THE IMPERFECT CITY: READING LEO STRAUSS READING AL-FARABI READING PLATO

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Abstract

Leo Strauss' reading of al-Farabi is a meditation on the issue of how philosophers speak beyond their time and place. They must speak in such a way that they can be understood by the enlightened but avoid persecution by the vulgar masses. According to Strauss, al-Farabi recognized that the philosopher can be happy in the imperfect city democratic city because of its freedom of thought, while the masses can be truly happy only in the virtuous city. This leads him to consider the possible role for the philosopher to advise the "enlightened prince" and to participate in the manipulation of the beliefs of the masses toward some enlightened goal – what we are now witnessing in our think-tank politics. But if we consider a truer reading of al-Farabi's philosophy, it in many ways recognizes the importance of imperfections, ambivalences, and frontiers. Our intellectual and religious ideals are often beyond our reach – Plato's "city in speech" – but yet these ideals can orient us and give us a sense of place even in our imperfect situations. For al-Farabi, the democratic city is the best of the imperfect cities, because its imperfections and freedoms allow for new possibilities. Today most of us live in this imperfect city, but this is precisely what allows us to maintain our connections with the past, and project many possibilities for the future. And it is what allows this conference to take place.

Keywords: al-Farabi, Leo Strauss, political theology, political philosophy, democracy

Perhaps you are wondering who I am as I stand before you addressing you.[2] What are my motives? Am I a friend or a foe? Do I walk the same path? These are considerations which all of us face as we group together in a conference. A popular expression is to ask: are we 'on the same page?' Certainly, we already inhabit together the many pages of the proceedings. But if we do form a community, then it is an imperfect one, and indeed, perhaps every community, the physical communities where we live (and which are gradually fading) and the virtual communities where scholars like us often dwell, are deeply imperfect.

And so who am I? I admit that I am lazy, sloppy, confused, decadent. I often strive to elevate myself, but I am pulled back down to earth by my bad habits and desires. I am vulgar. I am deeply imperfect. But I do have an intellectual curiosity in some sort of truth, in an understanding of where I am, where we are, in the larger scope of things, in the broad arc of history. I am sincere.

I am not an Islamic scholar, but I have an interest in the early Islamic philosophers. Not because of a special interest in Islam, but because I feel that in many ways, these thinkers speak to us across time and address something we are experiencing today. They began to struggle with the role of reason and its relation to religion. They began to struggle with a vast pool of knowledge that was translated from other cultures. They were faced with the increasing trade between cities, and the increasing interaction between cultures, philosophies and religions. They were faced with the life of the city, where so many diverse beliefs intermingle. They were challenged by the same phenomena we are now witnessing today on a global scale. And out of these struggles, they did much to develop the sciences and technologies that we take for granted today: algebra, algorithms, mapping, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, memory systems, etc.

But the problem we face today is that the fruits of these technologies, when coupled with politics and economics, now threaten to transform humanity and wipe away the memory of where we came from and who we are. Our information technologies while promoting the wide dissemination of ideas also threaten to put an end to free thinking. So the study of these early writers can give us insights on how to coordinate our knowledge, and to extend these insights to consider the relationship of our information technologies to politics.

Leo Strauss

Since we are concerned about who we are and where we came from, let us then work from the present and proceed backwards in time. Leo Strauss was one of the most famous political philosophers in the United States. When he taught at the University of Chicago he developed his own school of political philosophy. Many of his students have gone on to play prominent roles in the American government and private think-tanks and have had an enormous influence on the direction of Western foreign policy.

Certainly we can pass in silence on much of the damage that this has caused and continues to cause. But what we can point out that the damage is born of the idea that the world can be shaped into some kind of "rule based order" through manipulation. Especially the manipulation of ideals. This "idealism" also involves a contempt for historicism which often extends to an active erasing of history.

To be fair to Strauss, let us acknowledge that many scholars claim that he would not share the zealotry of his disciples. One of Strauss' famous contentions is that the aims of philosophy and the political community are different. Yet he did establish a school, and Heinrich Meir points out that the founding of a school is itself a "political decision."

> It is a political decision already insofar as the school like the commonwealth comprises quite different natures, it too consists of philosophers and non-philosophers who (bound together to varying degrees) cooperate in different ways and therefore the central determinations that apply to the tension between the political community and philosophy remain valid in the relationship of the school to philosophy. For the school, no less than for the commonwealth, it holds true that different addressees have to be addressed differently, that they grasp the teaching differently and pass it on differently. The school demands political action and is fraught with political risks.[3]

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[3] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Politcal Problem*, xix.

