

AL-FĀRĀBĪ'S IDEA OF HAPPINESS IN THE PERFECT STATE¹

A IDEIA DE FELICIDADE DE AL-FĀRĀBĪ NO ESTADO PERFEITO

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Abstract

The present text discusses Al-Fārābī's idea of happiness in the Perfect State. Plato offers Al-Fārābī the idea that the ruler of the Perfect State has to be a self-realized philosopher. In Aristotle, Al-Fārābī finds philosophical resources to affirm that the only 'good without qualification' is the happiness and, as such, it is the ultimate end towards which political life must be directed. That said, Al-Fārābī's originality on these points might not be readily apparent to the casual reader. In what follows, I wish to demonstrate that, in his account of a Perfect State, rather than just adapting elements of Greek philosophy to his religious beliefs, Al-Fārābī indeed constructed a quite original version of Plato's political leader, and a notion of political order – especially his notion of justice and foreign relations – that sounds weirdly contemporary and, thus, still relevant today.

Keywords: Al-Fārābī; perfect state; happiness; justice; corruption.

Resumo

O presente texto discute a ideia de felicidade de Al-Fārābī no Estado Perfeito. Platão oferece a Al-Fārābī a ideia de que o governante do Estado Perfeito deve ser um filósofo autorrealizado. Em Aristóteles, Al-Fārābī encontra recursos filosóficos para afirmar que o único 'bem sem qualificação' é a felicidade e, como tal, é o fim último para o qual a vida política deve ser orientada. Dito isso, a originalidade de Al-Fārābī nesses pontos pode não ser facilmente aparente para o leitor casual. Desejo, portanto, demonstrar que em seu relato de um Estado Perfeito, em vez de apenas adaptar elementos da filosofia grega às suas crenças religiosas, Al-Fārābī de fato construiu uma versão bastante original do líder político de Platão, e uma noção de ordem política – especialmente sua noção de justiça e relações exteriores – que soa estranhamente contemporânea e, assim, relevante ainda na atualidade.

Palavras-chave: Al-Fārābī; estado perfeito; felicidade; justiça; corrupção.

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Introduction

The early Islamic philosopher Abū Naṣr Muḥammad Al-Fārābī combined the insights of both Plato and Aristotle to formulate a particular account of a Perfect State³ whose formation requires the cooperation of all its citizens, as well as the firm guidance of a virtuous leader, whose understanding has led him, step by step, through the ascending degrees of knowledge.

Plato⁴ offers Al-Fārābī the idea that the ruler of the Perfect State has to be a self-realized philosopher. While Aristotle⁵ presents Al-Fārābī with the resources to claim that happiness is the only good without qualification and, as such, it is the ultimate end toward which political life ought to be oriented.

That said, Al-Fārābī's originality on these points might not be readily apparent to the casual reader⁶. Hence, in what follows, I wish to demonstrate that, in his account of a Perfect State, rather than just adapting elements of Greek philosophy to his religious beliefs, Al-Fārābī indeed constructed a quite original picture of Plato's political and religious leader – the philosopher-king – whose primary mission now is not to merely contemplate 'Intelligible Forms' and rule over a state which plays a minimalistic role in the structural foundations of society (since, in Plato, society is viewed as a whole unit made up of interrelated individuals who must work together for the common good, playing each its ascribed functions for the good of the state), but rather to directly provide the essential environment in which his people can achieve that only good without qualification: i.e., happiness.

With regards to the pursuit of happiness itself, Al-Fārābī follows closely on Aristotle in claiming that people are by no means equal naturally. That is to say that there will be different levels of happiness, as well as different ways of achieving it, according to one's position in society. Thus, in strong intellectual, elitist fashion, Al-Fārābī makes it clear that what he seeks for society is moral virtues, a second-best sort of happiness. This, in turn, should make it possible for a rather small number of philosophers to attain the first and

³ The phrases *Perfect State*, *Virtuous City* or *Perfect City* are used synonymously throughout to refer to Al-Fārābī's ideal political unity. Yet, it is important to notice that, as far as Al-Fārābī's conception of a perfect or virtuous political constitution goes, a city is the smallest legitimate political unity available. This point should become clearer later on.

⁴ Cf. Plato's *The Republic*, Book V.

⁵ Cf. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, chapter 4-7.

⁶ I am certainly referring to myself.

absolutely best happiness as individuals. In short, for Al-Fārābī, the purpose of the Perfect State is in fact to produce philosophers⁷.

The text proceeds as follows: The first four sections deal with Al-Fārābī's general concept of happiness, spiritual happiness, virtue, justice and political order, as well as the nature and character of the virtuous leader, namely: the sort of virtues, justice, political order and leadership that differentiate a Virtuous City from an ignorant one. Section 5 finishes with some remarks on Al-Fārābī's notion of the supremacy of philosophy over religion, as well as his contribution to political philosophy in general. The section also raises a few legitimate, thorny questions.

