

# ΣΚΕΒΙΣ

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## AL-FARABI'S ECONOMICAL STATE AND ITS MODERN CONNOTATIONS

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Al-Fārābi (c.870-c.950), a prominent philosopher of the Arabic Golden Age, contributed to political philosophy by preserving earlier traditions, especially Platonism, and by adding new and innovative elements into political thought. According to al-Fārābi, humans seek their perfection. The political order whose guiding principle is the realization and preservation of happiness is the virtuous regime. Humans achieve perfection, theoretical and practical, only in political associations. The perfect political associations are three: the city, the nation and the union of the inhabited part of the world. The addition of the nation and the inhabited part of the world could be ascribed to the strong influence of the Arabic paradigm and the pseudo-Aristotelian tradition of late antiquity, but their elaboration should be credited to al-Fārābi.

Furthermore, in his *Compendium of the Laws*, al-Fārābi avoids commenting on passages of the Platonic *Laws*, which identifies the virtuous republic with the city, so that he supports his argument about the preponderance of larger city ideal states. Another key factor of al-Fārābi's thought is the guiding role of philosophers who should govern rationally. In an environment of religious empires, al-Fārābi simplifies religion to a political instrument; religion is nothing more than the symbolic representation of eternal truth so that the uneducated public understands key assumptions of theoretical and practical wisdom. Al-Fārābi was the first philosopher to address the changing political reality of his epoch in a rather modern way. In the 21st century, humanity faces almost the same problems concerning globalization, which is simultaneously a vision and a developing reality.

Al-Fārābi holds that humans could not protect themselves from nature and the hostility of other humans outside of organized societies. In addition, perfection which is man's ultimate goal is not achievable without

the aid of his fellow citizens and the cooperation of societies (ijtimā)<sup>1</sup>. The supreme happiness (al-khayr al-afḍal) – a very rare term in Greek philosophy –<sup>2</sup> and the theoretical and practical perfection, are achievable only in the city and not in smaller political associations. According to al-Fārābī there are three perfect political associations (madīna), depending on their sizes: large (ma'mūra) – the union of all the nations and associations of the inhabited part of the world-, medium – a nation (umma) situated in a certain land- and small – the city-state (madīnah). The smaller societies, such as the village (qarya), the neighborhood (mahalla), the quarter (sikka) and the household (manzil) are imperfect<sup>3</sup>.

Dealing with the possible sources for his ecumenism, we observe that while there is a distinct influence aura of Aristotle's politics in al-Fārābī's philosophy, the latter distances himself from classical Greek political thought. His historical experience – the great empires of Alexander the Great, the Romans, the Sassanids and the Arabs – lead him to realize that the perfect society should be realized in political associations larger than the city. Moreover, the pseudo-Aristotelian tradition of the late antiquity could have had inspired al-Fārābī<sup>4</sup>. Walzer supports that al-Fārābī studied Middle Platonic political treatises whose writers argued in favor of an unsophisticated ecumenism. But the argument remains feeble since we

1. *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinah al-fadilah*, in *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* (ed. & trans R. Walzer), Clarendon, Oxford 1985, 15.1. ; Aristoteles, *Politica*, 1253a2, 1253a29.

2. Aristoteles, *Magna Moralia*, 1183a6, 23, 1184a36, b36.

3. *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinah al-fadilah*, 15.2.