Following this observation by Meier, we can say that Strauss' message was distorted by the imperfect community of his followers. But what was his message and its motivations?

Strauss during his time in Germany before World War II was influenced by the writings of Carl Schmitt and critique of liberalism. Schmitt believed that the idea of the "political" involves some kind of cohesion of the state. This cohesion is undermined by mere politics with its liberalism and factionalism. In other words, the political identity of a state is an act of faith that transcends the law.

While Strauss was inspired by Schmitt's critique of liberalism, he believed that such a critique had to be built on different grounds. It cannot be merely an act of faith, it must be based on reason and natural law, and this law must be grounded in a transcendental standard.[4] Robert Statham Jr. writes.

> Put differently, law, in and of itself, is insufficient. Law must have a purpose which transcends interest group based partiality which is expressed through mere convention or positive State action. The transcendental standard for the rule of law can only be ascertained by political philosophy. This derives from the necessary relation between natural reason and political right. The transcendental standard for the rule of law is natural right and the foundation of natural right is reason.[5]

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[4] This aligns Schmitt's approach with the Christian emphasis on faith, while Strauss' approach (as he himself recognized) is aligned with Judaism and Islam. In his work *Persecution and the Art of Writing,* Strauss writes: "For the Christian, the sacred doctrine is revealed theology; for the Jew and the Muslim, the sacred doctrine is, at least primarily the legal interpretation of the Divine Law (*talmud* or *fiqh*). The sacred doctrine in the latter sense has, to say the least, much less in common with philosophy than the sacred doctrine in the former sense. It is ultimately for this reason that the status of philosophy was, as a matter of principle, much more precarious in Judaism and in Islam than in Christianity: in Christianity philosophy became an integral part of the officially recognized and even required training of the student of the sacred doctrine… The precarious position of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world guaranteed its private character and therewith its inner-freedom from supervision. The status of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world resembled in this respect its status in classical Greece." Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing,* 18–19, 21.

[5] Statham, "Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and Heinrich Meier: A Dialogue Within the Hidden Dialogue," p. 226.

In other words, the "political" must have content. He shares the same aims as Schmitt but he does so through what he calls a return to "classical political philosophy." What he sees in the classical writers is an appreciation of the balance of reason and transcendence. He recognized that we need to go back and read the great political philosophers for guidance in present times. And so a big part of his legacy is his emphasis on careful reading. Steven B. Smith writes in the introduction to the book *Reading Leo Strauss*.

> Strauss' manner of reading unfolded from a single premise that he happened upon slowly and that he developed in a variety of contexts over many years – namely, that great writers often hide or conceal their most profound thoughts from all but the most careful and persistent readers. This seems a simple enough, even a commonsense premise. Do any of us ever say (or intend to say) all that we mean? Do we not speak in different ways to different people depending on the context of the conversation and the extent of our desire to communicate? Strauss's discovery – actually, he called it a "rediscovery" – of esoteric writing can be attributed to a number of causes, from the simple desire to avoid persecution for unpopular or heterodox opinions, to a sense of "social responsibility" to uphold the dominant values of one's society, to the wish to tantalize potential readers with the promise of buried treasure.[6]

So a philosopher should be read just as much for what they don't say (the esoteric) as what they do say (the exoteric), and they often disguise the message they want to deliver. This is what Strauss discovered in his readings of al-Farabi and Moses Maimonides. In his essay "Farabi's Plato" he gave a more technical explanation of this tactic; explaining that it involves repetition and difference.[7]

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[6] Smith, "Why Strauss, Why Now?," 7.
[7] Strauss writes: "Farabi intimates his solution by speaking of the twofold account which Plato gave of Socrates' life: he tells us that Plato repeated his account of Socrates' way and that he repeated his mention of the vulgar of the cities and nations which existed in his time. As we might have learned from Maimonides, "repetition" is a normal pedagogic device which is destined to reveal the truth to those who are able to understand by themselves while hiding it from the vulgar: whereas the vulgar are blinded by the features common to the first statement and the "repetition", those who are able to understand will pay the utmost attention to the differences, however apparently negligible, between the two statements and in particular to the "addition", made in the repetition", to the first statement." Strauss, *Farabi's Plato*, 382.

