of perfection in its existence where it is in no need of matter for its support”. Instead, it transcends into the realm of the incorporeal and immaterial entities, maintaining this elevated state eternally. *The Perfect State* 204-205.

3. Al-Fārābī asserts that as an individual, one can only attain “a portion of that perfection”. He contends that the path to achieving the highest state of fulfilment lies within the context of a community. *Attainment of Happiness* 23; *The Perfect State*, 229.

4. Within this ideal community envisioned by al-Fārābī, every individual assumes full responsibility towards others, driven by the common goal. Thus, al-Farabi defines the excellent city as a society, “in which people aim through association at co-operating for the things by which felicity in its real and true sense can be attained”. *The Perfect State* 231.

various intellectual capacities and their respective degrees of development. Al-Fārābī places emphasis on the voluntary habits and activities of individuals within this society, which enables its functioning and sustenance as a perfect organism. He draws a parallel between the structure of the virtuous city and that of the human body, wherein each organ performs its specific functions in a manner that ultimately provides the physical well-being and survival of a perfect and healthy body.¹ Simultaneously, the structure of the virtuous city corresponds to the cosmic hierarchy reflected in the created universe. Hence, al-Fārābī posits the natural hierarchy as the fundamental principle for constructing both the world and human society, serving as the guarantor of their optimal functioning.

II.

The leadership in this society naturally goes in the hands of the most knowledgeable individual², namely the philosopher who possesses the highest level of theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom required to achieve the final goal. The philosopher has the capacity to utilize this knowledge for the benefit of others, making it the authoritative source of action and the foundation of all political endeavours. Al-Fārābī defines knowledge as "the first condition for being a ruler"³. The legitimacy of the ruler is grounded in his possession of several superior physical, moral and rational qualities that set him apart from the rest. These exceptional qualities should be developed into six essential capacities such as the legal competence of the jurist, the eloquence of the gifted orator capable of inspiring people to improve themselves spiritually and engage in actions for the common good of the community, and military leadership⁴. Given the rare appearance of such individuals throughout history, al-Fārābī allows for the possibility the virtuous community to be governed by more than one ruler, as long as the members of this governing body collectively possess and apply all the qualities of the ideal ruler.

1. *The Perfect State* 234-235.

2. The ruler logically takes his place "by nature and not merely by will", *Attainment* 34.

3. *The Perfect State* 246-247.

4. *The Perfect State* 248-249.

Al-Fārābī defines the ideal sovereign as the “first ruler” who precedes others both in terms of historical precedence and excellence. He serves as example (*imām*)¹ for the subsequent rulers and establishes the foundational framework of the virtuous society.

Being a true philosopher, the ruler assumes the responsibility of utilizing his knowledge to build society in a teleological perspective where the goal for each individual and for the community as a whole is the attainment of ultimate happiness in the Afterlife². Therefore, the philosopher's role is to establish a political and social order that creates the conditions for happiness and encourages all actions that contribute to it. Additionally, the philosopher must assist those who are unable to grasp the complex metaphysical truths essential for happiness. These individuals require help from those with superior rational faculties who have mastered superior methods for attaining knowledge, and who have been appointed by the ruler to act as teachers and mentors. The ruler is entitled to use all means, including violence³, to mould the character of the community and its members and to direct them towards the attainment of happiness. In his capacity as military leader, the ruler must not only protect the community from external enemies, but also, and by force, compel those who refuse to perform voluntarily all the acts necessary for individual and common happiness.

III.

Starting from the premise that philosophical knowledge is a fundamental prerequisite for obtaining and exerting power, al-Fārābī gives moral, social and metaphysical

1. “As to the idea of *Imam* in the Arabic language, it signifies merely the one whose example is followed and who is well received”. *Attainment of Happiness* 44.

2. The ‘truly perfect philosopher’ is distinguished not only by his superior mastery of theoretical knowledge, but also by his ability to put it at the service of others and for the good of the community; see *Attainment of Happiness* 43, 54; *al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya* 79. This idea is similar to the importance of transmitting religious knowledge in Islam, which is made an individual religious duty and supported by the Hadith literature.