1 - Al-Fārābī: happiness in general

The central concept of Al-Fārābī's political theory is *sa'ada* – happiness. Thus, he begins his political regime with a simple and uncompromising statement: happiness is the only good without qualification and, as such, it is the ultimate end toward which political life ought to be oriented. But what exactly is this thing called happiness, and how can we attain it?

Somewhere else, Al-Fārābī defines happiness as “The Human Virtue”, and adds: “It is clear that among the goods [that man desires], happiness is the greatest good; and among the preferable things, it is the most preferable and it is the most perfect of all the most perfect of all the ends towards which man strives to achieve [...]” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 2002, p. 43). More fundamentally, Al-Fārābī draws on Aristotle⁸ to explain that: “happiness is the goal which every man wants, and that every person desires it as a kind of perfection; it is something we need not explain, for it is a plain fact widely known” (*Ibidem*, p. 42).

In other words, for Al-Fārābī, happiness alone is the fulfillment of our distinctive human functions. That is, *true happiness* – and not just hedonistic happiness – is the final goal of human life. And, having assumed that happiness is “the most preferable, and most perfect of goods”, Al-Fārābī continues, we must also suppose that “whoever has preferred to acquire it [happiness] by himself must know the path and those things that allow him to reach it” (*Ibidem*, p. 45).

⁷ I am indebted to Dr. Richard C. Taylor (Marquette University) for his kind discussion on this point.

⁸ See Book 1, Chapter 7 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Now, in regard to how we can attain it, Al-Fārābī describes the path toward happiness in a progressive fashion in the following manner:

Once man comes to be, the first thing to arise in him is the faculty by which he takes nourishment, namely the nutritive faculty; then afterwards the faculty by which he perceives the tangible, like heat and cold and the other tangibles; and the faculty by which he perceives the objects of taste; and the faculty by which he perceives scents; and the faculty by which he perceives sounds; and the faculty by which he perceives colours and all visible objects like rays of light. Together with the senses another faculty arises which consists in an appetite towards the object of perception so as to desire or to dislike them (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 165).

This is to say that, for Al-Fārābī, human progress toward perfection is gradual and ought to involve the use of all our passions and desires, as well as our moral character and intellect, which begins with the intuitive apprehension of the relevant principles. This much points to the most fundamental aspect of Al-Fārābī’s psychology, which deals with the nature and scope of the human soul. Like Plato⁹, Al-Fārābī thinks of the soul as a unity in difference. Thus, the philosopher says: “the soul is one, and that its unity is the basis for certain differences of powers. The powers of the soul are multiple but can be reduced to three: vegetative, sensitive and intellective” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1963, p. 147).

In a rather rationalist fashion, then, Al-Fārābī’s incorporation of all human passions and desires, and even the intellect, into the general pursuit of happiness, is his way of explaining how human actions differ from animal actions, since the former have potential moral consequences while the latter do not. In short, following on Plato, Al-Fārābī thinks that humans share with other animals the irrational elements of the soul. But man alone can be said to be the author of his own moral actions; for, the good has to be desired for its own sake: the unique prerogative of being human. Notice that on this last point, Al-Fārābī is closer to Aristotle in arguing that “actions” ought to be termed “moral” if and only if they originate in *proairesis* or choice, which evolves from our conscious deliberation¹⁰.

On this picture, the central question in moral psychology for Al-Fārābī is, then, this: What is it for an action to be called moral? This is the crucial question because, as we will see, every feature of the human soul but reason consists of both one ruling faculty and of

⁹ Cf. Plato’s *The Republic*, Book IV.

¹⁰ Once again, I thank Richard C. Taylor for pointing this out, since it is a model central to Al-Fārābī’s thought, one that he employs repeatedly.

auxiliaries. And this illustrates the supremacy of reason over the other parts of the soul. So, Al-Fārābī will say, for instance, that in the case of the vegetative soul, “The ruling faculty of nutrition is in the heart among the organs and limbs of the body, whereas the auxiliaries and subordinates are distributed among the other organs: “each of the subordinate and auxiliary faculties begins in one organ of the body” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 167).

The same hierarchy involving ruling and auxiliaries parts applies, of course, to the other features of the soul. The key point here is that, for Al-Fārābī, as for most philosophers following in the Platonic tradition, every faculty distributed through the body and the soul functions as auxiliaries for the single ruling faculty in man: reason. Al-Fārābī makes this point clear thus:

The rational faculty has neither auxiliaries nor subordinates of its own kind in any of the organs of the body. Its rule extends over the other faculties, and precisely the faculty of representation and the ruling faculty of every genus in which a ruler and subordinates exist. It thus rules over the faculty of representation and the ruling faculty of sense perception and the ruling faculty of nutrition (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, pp. 169; 171).¹¹

Then Al-Fārābī goes on to explain:

Thus the nutritive faculty in man is made to be the servant of the body, and the faculties of sense and of representation are both made to serve the body and to serve the rational faculty; all three of them while serving the body are ultimately depending on the rational faculty, since support for the rational faculty is primarily provided by the body. The rational faculty is partly practical reason and partly theoretical reason; practical reason is made to serve theoretical reason. Theoretical reason, however, is not made to serve anything else but has as its purpose to bring man to felicity (*Ibidem*, pp. 207; 209).¹²

Notice that in his account of the soul, Al-Fārābī lists five specific faculties: the faculty of nutrition, the senses, the imagination, the appetites, and the rational faculty. The latter is then subdivided into two specific powers:

- (1) the power of theoretical reasoning, whereby a person acquires knowledge; and
- (2) practical reasoning, which aims to direct a person’s actions.