Since philosophers can think beyond the religious and moral situation of their time, they need to be careful how they write according to Strauss. They need to be understood by the wise but must not to offend the *vulgar*. Otherwise they open themselves to persecution like Socrates. Strauss observes that Plato was more careful than Socrates:

> [Plato's] moral fervor was mitigated by his insight into the nature of beings; thus he could adjust himself to the requirements of political life, or to the ways and opinions of the vulgar. In his treatment of the subjects in question he combined the way of Socrates with the way of – Thrasymachus. While the intransigent way of Socrates is appropriate in the philosopher's dealing with the political elite only, the less exacting way of Thrasymachus is appropriate in his dealing with the vulgar and the young.[8]

According to Strauss, Plato only *seems* to side with Socrates over Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. Thrasymachus claimed that "justice is the interest of the stronger," while Socrates was searching for some higher idea of justice. But Plato in setting them as opponents within a dialogue is also able to express to the careful reader of the necessity and balance of both approaches. Thrasymachus teaches us that it is necessity to manipulate the opinions of the vulgar.

> By combining the two ways, Plato avoided the conflict with the vulgar and thus the fate of Socrates. Accordingly, the "revolutionary" quest for the other city ceased to be a necessity: Plato substituted for it a much more "conservative" way of action, *viz*. the gradual replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation to the truth. The replacement, however gradual, of the accepted opinions is of course a destruction of the accepted opinions. But being emphatically gradual, it is best described as an undermining of the accepted opinions. For it would not be gradual, if it were not combined with a provisional acceptance of the accepted opinions: as Farabi elsewhere declares, conformity with the opinions of the religious community in which one is brought up, is a necessary qualification for the future philosopher. The goal of the gradual destruction of the accepted opinions is the truth, as far as the elite, the potential philosophers, is concerned, but only an approximation to the truth (or an imaginative representation of the truth) as far as the general run of men is concerned. We may say that Farabi's Plato replaces Socrates' philosopher-king who rules openly in the perfect city by the secret kingship of the philosopher who lives privately as a member of an imperfect community. That kingship is exercised by means of an exoteric teaching which, while not too flagrantly

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[8] Strauss, *Farabi's Plato*, 383.

contradicting the accepted opinions, undermines them in such a way as to guide the potential philosophers toward the truth.[9]

So according to Strauss, al-Farabi following Plato was an advocate for the manufacture of consent. The philosopher needs to feign a loyalty to accepted opinion while undermining it at the same time. And he needs to anticipate the variety of his readers when he was writing.

> He knew of course that he would be met half-way by the large majority of his readers. Not only will most readers not observe the difference between the expected subject of the paragraph (the desired way of life) and its actual subject (happiness), because their expectation will determine what they perceive; most readers will besides expect from the outset, i.e. independently of any suggestions of the author, that the author will identify the desired way of life with the virtuous way of life, because they themselves believe in their identity.[10]

Virtue is different from happiness. Life in the perfect city, the virtuous city, can lead to the happiness of the normal citizens. But only the philosopher can achieve happiness in the imperfect city.

> Philosophy and the perfection of philosophy and hence happiness do not require – this is Farabi's last word on the subject – the establishment of the perfect political community: they are possible, not only in this world, but even in these cities, the imperfect cities. But – and this is the essential implication – in the imperfect cities, i.e. in the world as it actually is and as it always will be, happiness is within the reach of the philosophers alone: the non-philosophers are eternally barred, by the nature of things, from happiness. Happiness consists "*in consideratione scientaiarum speculativarum*" and nothing else. Philosophy is the necessary and sufficient condition of happiness.[11]

Of course this seems quite surprisingly elitist, but he uses this to ground his philosophical answer to Schmitt.

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[9] Ibid, 384.
[10] Ibid, 387.
[11] Ibid, 381.

For reasons of philanthropy, if for no other reason, Farabi was compelled to show a possibility of happiness to men other than philosophers. Therefore, he distinguishes between perfection and happiness: he asserts that philosophy, being a theoretical art, supplies indeed the science of the beings and thus man's highest perfection, but has to be supplemented by the right way of life in order to produce happiness. More generally expressed, he accepts to begin with the orthodox opinion that philosophy is insufficient to lead man to happiness. Yet, he makes clear, the supplement to philosophy which is required for the attaining of happiness, is supplied, not by religion, or revelation, but by politics. He substitutes politics for religion. He thus lays the foundation for the secular alliance between philosophers and enlightened princes.[12]

I think we can see two things here in Strauss' reading. One is an interesting insight that the philosopher is embedded in a certain historical, cultural, and religious context and yet can with the use of reason speak beyond it. Strauss correctly sees that perfections can be recognized in the imperfect city. This is something we will explore shortly. The other is his view of the importance of dissimulation in the expression of philosophy, its role in the manipulation of the vulgar, and that al-Farabi lays the foundation for "the secular alliance between philosophers and enlightened princes." This is more problematic.[13]

So what is an "enlightened prince"? In his famous work *On Tyranny* Strauss in his reading of Thucydides seems to accept the need for an enlightened form of Tyranny.[14] But notice here that even an enlightened tyranny works from the top down. It is easy to see how Strauss's disciples and their think-tanks can see themselves as the elite who carry the heavy burden of shaping public opinion. The result is that the very idea of democracy becomes idealized into a "noble lie" rather than an arena of possibility.