4. O'Meara D., *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2003, 185-97. ; Plezia M., "Lettre d'Aristote a Alexandre sur la politique envers les cites", *Archivum Filologiczne* 25 (1970), 6-206. ; Stern S.M., *Aristotle on the World State*, B. Cassirer, Oxford 1968; Syros V., "A Note on the Transmission of Aristotle's Political Ideas in Medieval Persian and Early-Modern India. Was There Any Arabic or Persian Translation of the *Politics*?" *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 50 (2008), 303-10; Vallat P., *Farabi et l'École d'Alexandrie. Des prémisses de la connaissance à la philosophie politique* (Études Musulmanes, XXXVIII), Vrin, Paris 2004, 33-128; Walzer R., "Aspects of Islamic political thought: al-Fārābī and Ibn Khaldun", *Oriens XVI* (1963), 40-60; Watt J., "From Themistius to al-Fārābī: Platonic political philosophy and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in the East," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 13 (1995), 17-41. ; Watt J., "From Synesius to al-Fārābī: philosophy, religion, and rhetoric in the Christian Orient," in R. Lavenant (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII* (OCA 256), Rome 1998, 265-277. ; Woerther F., "La Rhétorique d'Aristote comme moyen de diffusion des idées politiques aristotéliennes dans la philosophie politique arabe: les *Disdascalia in Rethoricam ex glossa Alfarabii*," in V. Syros (ed.), *Well Begun is Only Half Done: Tracing Aristotle's Political Ideas in Medieval Arabic, Syriac, Byzantine, and Jewish Sources*, AMCRS, Tempe 2011, 49-71.

have no such treatise available and there is no concrete indirect information about the content of these supposed treatises. Mahdi and Lerner interpret al-Fārābī's ecumenism as a result of his life: he lived in a world dominated by great monotheistic empires, which attempted to prevail over each other so as to achieve universal dominion<sup>5</sup>. Parens holds that al-Fārābī does not promote a totalitarian globalization; rather he proposes the enlargement of the virtuous city-state so as to coincide with the inhabited part of the earth<sup>6</sup>. The virtuous city-state is that in which the citizens cooperate for the achievement of happiness. Consequently, the virtuous nation is that in which all the cities aim at happiness. The virtuous world-state, according to al-Fārābī, is not a reality, but it is possible to be realized in the future when all nations shall struggle for happiness. Al-Fārābī aspires to that specific type of ecumenism because it will maximize the common good and facilitate the realization of human nature<sup>7</sup>. In addition, al-Fārābī, in his *Talkhis Nawamis Aflatun*, refrains from mentioning the passages of the Platonic *Laws* which refer to the extent of the virtuous city-state,<sup>8</sup> a prepositional omission in favor of ecumenism. Al-Fārābī was well aware of the political reality of his era and realized that the limitations of the Greek city-states, both theoretical and practical, could not correspond to the needs of his epoch and of the coming generations. Moreover, a small political association could not promote the philosophical humanism which his treatises emit because civic and national identity excludes the most part of humanity. The realization of happiness for all the human beings requires a single, universal state which safeguards the necessary conditions for such an accomplishment. Even today, when a lot of people demand the breaking down of large political associations as a solution to their problems, they do not understand that not even national states could answer their needs. The root of the crisis is not ecumenism, but the way we try to implement it.

5. Lerner R., "Beating the Neoplatonic Bushes", *Journal of Religion* 67 (1987), 510-517. ; Mahdi M., "Review: Al-Fārābī's Imperfect State", Reviewed Work: *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State* by Richard Walzer, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 110 (1990), 691-726.; Walzer R., "Al-Fārābī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New edition, v.2. p.2, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1965, 779-781.

6. Parens J., *Metaphysics as Rhetoric, Al-Fārābī's Summary of Plato's "Laws"*, SUNY Press, New York 1995, 52.

7. *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinah al-fadilah*, 15.3.

8. Parens, *Metaphysics*, 63-65.

It is of great importance to describe in detail the way al-Fārābī perceives ecumenism. In his *Talkhis Nawamis Aflatun* (8.7), he compares the state which is governed according to the written law with the hive. The bees produce honey which is, in turn, collected and consumed by the beekeepers. The workers, in fact, and the drones are treated equally. The workers are forced to produce; work is a kind of punishment for them, while the typical attitude would have been to coerce the drones. According to al-Fārābī, the same happens when the city-state tends to be ecumenical and apply its laws outside of its limited area. The outcome of such an expansion would be tyranny which is not an acceptable regime<sup>9</sup>. Al-Fārābī visualizes an ecumenical state based on laws and institutions appropriate for its size and goal: a political association of justice which serves the totality of the citizens and not only dominant and powerful groups. His message remains valid to the present day because modern globalization falls victim of the same mistake: leaders disregard the characteristics and the cultures of nations and groups of people and attempt to enforce the Western administrative and cultural model all over the world. They coerce people for their advantage. Though one could add that economic goals, mostly of individuals within the states, are what drive the imposing of one culture rather than the other. In other words, the western/eastern division is the perfect analogue of the bee/drove example.