¹¹ The publication of *On the Perfect State* consulted here, as translated by Richard Walzer (1985), is a bilingual version (Arabic-English). In this case, even pages correspond to the Arabic text, while odd pages correspond to their English translations.

¹² *Idem*.

Moreover, these faculties of the soul are arranged in a hierarchical order. This is to say that, each faculty is related to the previous one as matter is related to form (i.e., the faculty of nutrition is less perfect than the sensitive power, and so on, like matter is, for Aristotle, typically less perfect than form). From this, Al-Fārābī's idea that reasoning makes humans the most perfect beings in the sublunary world necessarily follows.

In short, then, the pursuit of happiness is, says Al-Fārābī, a strict rational endeavor. This point is made explicit as he continues:

When this felicity becomes known through theoretical reason and is set up as an aim and desired by the appetitive faculty, and when the deliberative faculty discovers what ought to be done in order to attain that with the assistance of the faculty of representation and the senses, and when those actions are performed by the instruments of the appetitive faculty, the actions of man will be all good and noble (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 209).

One obvious point here is that, for the philosopher, happiness and morality are concepts intrinsically connected. But this passage is by itself most useful for illuminating Al-Fārābī's rejection of moral luck; or the idea that luck affects the moral character and status of human actions and intentionality. Al-Fārābī gives expression of this more clearly thus:

But when felicity remains unknown, or becomes known without being set up as an aim which is desired, and something else different from it is set up as an aim and desired by the appetitive faculty, and the deliberative faculty has discovered what ought to be done in order to attain it with the assistance of the faculty of representation and the senses, and when those actions are performed by the instruments of the appetitive faculty, the actions of man will all be ignoble (*Idem, ibidem*).

From this, then, we can understand not only that "happiness" is the ultimate good for Al-Fārābī, but we can also see how the ultimate good is to be achieved: reason does not work alone in the pursuit of happiness, for the soul has to engage all the other faculties or powers, as well as their auxiliary functions in its moral actions. This is to say, then, that the pursuit of human happiness ought to occupy the whole of our nutritive functions, our senses, imagination, and appetites, as well as our moral inclinations and the intellect.

To be sure, human perfection does not consist in the development of any of these faculties taken individually. That is, for Al-Fārābī neither a healthy, strong body nor intellectual virtues or other natural talents on their own can be the source of human

perfection. The model of pursuing happiness Al-Fārābī is setting out, therefore, is a life-long progression starting with the senses, all the way toward what he calls Active Intellect, as ascending from the typically less perfect to the truly perfect.

This is to say then that, according to Al-Fārābī, there are no shortcuts – no mystical illumination or supernatural events – to the eternal life. On the contrary, reason is the unique feature we share as human beings. Hence, we ought to pursue rational knowledge in order to both fulfill ourselves spiritually and attain the ultimate good or perfect happiness.

That said, since people differ in various ways, there are also different degrees of happiness, as well as different ways of achieving it, accordingly. This issue points to the more general idea mentioned earlier, that Al-Fārābī seeks to explain that not every citizen of the Perfect City will achieve the same level of happiness. Let us then consider this point in more detail in the section below.

2 - On spiritual and material happiness

Another, important related dimension of Al-Fārābī's political theory is that there are three types of happiness (*sa'ada*), according to its different levels of perfection. Thus, in Chapter 13, paragraph 5 of the *Perfect State*, Al-Fārābī says:

The presence of the first intelligible in man is his first perfection, but these intelligibles are supplied to him only in order to be used by him to reach his ultimate perfection, i.e., felicity. 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 for ever. But its rank is beneath the rank of the Active Intellect (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 205).

If we continue our reading, we shall see that, for Al-Fārābī, the particular level of knowledge and degree of perfection a person possesses, as well as the particular way she directs her thoughts and actions in accordance with that knowledge, is mostly determined by her place in society. What is more, by their own constitution, individuals are not self-sufficient beings. So, in the Perfect City, all citizens must cooperate with one another in order to achieve true happiness and self-realization, according to their own function or place in society. The philosopher gives expression of this idea more clearly as follows:

In order to preserve himself and to attain his highest perfections every human being is by his very nature in need of many things which he cannot provide all by himself; he is indeed in need of people who each supply him with some particular need of his. Everybody finds himself in the same relation to everybody in this respect. Therefore man cannot attain the perfection, for the sake of which his inborn nature has been given to him, unless many (societies of) people who co-operate come together, who each supply everybody else with some particular need of his, so that as a result of the contribution of the whole community all the things are brought together which everybody needs in order to preserve himself and to attain perfection. Therefore human individuals have come to exist in great numbers, so that human societies have come to exist in great numbers, and have settled in the inhabitable (inhabited?) region of the earth, so that human societies have come to exist in it, some of which are perfect, others imperfect (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 229).