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[12] Ibid, 382.

[13] This is the theme of the famous dialogue between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève.

[14] Gourevitch, Victor and Michael S. Roth. *Leo Strauss On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojeve Correspondence*. New York: The Free Press, 1991.

Al-Farabi

Let us now go back further in time to al-Farabi. Standing in front of al-Farabi experts I need to clarify that I certainly cannot speak for al-Farabi, I cannot "read" him. Let me just mention some aspects of his work, and various readings of his work, that seem to resist Strauss' reading.

Al-Farabi in his work "The Virtuous City" was struggling with Plato's idea of the "Republic." Plato recognized that the Republic is the "city in speech," that is, an ideal city which does not yet exist. This introduces then the issue of perfection. So al-Farabi must explain the relationship between the perfection of the virtuous city and the imperfections of the cities as they actually exist. He classifies various kinds of imperfect cities. But the imperfect city that attracts his attention is the democratic city. He describes it as follows:

> The democratic city is the one in which each one of the citizens is given free rein and left alone to do whatever he likes. Its citizens are equal and their laws say that no man is in any way at all better than any other man … And no one … has any claim to authority unless he works to enhance their freedom … Those who rule them do so by the will of the ruled, and the rulers follow the wishes of the ruled.[15]

It would be the best of the imperfect cities. Larbi Sadiki in his short essay on Islamic democracy, writes about al-Farabi's ambivalence.

> However, Al-Farabi both praises and deprecates *al-madinah al-jama 'iyyah* in tune with his open 'Islamicity'. In terms of his praise for the democratic city, A-Farabi applauds its legal freedom and the equality of its citizens, seeing in them equivalence to the Islamic concepts of *musawat'itq* (emancipation of slaves) and *al-la ikrah* (non-compulsion) which are associated with freedom. However, the best indication of Al-Farabi's approval of the democratic city is his distinction of *al-madinah al-jama 'iyyah* as 'the most admirable and happy city' (Al-'Aali 1986: 51). It provides a foundation from which his *al-madinatu al-fadilah* (virtuous city) can develop, governed by virtuous rulers (Al-Farabi [940] 1963: 51-52).[16]

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[15] Al-Farabi, 50. quoted in Sadki, "Islam," 126.
[16] Sadiki, "Islam," 127.

Notice that Strauss does not dwell on this in his reading of al-Farabi, that is, the imperfect city is where the possibility of the perfect city can be viewed.

According to Sadiki, al-Farabi's criticism of the democratic city is due to three reasons. The first is that it leads to a kind of material freedom where power can be bought.[17] al-Farabi writes:

> Rulerships are actually bought for a price, especially the positions of authority in the democratic city … Therefore, when someone finally holds a position of authority, it is either because the citizens have favoured him with it, or else because they have received from him money or something in return.[18]

One can see this clearly to the de-evolution of Western democracy. It begins to no longer favor 'citizens' but instead institutions and wealthy 'investors'. Freedom becomes linked with material wealth. This is what is now called "market democracy."

The second reason is its marginalization of the learned and virtuous. This also connects us with the motive for the dissimulation of the philosopher as Strauss interprets it.[19] And the third reason involves the idea of diversity and competing interests. Sadiki writes:

> The third explanation for Al-Farabi's criticism of *al-madinah a-jama 'iyyah* is its diversity and 'contesting interests', which for Al-Farabi represents a deviation from the Islamic concept of *tawhid* and the one *ummah*. He appears to deride the democratic city's citizenry in whose 'eyes the virtuous ruler is he who has the ability to judge well and contrive well what enables them to attain their diverse and variegated desires and wishes' (Al-Farabi [940] 1963: 51). This rather sophisticated view of the democratic city in terms of vying

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[17] Sadiki writes: "His disapproval of *al-madinah al-jama 'iyyah* can be put down to three main reasons. The first, is its earthly and sensual materialism which contradicts Islam's spiritualism, and Al-Farabi's own life of *zuhd* (asceticism). As in all ignorant cities, the democratic city's leadership 'aims at having its fill of bare necessities', including domination and freedom (Al-Farabi [940] 1963: 51). What can be presumed is Al-Farabi's aversion to the kind of material freedom that is deleterious to supreme happiness. For those who are materially free can buy power." Sadiki, "Islam," 128.