Joshua Parens reads al-Fārābī's ecumenism in a different way. As Parens claims, al-Fārābī studies the Platonic *Respublica* and realizes that the virtuous city-state is not realizable. If the virtuous city-state is an atopia - i.e. if there is no place for it in the world, then there is no place for a virtuous ecumenical state since, according to al-Fārābī, the latter is the sum of the virtuous nations which, in turn, are the sum of virtuous cities. Moreover, if Islam - the virtuous religion - was able to conquer the entire globe, then every nation would automatically be virtuous. As a result, the two arguments are in contradiction<sup>10</sup>. I support the view that Parens misinterpreted al-Fārābī's argument. In fact, al-Fārābī ascribes different levels

9. Parens, *Metaphysics*, 82-83. ; Plato, *Leges*, 843e.

10. Çevik M., "Farabi's Utopia and its Eschatological Relations," *Journal of Islamic Research*, 3.2 (2010): 173-78. ; Parens J., *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions, Introducing AlFārābī*, State University of New York Press, Albany New York 2006, 7-8.

of perfection to each virtuous regime. Humans could achieve happiness in every virtuous regime, but its achievement is easier and more complete in an ecumenical state. That is the reason why al-Fārābi adds the ecumenical state to the virtuous political associations and not because he thinks that the Platonic ideal city-state is an atopia.

In addition, Parens claims that al-Fārābi holds that every religion has to comply with the specific character of every nation determined by both material and spiritual factors in a certain historical period<sup>11</sup>. As a result, the virtuous ecumenical state would include several religions and al-Fārābi's political vision would be incompatible with the expansion of Islamic religion and the caliphate<sup>12</sup>. Parens misconstrues once again al-Fārābi's thought. As I mentioned earlier, the philosopher argues that the ecumenical state should not be organized under the laws and institutions of its constitutive city and nations, but it should have new institutions, proper for its qualities and needs. Consequently, the ecumenical state needs a singular religion that serves its goals and should be capable of empowering the philosophers and the members of the ruling political order to manipulate the public. Certain scholars indicate that al-Fārābi's political philosophy did not address the actual political situation of his era and remains distant even though al-Fārābi's ambition was to preserve its practical dimensions<sup>13</sup>. This is, however, al-Fārābi's main advantage: he did not want to narrow his ecumenism to the historical reality of his era; he was not a political scientist. In addition, he did not ignore the limitations of the caliphate and the other major religions; rather, he found ways to surpass them so as his political proposition shall not be restricted by the medieval paradigm.

Another crucial issue concerns the person who governs the perfect political associations: Al-Fārābi supports that such person should have achieved happiness on a personal level so that he guides others. The supreme ruler (malik) is obliged not only to know the path to happiness, but to have crossed it as well: without empirical evidence of his ability to achieve happiness, he would not have been king. Al-Fārābi claims that

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11. Kurmanalieva A.D., "Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd on the Correlation between Philosophy and Religion," *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 3.2 (2007), 247-53.

12. Parens, *Virtuous*, 7-8.

13. Jackson S., "From Prophetic Actions to Constitutional Theory: A Novel Chapter in Medieval Muslim Jurisprudence", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993), 72.

such a virtuous person is the imam, who governs the virtuous city-state, nation and the ecumenical state<sup>14</sup>. The identification of the philosopher-king with the imam bears a resemblance with Mohamed, the prophet who transmitted the true philosophy through the Quran<sup>15</sup>.