Notice how this passage indicates a point we mentioned earlier that the ultimate perfection of a virtuous city is the realization of the conditions which make the perfection of the philosopher possible. But what exactly will determine whether or not a city is perfect? What would be the ideal constitution of a Perfect State? On this point, Al-Fārābī correlates the notions of perfection and imperfection with various types of structure and size of human settlements. So, he says:

There are three kinds of perfect society: great, medium and small. The great one is the union of all the societies in the inhabitable world; the medium one the union of one nation in one part of the inhabitable world; the small one the union of the people of a city in the territory of any nation whatsoever (*Idem, ibidem*).

In other words, anything smaller than a city – villages, districts, neighborhoods, rows of houses, a household, and so on – shall constitute an imperfect union of peoples. This is to say that: “The most excellent good and the utmost perfection is, in the first instance, attained in a city, not in a society which is less complete than it.” Al-Fārābī’s reasoning here is quite simple: villages, districts, etc., are just parts of a city; pretty much like limbs and organs are mere parts of a body and, as such, they cannot exist by and for themselves. Thus, as Al-Fārābī has it: “The excellent city resembles the perfect and healthy body, all of whose limbs cooperate to make the life of the animal perfect and to preserve it in this state” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 231).

At this point one ought to raise the question whether the notion of happiness Al-Fārābī is discussing here is eternal happiness – the sort of happiness a believer can only expect to obtain in the afterlife. As a matter of fact, truth *sa’ada* can be attained only when the soul

leaves the material body and survives death; for only then the soul can finally enjoy eternal bliss without the need of matter or body.

But Al-Fārābī's characterization of a political structure in which happiness comes as a result of the contribution of the whole community, working together toward the ultimate good, points to a larger idea: that material happiness is the very first step down a long path toward absolute, eternal felicity. To this end, the role of the virtuous leader is now to provide the essential context in which the citizens of the Perfect State can fulfill their spirituality and wellbeing. So, we shall discuss this issue in the following section.

3 – The profile and role of the virtuous leader

Thus far we have mentioned Al-Fārābī's idea that no individual human being can attain perfection in this life without political cooperation. For, in order to preserve ourselves and to attain our highest good, we are by our very nature in need of many things that we cannot provide all ourselves. We are indeed in need of people who each supply us with our various needs. Here, of course, Al-Fārābī was partly following the political theory of Aristotle, from whom he took the idea that people are by nature social animals¹³.

From this, it follows that legitimate political association ought to be directed toward the achievement of happiness. In other words, a virtuous political society is one focused on the preservation of the souls of all its inhabitants, through the exercise of virtuous qualities and the pursuit of happiness. To this end, all citizens must cooperate with one another in order to achieve true happiness and self-realization, according to their own function or place in society. Unsurprisingly, we can see at work here a sort of intellectual elitism. Following on Plato's division of human society into classes¹⁴, Al-Fārābī thinks that the actual purpose of the Perfect State is not to direct 'every' citizen towards ultimate happiness, but to produce philosophers.

¹³ Cf. Aristotle's statement that: "Hence, it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the 'Tribeless, lawless, heartless one,' whom Homer denounces – the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts" (ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, 1999, p. 5).

¹⁴ Cf., for one, Plato's classic "Chariot Allegory" in the *Phaedrus* (245c to 257b); as well as Plato's discussions on the topic of 'what is a human being?' in *The Republic*, 435e-ff.

Next Al-Fārābī focuses firmly on the fundamental role of the virtuous leader in the running of the Perfect State. On this point he elaborates a parallel between the leader of the city and the function that the heart plays in the process of maintaining a healthy, strong body. The aim of the analogy is to complete his Platonic idea that the harmony of the Perfect State requires not only the cooperation of all its citizens performing their tasks accordingly, but it also demands the firm guidance of a virtuous leader whose knowledge has led him, step by step, through the ascending degrees of knowledge acquired by the senses, the imagination and the Passive Intellect, until he has fully realized his Active Intellect: this should be the crucial characteristic of the most perfect and most complete virtuous leader. Al-Fārābī puts the point vividly thus:

The ruling organ in the body is by nature the most perfect and most complete of the organs in itself and in its specific qualification, and it also has the best of everything of which another organ has a share as well; beneath it, in turn, are other organs which rule over organs inferior to them, their rule being lower in rank than the rule of the first and indeed subordinate to the rule of the first [...].