[18] Al-Farabi, 51. quoted in Sadki, "Islam," 126.

[19] Al-Farabi writes: "As for the truly virtuous man – namely the man, who, if he were to rule them, would determine and direct their actions towards happiness – they do not make him a ruler. If by chance he come to rule them he will soon find himself either deposed or killed or in an unstable and challenged position (Al-Farabi [940] 1963: 51)."

'desires and wishes' somewhat contradicts his functional approach in the crafting of his virtuous city in which he presents a view of society bound by a common interest.[20]

This critique of diversity is also quite interesting because al-Farabi also relates it to the virtuous city or cities, and also discusses several methods which can create a balance between the democratic and the virtuous city.[21] This also leads us to the idea that there can be as many kinds of democracy as there are cities. In his book on al-Farabi, Majid Fakhry writes concerning this ambivalence.

> Here al-Farabi may be accused of a certain degree of vacillation. For having assigned the democratic city to the category of ignorant cities, he now makes this qualified concession, which sounds strange. It is possible, of course, that he is simply reflecting in this respect the sentiments of Plato, who was one of the arch-enemies of democracy in ancient times but made a similar concession in its favor. For, despite its faults and the fact that it was far removed from his political ideal of aristocratic kingship, Plato refers to democracy in the Republic as a fertile ground for the emergence of every type of constitution. 'A democracy,' he writes, 'is so free that it contains a sample of every kind and perhaps anyone who intends to found a state … ought first to visit this emporium of constitutions and choose the model he likes best.' *Republic, VIII, 557b*.[22]

So this reflects an interesting ambivalence found in al-Farabi's writings. An ambivalence between diversity and unity. The idea of a virtuous city would require unity. And yet it is only in

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[20] Sadiki, "Islam," 127

[21] One way is through councils. Sadiki writes: "Al-Farabi also realized the ultimate fallibility of one-man rule. He therefore appears to advocate a form of collegial rulership. And 'rule through councils' in *al-ri asatu al-thalithah* (the third rulership) (Al-Huluw 1980: 63). This can be interpreted as a way to harmonise the institutions of both the democratic and virtuous cities. Al-Farabi stresses that supreme happiness derives from the virtues of loving justice and loathing injustice, and the strong sense of community and cooperation for the common good. Al-Farabi's virtuous city is multifaceted. It is differentiated in that 'There will be certain ranks of order', and yet it is integrated as 'The function of the city's governor … is to manage the cities in such a way that all the city's parts become linked and fitted together.' It is also civic and participatory because 'the citizens … cooperate to eliminate the evils and acquire the goods' and the ruler can enjoin the citizens [to be active on] certain matters'." Sadiki, "Islam," 128.

[22] Fakhry, *Al-Farabi: Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism*, 111.

the imperfect city that the freedom exists to speculate on this possible unity. Notice for Strauss, this ambivalence was merely a sign of dissimulation.

We begin to see how we can perhaps turn the tables and begin to read Strauss through al-Farabi. Strauss remains silent about al-Farabi's or Plato's deeper consideration of the possibilities found within democracy. Instead, Strauss upholds an empty and merely functional idea of democracy as a strategy and a transcendental ideal. On one hand democracy as an ideal can act as a resistance to what is considered *unenlightened* forms of tyranny, and on the other, democracy can be a mechanism where the beliefs and desires of the vulgar can be manipulated to correspond with an *enlightened* form of tyranny. This also aligns Strauss's political philosophy with Schmitt's political theology. Philosophy now simply takes over from revelation. It is now the philosopher – or the think-tank – who orchestrates the sovereign decision.[23] It installs its own version of the "virtuous city" and eliminates other possibilities – subverting the very thing which made democracy the best of the imperfect cities.

But an enlightened tyranny nevertheless remains a tyranny. For al-Farabi, tyranny operates both internally and externally. Internally it violates justice and undermines and manipulates the values of the citizen of the city, and externally it dominates other cities. And so we see how liberal democracy as an empty ideal can be easily be distorted to act as a tool of imperialism. And how it can disingenuously employ *ideals* such as justice, human rights, freedom and anti-corruption for the purpose of injustice.

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[23] Meier writes: "The restraint that Strauss imposed on himself in the public treatment of the question of how this officium of philosophy is to be fulfilled has resulted in the position being widely attributed to him that, in the face of revelation, philosophy finds itself in a blind alley from which it can free itself only by means of a decisionistic act… Struass not only allowed for the misleading impression that he holds a decisionistic position, but he even helped to nourish it with a number of remarks that suggested a stalemate between philosophy and faith in revelation." Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Politcal Problem,* 23.