3. “The prince [*al-malik*] needs the most powerful skill for forming the character of others with their consent and the most powerful skill for forming their character by compulsion. The latter is the craft of war: that is, the faculty that enables him to excel in organizing and leading armies and utilizing war implements [*‘ālāt al-ḥarb*] and warlike people to conquer the nations and cities that do not submit to doing what will procure them that happiness for whose acquisition man is made”. *Attainment of Happiness* 37. Here, al-Fārābī provides the philosophical underpinnings of the idea of *jihād* as a legal concept, authorising military campaigns to expand the ‘house of Islam’.

dimensions to every action of the ruler. The philosopher-ruler assumes the role of the first legislator (*wāḍī' al-nawāmīs*) who establishes a comprehensive framework of universal moral and social norms and laws¹. They are firmly grounded in metaphysics and serve to govern the social and political order of any virtuous society. If it were not for the instructions and laws set forth by the first ruler, the people would have found themselves incapable of achieving happiness. Consequently, subsequent rulers bear the responsibility of comprehending, preserving, and faithfully adhering to these laws. They possess the authority to interpret the universal laws enacted by the first ruler or devise new social norms according to requirements of their historical context.

It seems that al-Fārābī deliberately and much more frequently uses *nawāmīs* as the Arabized version of the Greek word *nomoi* when referring to the legislative functions of the first ruler. This choice serves as a contrast to the Arabic terms *sharā'i'*, *sunan*, *siyar*² that are used to refer to the specific law-making activities of the other rulers, alluding here particularly to the practice of interpretive jurisprudence within the Muslim community to which he himself belongs. Through this linguistic distinction, he highlights the dialectic relation between the universal laws common to all virtuous societies and the specific norms that govern social life within a particular community, at a particular time and place. Moreover, this dialectic can be seen as an exploration of the interplay between philosophy and religion. Al-Fārābī stresses the importance of religious narrative and religion in general, viewing them as essential tools employed by the philosopher-ruler to motivate and guide the actions of the masses. While for al-Fārābī, religious language is constructed through rational means, its underlying impetus is metaphysical³. According to him, religion is seen as another expression of

1. According to al-Fārābī, the ideal ruler should possess the qualities of a philosopher first, and then, of a legislator. This is because the ruler needs philosophical knowledge to understand the true essence of happiness and to determine the means to achieve it. Thus, he must create laws "on the basis of knowledge". The process of governing follows a chronological sequence where philosophical perfection precedes the legislative function. The "chronology" of government follows an ontological argument: "it will follow that the theoretical virtue must precede the others - the existence of the inferior presupposes the existence of the superior". *Attainment of Happiness* 46. see also: Galston, *Politics and Excellence* 121-122.

2. *The Perfect state* 250.

3. Al-Fārābī describes this impetus within the process of emanation from the First Cause (God) to the philosopher through the mediation of the Active Intellect. Through this process, the Active Intellect

the same metaphysical reality explored by philosophical science. However, while philosophical language is universal, religious narratives are culturally and linguistically influenced, varying among different religions and peoples¹.

As a ruler, the philosopher-prophet establishes and integrates religion into the foundations of the political community, with the purpose of benefiting the common people². In a sense, al-Fārābī builds upon the notion promoted by the rational theologians in Islam regarding the active participation of man and the human community in understanding and interpreting the divine word and laws. His approach, combining the philosophical language of Greek political thought with the concepts of Islamic culture, could be interpreted as a kind of philosophical *ijtihād* and serves as a fundamental principle for strengthening the community and ensuring the happiness of its members.

The Islamic society of which al-Fārābī was a contemporary was very different from the homogeneous *polis*, which Plato considered as the best form of political association. The historical reality of the Abbasid caliphate in the second half of the 9th century and up to 950, the year of al-Fārābī's death, was characterised by political fragmentation and ethnic and religious diversity. It is in the specifics of this complex political, religious, and ideational landscape witnessed by al-Fārābī that we must look for the ultimate justification of his political arguments. Being part of the philosophical circles in Baghdad, where the works of Plato, Aristotle and their commentators were

influences the philosopher's ability for representation developed to perfection in this man. This person becomes a prophet, directly receiving revelation from God and possessing the ability to translate complex philosophical concepts into religious symbols. Thus, the religious language serves as persuasive and educational tool for those who are unable to understand the world and its fundamental principles through scientific methodologies. *The Perfect State*, 240-245.

1. We find the personification of this idea in the image of the first ruler and his functions in the virtuous city, and in the synonymous terms al-Farabi uses to describe him: „the Philosopher, Supreme Ruler, Prince, Legislator and Imam. 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“. *Attainment of Happiness* 47.

2. "Religion deals with opinion and actions, determined and restricted with stipulations and prescribed for a community by their first ruler". *al-Milla* 43; *Book of Religion*, English transl. by Butterworth in: Alfarabi, *Political writings* 93. 85-115.

read and studied, he explored the new venues opened by the rediscovery of the Greeks. The intricate task of preserving the exemplary religious-political unity established by the Prophet has led him to synthesizing the two main tendencies that shaped his thinking – the classic Greek and the Islamic one. The idea of the prophet-ruler is at the heart of his political project for good governance, proper moral orientation and ultimately the salvation of the community.

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