The heart comes to be the first and becomes then the cause of the existence of the other organs and limbs of the body, and the cause of the existence of their faculties in them and of their arrangement in the rank proper to them, and one of its organs is out of order, it is the heart which provides the means to remove that disorder. In the same way the ruler of this city must come to be in the first instance, and will subsequently be the cause of the rise of the city and its parts and the cause of the presence of the voluntary habits of its parts and of their arrangement in the ranks proper to them; and when one part is out of order he provides it with the means to remove its disorder (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 235).

What is more, the leader of the virtuous city, he says, “holds the most perfect rank of humanity and has reached the highest degree of felicity. His soul is united as it were with the Active Intellect, in the way stated by us. He is the man who knows every action by which felicity can be reached. This is the first condition for being a ruler [...]” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 247). But at this point we ought to slow down and try to understand what exactly Al-Fārābī means by *Active Intellect*.

Al-Fārābī’s conception of the Active Intellect follows closely on Aristotle’s discussion on the topic on *De Anima*.¹⁵ Thus, much like Aristotle, Al-Fārābī lists several stages of the human intellect, as it becomes actualized. Recall that Aristotle¹⁶ defines human

¹⁵ See R. D. Hicks’ translation of *De Anima* (1907), pp. 121-163.

¹⁶ Cf. *Aristotle’s Psychology (De Anima)*, Book iii (*Sensation, Imagination, and Thought*), Chapters 4 & 5 (“Theory or reason, abstract thought” & “Active and passive reason”) in: Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *Parva*

intellect in four aspects: first as intellect in potency (this is a pure disposition to abstract forms from mental images), then intellect in act (after it acquires forms for intellectual knowledge), the fully actualized intellect (called *intellectus adeptus*), and the active intellect. Hence, we can – as Robert Hammond points out – understand that, for Al-Fārābī, the Active Intellect is “a separate 'substance emanating from God which is able to awaken the latent power in man and arouse it to activity” (HAMMOND, 1947, p. 44).

Against this background, a virtuous leader arises whose intellect is fully actualized. He is the Philosopher-King, whose primary mission now is not to merely contemplate Intelligible Forms, “lying” somewhere above, but to firmly rule over a state responsible for providing the essential environment in which the citizens of his city can achieve happiness, the only good without qualification. Yet, how exactly does the Virtuous Leader in the Perfect City come to have such great and distinctive knowledge? In this regard, the following passage is relevant:

The ruler of the excellent city cannot just be any man, because rulership requires two conditions: (a) he should be predisposed for it by his inborn nature, (b) he should have acquired the attitude and habit of will for rulership which will develop in a man whose inborn nature is predisposed for it (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 239).

Here, again, we can see Al-Fārābī’s intellectual elitism at work. Much like Aristotle, the Arabic philosopher also believes that people are by no means equal naturally. For him, people differ in three basic ways in their capacity for knowledge; hence, there are also three classes of individuals, according to their intellectual abilities. On this point, says Al-Fārābī: “The people of the excellent city have things in common which they all perform and comprehend, and other things which each class knows and does on its own” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 243).

First, there is the philosopher, who knows things as they actually are. Next, there are the followers or disciples of those philosophers; they can attain knowledge and understanding by learning from their teachers the true meaning of symbols and demonstrations. Finally,

Naturalia. William Alexander Hammond (trans.). London & New York: Swan Sonnenschein & CO., Lim. & The Macmillan Co., 1902, pp. 105-118. For a very specific discussion on the nature of the distinctions Aristotle draws between different types of intellect, which reaches its climax in *De Anima* iii. 5, the reader may wish to consider the following article: Dias da Silva, W. “Leitura não-externalista do *De Anima* iii 5: desmistificando o ποιητικὸς νοῦς (*nous poietikós*) de Aristóteles”, in: *Kínēsis* (UNESP, Marília, SP, 2021), vol. XIII, no. 35, pp. 384-396.

there is the general mass, those who simply follow the social symbols and mores of their communities without necessarily understanding them. Among such symbolic representations we have religion. This is, in effect, precisely why religion will vary among different peoples, says Al-Fārābī. This is to say then, that, according to Al-Fārābī, philosophy is the highest source of truth: for the degree of reality philosophy conveys is complete, unconditional and universal, whereas in religion, for instance, the truth is always relative and partial¹⁷.

Hence, as explained earlier, while, according to Al-Fārābī, the Perfect City ought to provide the basic context in which individuals can fulfill themselves, the realization of happiness will vary accordingly. In general, citizens of the Perfect City can only attain a moral, virtuous life, which is in itself of course a source of happiness, yet only a small, selected number of philosophers will achieve the ultimate good, *absolute happiness*.

In sum, then, drawing on Aristotle, Al-Fārābī thinks of the human good or happiness not merely as the result of rational or theoretical work, but it consists in the exercise of it; because a rational action is one whose principle expresses the agent's deliberation and execution of her freewill. This is not to say, though, that every inhabitant of the Perfect City will achieve the same level of happiness. It is true that, as Al-Fārābī says:

Indeed any man whose Passive Intellect has thus been perfected by [having apprehended] all the intelligibles and has become actual intellect and actual being, so that the intelligible in him has become identical with that which thinks in him, acquires an actual intellect which is superior to the Passive Intellect [...]. (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 243).