Perfection and Imperfection

But how can we understand such an ambivalence on a deeper level? We saw in al-Farabi

the strength of democracy lies in its imperfection. Al-Farabi believed that thinking itself is bound

with the fallen state of man, the ability to seek perfection in oneself, in texts and in the diversity

of the world around them. Sadiki writes:

> Al-Farabi's virtuous city constitutes the process of dialectic or, more aptly, the process of
> its resolution. It is *mithaliyyah* (ideal) and it approximates divinity, for al-*kamal*
> (perfection), an Islamic quality reserved to Allah, is obtainable in the virtuous city. That
> Al-Farabi expects perfection from mortals in an earthly virtuous city would seem to verge
> on *ishrak* (polytheism), for it is an Islamic axiom that *al-kamal Allah* (perfection is only
> for God). The Farabian notion of human perfection indicates a dialectic between Hellenistic
> and Islamic tenet. On the one hand, the Qur'anic notion of *al-qawmu al-salihum* (the
> righteous people) is in concordance with Al-Farabi's idea of virtuosity. On the other hand,
> the notion of human perfection appears to derive from the Platonic influence on Al-Farabi's
> own philosophy.[24]

One can find this theme in the writings of the Ikhwan al-Safa.[25] In their "Epistle on the

Animals" the animals petition the Jinns to be released from servitude to the humans. Each animal

species sends an envoy to make their case concerning their respective perfection over humans.

Each animal demonstrates a perfection that the human being lacks.

Yet the animals lose their case against the humans. While the animals represent the myriad

perfections of creation. they are innocent in the expression of their perfection – it comes naturally

from God. But it is the 'imperfect' human who has to power to recognize the perfection in each

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[24] Sadiki, "Islam," 128.
[25] There seems to be a commonality in the thinking of al-Farabi and the Ikhwan al-Safa. For instance, the
story of al-Farabi as wandering musician is repeated by the Ikhwan al-Safa. Such correspondences I
believe can allow one to "read" al-Farabi's affirmation of diversity.

thing, in each animal, in each text, in each religion and in each culture. The "perfect man" emerges as one who represents the gathering of the diversity of perfections.

> Finally arose a learned, accomplished, worthy, keen, pious, and insightful man. He was Persian by breeding, Arabian by faith, a ḥanīf by confession, Iraqi in culture, Hebrew in lore, Christian in manner, Damascene in devotion, Greek in science, Indian in discernment, Sufi in intimations, regal in character, masterful in thought, and divine in awareness.[26]

The imperfections of the cities or communities which we live, the imperfections of our own selves and our writings, our communication, our motives, this is where truth shows itself. It is our state of imperfection and our imperfect political situations which allow us to recognize perfections. To relate the secular to the religious, to relate reason with revelation, to recognize changes and adapt to these changes, to constantly re-question who we are, where we were, and where we are heading.

Strauss recognized something in al-Farabi, a certain ambivalence, but while Strauss interpreted this as pointing to the elite power of the philosopher, I suspect al-Farabi modestly saw this as pointing to the imperfections inherent in thinking itself. This is also similar to what the writer C. S. Lewis describes.

> "I am a democrat [proponent of democracy] because I believe in the Fall of Man. I think most people are democrats for the opposite reason. A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people like Rousseau, who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government. The danger of defending democracy on those grounds is that they're not true…. I find that they're not true without looking further than myself. I don't deserve a share in governing a hen-roost. Much less a nation…. The real reason for democracy is just the reverse. Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows. Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters."[27]

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[26] Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, 314.
[27] Lewis, "Present Concerns."

In my own "reading," I suspect that Strauss misread al-Farabi's gaps, repetitions and silences. He read al-Farabi's ambivalence as a kind of calculated philosophical control. So he and his disciples were able to conceive of "liberal democracy" as an empty ideal, a perfection, to be manipulated by the philosopher – or the think-tank – in association with an enlightened prince. But what al-Farabi's gaps, repetitions and silences, his vacillations, his ambivalences concerning democracy really express is the simply the imperfection of democracy as a well of its possibilities.

This imperfection has been handled imperfectly by other thinkers as well. Many poststructuralist thinkers like Francois Lyotard and Jean Luc Nancy have developed approaches that celebrate imperfection within the community as a perfection in itself. Heinrich Meier recognized the political danger of this:

> Jean-Francois Lyotard has recalled the divine commandment given to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and Abraham's faithful obedience as the paradigm of the *Ereignis* – of the unforeseeable call as well as the attitude in which one must answer it. The proximity of some "postmodern" authors not only to Kierkegaard, … but also to Schmitt, is greater than it may at first seem. In an intricate way – *dans un etat de latence ou dans un etat de langueur* – they are turned towards the decisive determinations of the political theologian's cause: authority, revelation, and obedience.[28]

Such writers reject any sort of transcendental or theological structure to insist on pure immanence. They celebrate pure difference, pure openess, and the pure possibility found in the event (*Ereignis*), but this abstract embrace of openness leaves no room for real possibility, or the directedness toward some kind of perfection.