Yet, according to Al-Fārābī, only philosophers can reach that far. In this light, then, Al-Fārābī's conception of the virtuous leader is much like Plato's philosopher-king as discussed in the *Republic*, Book V. On the other hand, though, it is important to appreciate the contrast between his view and that of Plato, since the Virtuous Leader of the Perfect City plays a much more direct, radical role: the Virtuous Leader's major concern now is to organize the education of his citizens, distributing to them their specific duties and obligations, according to their functions in society. This is to say that, *if necessary*, the

¹⁷ Although Al-Fārābī's notion of the superiority of philosophy over religion is a crucial concept of his doctrine – and one that deserves careful analysis –, it would be quite a task to work out this idea in much detail here. Thus, I merely note the issue in passing, without attempting to deal with it, and should rather limit myself to some quite short remarks in the remaining sections of this paper.

political leader must use his power of persuasion and authority in order to help the citizens of the Perfect City to develop their moral virtues fully, for only in this way the city can become a perfect harmony.

All that said, it is important to note that, for Al-Fārābī, the use of force and power of persuasion here is not without qualification. To make this point clear, then, his next task is to distinguish between *two* concepts of justice, and how these different notions of justice influence the political order of a given society. Let us then briefly consider this idea in the section below.

4 – The idea of justice and its corruption

In Chapter 18 of *On the Perfect State* – “Views of the Cities which are Ignorant of the True Good” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, pp. 287 - 315) –, Al-Fārābī underlines a gross misapprehension of justice and the divine orders, namely: the particular idea of justice held by countries in constant conflict with their neighbors, as if war were justified by natural law. On Al-Fārābī’s interpretation, however, the true nature of felicity found in the Perfect City is distinct from the sort of happiness desired by those who cultivate power and violence. Why?

Because, to Al-Fārābī, justice is a proper good in itself and, as such, it should be distributed to all. On this picture, then, justice cannot be acquired by force. That is, justice cannot be the product of the abuse of political power, war and tyranny. Notice that throughout his discussion on this matter, Al-Fārābī often starts his arguments with the phrase: “Some people say ...”, to make it clear that these are not his own opinions, but rather the corrupted ideas and prejudices of past generations: “Thus some of the Ancients came to maintain that they all should always strive to overcome others by force and should whenever they had overcome one group advance against another” (*Ibidem*, p. 311).

It follows that neither wars of conquest nor violent occupation of foreign territories are a feature of a Virtuous State. It is, rather, the feature of a state that is ignorant of the True Good; and as such, contrary to the natural order of the universe. In this case, virtues are replaced by their respective counterparts: war, injustice, social inequalities, political chaos, abuse of political authority, and so forth. Al-Fārābī says as much in the following extract:

We also see things occurring without order, we see that the established ranks of the existents are not kept; we see many single things connected closely with some being or non-being without deserving it. They said: This and the like of it is [are] evident in the existents which we observe and come to know.

Some people say after that: This state is natural for the existents and this is the nature with which they are endowed; and what natural bodies do by their very nature ought to be done through acts of choice and will by those living beings which are free to choose and through deliberation by those which can deliberate. Therefore they held that cities ought to overpower and to fight each other, there being neither any ranks nor any established order, nor any place of honour or something else reserved for one and nobody else in particular according to merit; and that every man should keep any good he has to himself exclusively and seek to gain by force every good owned by another, and that the man who is most successful in overpowering whoever rises against him is most happy (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 291).

In short then, war and political disorder are the main features of the Ignorant City, in which the ultimate good or felicity is replaced by a gross misconception of justice and happiness. This, the philosopher says, “is the brutish (*bestial, sub-human*) view among the views held by man” (1985, p. 295, *italic mine*). As we can see, Al-Fārābī’s first point here is, then, to elucidate the true nature and scope of justice: *that justice neither contradicts the natural order of the universe nor the true nature of the good.*

Notice how contemporary this whole idea sounds; for, in international law, for instance, this is still pretty much the (theoretical) foundation of geo-political legitimacy and territory integrity. For one thing, political boundaries are internationally recognized and legitimate, even if they are somewhat accidental so to speak, based on these principles, or on some version of them.

And notice also how Al-Fārābī’s understanding of sovereignty and foreign relations (based on his conception of justice) closely resembles John Rawls’ idea – as discussed in the “Extension to Decent Hierarchical Peoples”, section of *The Law of Peoples* (2000): that a well-ordered “society does not have aggressive aims, and it recognizes that it must gain its legitimate ends through diplomacy and trade and other ways of peace, [since a well-ordered society] respects the political and social order of other societies” (RAWLS, 2000, pp. 62 - 70).