Also following this line of thought is the approach of Hardt and Negri in their work *Multitudes.* In this book they see future democracy as an empowerment of the ordinary global

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[28] Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Politcal Problem,* 87.

citizen and their decision-making abilities due to the connectivity created by communication technology. Our advances in communication within the global economy challenge the power of political sovereignty and allow power to circulate and regulate itself at the level of the global population which they – after Spinoza – call "the multitude." It would be a kind of cybernetic self-regulation, or what they call an "open-source society."

> The creation of the multitude, its innovation in networks, and its decision-making ability in common makes democracy possible for the first time today. Political sovereignty and the rule of the one, which has always undermined any real notion of democracy, tends to appear not only unnecessary but absolutely impossible… The autonomy of the multitude and its capacities for economic, political, and social self-organization take away any role for sovereignty. Not only is sovereignty no longer the exclusive terrain of the political, the multitude banishes sovereignty from politics. When the multitude is finally able to rule itself, democracy becomes possible.[29]

The problem is that this cybernetic self-regulation is that it is in fact easily regulated and manipulated in the manner Strauss outlined. A self-regulating system can be guided at a higher level. Any movement and decision-making at the grass-roots level can have its momentum captured and directed to other ends.[30] Another problem arises with their idea of a global self-regulating system itself. What al-Farabi admired about the imperfect democratic city is that it exists in multiple forms which allow for its diversity, its freedom, and the possibilities for the philosophical projections of perfections. But by this very idea, an inter-connected, self-regulating society leaves little room for novelty. Our most valuable ideas and deepest religious insights often emerge outside of the connectivity of networks. Hardt and Negri's idea of this future of democracy remains an ideal. And it is an ideal, which Meier recognized, which has the potential for tyranny.

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[29] Hardt and Negri, *Multitudes*, 340.
[30] For example, this seems to be what happened in the so-called "Arab Spring."

Jacques Derrida also dealt with this problem when he spoke of the "democracy to come" (*la democratie a venir*). For Derrida, democracy cannot be claimed by any state in an ideal or completed form. A "democracy to come" involves the contradictions and *aporias* inherent in democracy that threaten to defer it or destroy it. He calls this "auto-immunity." One example would be the *aporia* inherent in state sovereignty which makes democracy possible but also threatens it. Other example would be the *aporia* between incalculable singularity and calculable equality of its citizens. This "democracy to come" would be then a kind of possibility or "promise." In his reflection on democracy entitled "The Last of the Rogue States: The "Democracy to Come," Opening in Two Turns," he uses this to reject the connection of the political with the theological.[31] This is in response to Schmitt, who develops a political theology. To extend this insight into the language of this essay, we can say that democracy cannot be theologically represented as a perfection.

On one hand, democracy can correspond to the "neutral, constative analysis of a concept." On the other hand, it can refer to a "promise" or a messianic waiting. Derrida claims in this presentation that these are two modes of speaking which alternate with one another in the form of two "turns." This indecision in listening (or reading) also constitutes an irony made possible by the political itself.

> Here is yet one more turn, and it is political: is it not also democracy that gives the right to irony in the public space? Yes, for democracy opens public space, the publicity of public space, by granting the right to a change of tone (Wechsel der Töne), to irony as well as to

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[31] That is democracy cannot be represented in a theological sense. Its possibilities always precede theological representation. Derrida writes: "That is what I tried to suggest in *Sauf le nom* (1993) with regard to the meaning of *sans* in the apophatic discourse of so-called negative theology, indeed of a *khô*ra or a spacing before any determination and any possible reappropriation by a theologico-political history or revelation, and even before a negative theology, which is always fundamentally related to some historical, and especially Christian, revelation. The democracy to come would be like the *khôra* of the political." Derrida, "The Last of the Rogue States: The "Democracy to Come," Opening in Two Turns," 327.

fiction, the simulacrum, the secret, literature, and so on... It thus already opens, for whomever, an experience of freedom, however ambiguous and disquieting, threatened and threatening, it might remain in its ''perhaps,'' with a necessarily excessive responsibility of which no one may be absolved.[32]

Notice that this is important because it folds back upon our initial consideration. How does one read and interpret? Strauss believed that he deciphered the secrets open only to elite philosophers like himself. Derrida stresses the indecisions of listening and reading, the possibility for new interpretations. Which, I might add, opens a space for the religious imagination free from the domination of any system. He continues to discuss this in his interview with Mustapha Cherif in the book *Islam and the West*. When asked about the "universalism of democracy" Derrida answers.

> I believe that what distinguishes the idea of democracy from all other ideas of political regimes – monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and so on – is that democracy is the only political system, a model without a model, that accepts its own historicity, that is, its own future, which accepts its self-criticism, which accepts it perfectibility. You are correct: it is your democratic right to criticize the insufficiencies, the contradictions, the imperfections of our system. To exist in a democracy is to agree to challenge, to be challenged, to challenge the status quo, which is called democratic, in the name of a democracy to come. This is why I always speak of a democracy to come. Democracy is always to come, it is a promise, and it is in the name of that promise that one can always criticize, question that which is proposed as de facto democracy. Consequently, I believe that there doesn't exist in the world a democracy suitable for the concept of the democracy to come.[33]

Derrida's approach possesses many of the ambiguities we saw in al-Farabi. Yet in his important and rich discussion of the contradictions of democracy, Derrida's approach still regards democracy as a promise, a goal, or in some ways, a perfection. The perfection which is promised remains something that can be named "democracy." And as Derrida realizes, this remains at one

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[32] Derrida, "The Last of the Rogue States: The "Democracy to Come," Opening in Two Turns," 337.
[33] Cherif, Mustapha. *Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,* 42-43.

level ("turn") a mere philosophical concept. And of course, it too remains an empty philosophical concept whose 'promise' which can be manipulated by the tyrant.[34]

So we might say that these poststructuralist approaches try to idealize democracy each in their own way. But we might claim, following al-Farabi, that democracy is valuable precisely because it is imperfect, because it is flexible, because with so many challenges and changes in the world, there must be a certain freedom of the thinker to consider new promises, new solutions, or to reorient ourselves to our ideals and perfections, and to reorient ourselves to our past. The imperfect democratic city is valuable because it can project beyond itself. Postmodernism often does not appreciate this transcendent impulse. In its emphasis on immanence, it does not recognize that the human being is that which reaches beyond itself to define itself, to place itself.

The monolithic ideal of global liberal democracy is merely the ideal of the consolidation and control of all knowledge and information. This consolidation and control poses the immense danger of erasing memory and culture, and of rewriting history for the purpose of profit. This leads us to reconsider the problem recognized by both al-Farabi and Strauss. The philosopher lives within a certain time and culture and yet can think beyond it. It is this paradox that allows thinking to be valuable. It allows thinking to be directed towards solutions to new problems, and to maintain contact with the past. Against Strauss we can say that the philosopher is not an expert in the art of dissimulation, the philosopher is *sincere* for lack of a better term, and this sincerity is more important that even the notion of truth. The philosopher is interested in ideals, but not for the sake of manipulating the vulgar.

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[34] Consider the fact that 'democracy' as a term can be abused to justify the individualization of the world's population, removed from older traditional and religious historical structures. Here the tension between the singularity and equality of individuals is emphasized but in a way that maintains their complete control within a larger global network of connectivity.

And yet we see that these ideals are increasingly manipulated. By politics, economics, and the media. Our ideals are manipulated to create new conflicts and interventions and justify new wars. And the thinker or academic – in their sincerity and naivety – is nowadays often complicit in these justifications. We as philosophers are often led around by brightly colored strings; we are controlled by what we love the most – our ideals. But if our perfections and ideals are completely manipulated, if our media succeeds in completely disguising and twisting events, then the philosopher will be only a functionary in the flows of capital. Thinking will only occur in the think-tanks which serve these flows of capital and generate profit from an endless cycle of destruction and reconstruction. Thinking and philosophy – as Heidegger pointed out – will be reduced to a cybernetic flow of information which only serves the system itself.

But when we have lost the type of thinking which we call philosophy, we have lost the only tool that can anchor us, that can place us. We have no way of coordinating our condition with our traditions, our religions, and with what it means to be a human being. Without these anchors, the human being may disappear into its technologies and their political control. But it is the imperfections of the world which preserve it, which allow for the thinking of new possibilities.

So who am I to be speaking to you, to be reading and interpreting al-Farabi? Who are we as members of a conference? We are wandering scholars like al-Farabi. We travel from imperfect city to imperfect city to speak and listen to new ideas. We are certainly a diverse and imperfect community. But we are the imperfect ones who strive to keep an eye open for perfection.

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