On this light, it follows, then, that any form of sovereign unity established by force and war is to be considered unjust and illegitimate. Put differently, the spoils of war are contrary to the function of the highest good and the purpose of the Perfect City, even if considered in the context of external or world political order.

This is not to say, however, that the perfect state cannot defend itself from outside forces. There is, Al-Fārābī says, a class of citizens trained for war in the Virtuous City. But the main point of this military group is not to invade other nations or start unjust wars with another people.

Thus, he continues: “There will be, in each group two forces, one for war and defense, and one for establishing peaceful relations. But the defense force is not meant to act of its own spontaneous will but only if an attack from the outside compels it” (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1985, p. 331). By contrast, though, citizens of the Ignorant City truly believe that peace and the pursuit of their ultimate happiness shall be “brought about by an outside factor” (i.e. by war and the abuse of power in order to conquer and manipulate other societies); whereas the citizens of the Virtuous City knows that it is actually “war that is brought about by an outside force” (*Idem, ibidem*). In other words, in line with most just-war theorists, Al-Fārābī also believes that excessive force may be used only after all peaceful, diplomatic alternatives have failed.

Moreover, says Al-Fārābī, “Out of these pernicious views of the Ancients which we have surveyed, views have developed from which religions have been derived in many of the cities which miss the right path” (*Ibidem*, p. 323). So, Al-Fārābī not just rejects, clearly, the idea of justified holy war – something which would take a while for the modern Western culture to understand – but he also belittles religions which are based on such corrupted conception of justice. In this light, then, we can start to see why, according to Al-Fārābī, philosophy is superior to religious beliefs: while religion is a relative symbolic representation of truth, philosophy is one and cannot be corrupted. This is so because the sort of *reality* or *understanding* that religion conveys is partial and subject to social and cultural variations. That is precisely why he thinks that religious beliefs will vary among nations and peoples, as clearly stated in the passage above. Philosophy, on the other hand, expresses the highest truth and, as such, it is not subjected to social differences¹⁸.

Against this background, the Perfect State is essentially Al-Fārābī’s statement of the aims of philosophy itself. On the face of it, one would suppose that the ideal constitution of a perfect state is simply one determined by a strong, legitimate government, *good citizenship*,

¹⁸ There seems to be nothing new in this idea, for it would appear that nearly every philosopher since Thales of Miletus (c. 635 BCE) has, in one way or another, made the same sort of statement.

social and religious tolerance, as well as a *solid sense of justice*. It surely remains unclear though as to whether such a “virtuous city” can actually exist.

General Comments

Based on this rough sketch of Al-Fārābī’s political doctrine and his conception of happiness in the perfect state, we can see that, in general terms, the philosopher wants to construct a society based on reason, governed by a philosopher-king who, within his limitations, can imitate God and introduce among his citizens the precepts of perfect harmony, so citizens can achieve the highest degree of happiness possible in this life, according to their places in society. On this view, the ultimate good is a condition that develops as the result of training and habituation. Moreover, ideally, the virtuous citizens of the Perfect State must be fully conscious of what they are doing, and they must will their moral actions for their own sake.

And this, in turn, makes it possible for a small number of philosophers to attain ultimate, true happiness. Thus, much like Aristotle (and against Plato, perhaps), Al-Fārābī supposes that the State is no longer limited to playing a minimalistic role in human society, but must be regarded as responsible for providing for all the needs of the people, both material and spiritual ones.

On this matter, however, it is important to appreciate the contrast between Al-Fārābī’s view and those of other neo-Aristotelian philosophers of the medieval era, such as Thomas, for instance, who argued that the State cannot deal with our more “supernatural” essentials; for Thomas of Aquino, it is the Church that shall direct us to this end. This is to say, then, that Al-Fārābī’s political philosophy turns crucially around the more human element, whose sole object in life is to attain true happiness, the ultimate good.

In short, then, Al-Fārābī combines, through philosophy, the material and the spiritual world to propose the conception of a perfect state in which: in order to attain happiness, man has, first of all, to learn what real happiness is. To this end, however, according to Al-Fārābī knowledge in itself does not suffice: knowledge ought to be always followed by proper actions if it is to be effective. Such knowledge can only be attained by philosophy; and its full realization can only be materialized through Politics, that is, through the political structures of the Virtuous City, which is based on a *proper notion of justice*. So, as a perfect

political structure, the Perfect City cannot be directed by the vagaries and love of honor of unscrupulous leaders: the Perfect State is founded on the hierarchical order of the universe. But, since most individuals are incapable of such knowledge by themselves, the State ought to be directed by a virtuous philosopher-king whose qualities and behavior is directed by the Active Intellect. It is clear, then, that, in drawing on the great masters of Greek philosophy, Al-Fārābī followed the same path as the father of Arabic philosophy, Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq Al-Kindī, whose idea of the significance of philosophical knowledge is so crucial here that Al-Fārābī vividly paraphrases it thus:

We must not be ashamed to admire the truth or to acquire it, from wherever it comes. Even if it should come from far-flung nations and foreign peoples, there is for the student of truth nothing more important than the truth, nor is the truth demeaned or diminished by the one who states or conveys it; no one is demeaned by the truth, rather all are ennobled by it (AL-FĀRĀBĪ, 1978, p. 58).

From this it follows, then, that for Al-Fārābī, as for Al-Kindī, the ultimate goal that every individual ought to pursue in this life is the cultivation of rational knowledge, through the exercise of his or her freedom of the will, by means of the execution of moral actions. This is knowledge that develops as the result of proper training and habituation, as already pointed out; for this is the surest way to attain genuine understanding and contemplation of the highest Being.

For Al-Fārābī, then, there is a higher form of both knowledge and truth, to which only the real philosopher has direct access. As for the rest of humankind, truth and the pursuit of happiness can only be achieved either by learning the philosophical principles from the great masters of the past, or simply by following the established cultural symbols, mores and religious beliefs of their communities. In this case, *happiness* comes as the result of a virtuous and religious life. This, however, is not ultimate, absolutely best happiness, for only a small number of philosophers can attain such happiness in the Virtuous City.

On this point, we should not be surprised to hear, then, that Al-Fārābī’s conception of the supremacy of philosophy over religion has been met with much resistance, ridicule and, why not, some degree of extremism. Among Al-Fārābī’s detractors were Sunni followers, who would eventually “ban” the philosopher’s ideas from the history of Islamic

thought. This point cannot be examined here, though, but it is clearly an issue that admits careful consideration.

All that said, it is hard to deny that there seems to be something decidedly odd, yet familiar, about Al-Fārābī's sketch of the profile and role of the virtuous leader of the Perfect City. Haven't we already seen this picture – of a perfect leader, of a savior of the nation – over and over again, through history. And it never ends well. Yet, we can still ponder: How can we ensure that such a radical, direct political model will not eventually degenerate into a totalitarian, elitist and repressive state? Or yet, why does a totalitarian regime always have to end in oppression? If not, how else? These are difficult, but legitimate questions.

If, according to Al-Fārābī, there are no shortcuts – no mystical illumination or supernatural events – to the eternal life, the same can be said about the construction of a Perfect – or at least 'just' – State: its construction involves no shortcuts, no mystical illumination, no supernatural events. Rather, it requires that every faculty distributed through the body and the soul functions as auxiliaries for the single ruling faculty in human: reason, in pursuit of a just city. Something which cannot be achieved without political cooperation and the slightest notion of the common good.

All in all, we can say that, at least since Plato, the problem of the relationship between the state structure and the individual remains a complex matter. Currently, the heated debate between *communitarians* and *liberals*, for instance, is just one example of how the problem is well and alive. The former (communitarians) share a distrust of abstract morality, sympathize with virtue ethics and a conception of policy with some room for the history of the community. The latter (liberals), defend the idea of freedom of consciousness, respect for the rights of the individuals and distrust of the threat of a parental state. With some philosophical freedom, we could, perhaps, place Aristotle amongst liberals (all things considered, and despite communitarians alignment with Aristotle's virtue ethics) and Plato amongst the communitarians.

Yet, in the end, the political challenge that arises is the same: to come to a solution to the problem of heterogeneity (or multiculturalism, if insisted): i.e., how to organize the heterogeneity of types (of personality, character, natural abilities, desires, goals, etc.) of all the members of a given society, which naturally clash with each other, in order to establish the social order?

In short, Al-Fārābī seems to be proposing a compromise between Plato’s and Aristotle’s political views. For him (and for us), the ultimate question seems to be this: How can we square the notion of a Philosopher-King – just, kind, and honest political leaders who happen to represent us – with the demand to consolidate our own positions in society as equally just, kind and honest citizens? Finding the ‘right’ answer to this question has never been that easy – primarily because living with multiplicity – with diversity of human nature, of goals, of understandings of the common good, of conceptions of justice and happiness, and so on – is always troublesome.

Perhaps that is one reason why reading Plato, Aristotle, and, above all, reading them in Al-Fārābī’s light – as well as other ancient ‘political’ thinkers – remains relevant to this day: old (human) habits die hard, and many of the political issues we are struggling with at present (as well as some solutions) have their origin in the traditional thoughts of these historical thinkers. And, surely, understanding the ‘origin’ of the problem, as well as their answers to these problems, might contribute to a better understanding of our own present predicament.

Therefore, let the above reflections on Al-Fārābī’s idea of happiness in the Perfect State serve, at least, this purpose; especially because, as I hope it has become clear, Al-Fārābī seemed more aware of the peculiar problems of heterogeneity, of ‘multiculturalism’ – including religion diversity so characteristic of contemporary democratic societies – in the concrete life of the community than Plato and Aristotle were. (However elitist Al-Fārābī’s understanding of the Perfect State and the superiority of philosophy may sound in the end.)

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