It is worth noticing that al-Fārābī also accepts other, larger types of regime, if the virtuous ruler is not available in a specific period. The only rigid premise is that the governing elite must include philosophers. The virtuous political regime - whether it is based on philosophy or on religion - entails a thorough understanding of metaphysics so as to grasp humans' place in the cosmic hierarchy<sup>16</sup>.

Al-Fārābī draws from the Islamic tradition, as far as it concerns the status of religion in the ecumenical state, a matter that affects the state's administration. According to him, religion is a possible threat to ecumenism, if it does not support the dimensions of an ecumenical state. He combines his philosophy with the Islamic theory of just war and diverges from the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy. He does not reject the offensive war, a war which is a means for rectitude and for the restitution of the proper political order<sup>17</sup>. Scholars disagree on whether al-Fārābī remains faithful to his philosophical vision or he leans towards a Muslim interpretation of the just war tradition<sup>18</sup>. Another least possible interpretation of al-Fārābī's thought would be that he was inspired by Alexander of Macedon and the Romans and hoped for a military campaign which would bring the people together and unite them under a single political and cultural association.

14. *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinah al-fadilah*, 15.11.

15. Walzer R., "Commentary", R. Walzer (ed. - trans. - com.), *On the Perfect State, Abu Basr al Fārābī, Revised text with introduction, translation, and commentary by Richard Walzer*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, 442.

16. Mahdi M., *Al-Fārābī and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2001, 18.

17. Butterworth C., "Al-Fārābī's Statecraft: War in the Well-Ordered Regime", J. Johnson - J. Kelsay (eds), *Cross, Crescent and Sword*, Greenwood Press, New York 1990, 79-100. ; Mahdi, *Al-Fārābī*, 139-144. ; Sweeney M. J., "Philosophy and *Jihād*: al-Fārābī on Compulsion to Happiness," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 60.3 (2007), 543-72.

18. Butterworth C., "Al-Fārābī's Statecraft: War in the Well-Ordered Regime", J. Johnson - J. Kelsay (eds), *Cross, Crescent and Sword*, Greenwood Press, New York 1990, 79-100. ; Kraemer J., "The jihad of the falasifa", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987), 288-324. ; Lambton A., *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1981.

Religion, according to al-Fārābi, is a human construction. As a consequence, it is inferior to philosophy; religion's goal is the guidance of people through theory and practice in a simple and clear way while this is not in the nature of what philosophy does<sup>19</sup>. Religion and philosophy lead humans to the truth, but via different approaches: religion addresses the wide, uneducated public, whereas philosophy addresses the selected few. Religion, which is posterior to philosophy, expresses a logically founded, philosophical truth through imagery and symbols<sup>20</sup>. If religion depends upon an uncertain and ambiguous philosophy, both theology and jurisprudence, which depend upon the latter, would also suffer and be inadequate<sup>21</sup>. Al-Fārābi does not reject *a priori* all religion, but he insists that religion, whether true or not, is based upon philosophy<sup>22</sup>. Religion, as a simplified version of philosophy, may be transferred to a nation or to the ecumenical state without explicitly citing that it depends upon philosophy. This fact could be kept silent and consequently the citizens might be misled to believe that this religious imagery stands for reality. Things could, however, take a different course if philosophy, upon which religion is dependent, is spread to a nation which has already espoused the religion in question. Then philosophy and religion might come into conflict. When the advocates of philosophy are aware of the fact that religion contains images of philosophical truths, they may not be so inimical. However, the supporters of religion usually become very eristic if they think that they know the truth. The result of this conflict is the marginalization of philosophy and its followers, which, in turn, leads the latter to withdraw their support of religion. Furthermore, since the position

19. *Kitab al-Huruf*, in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (ed. & trans. M. Ali Khalidi), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, 1. ; Arnaldez R., "Pensée et langage dans la philosophie de Farabi (a propos du "Kitab Al-Huruf")", *Studia Islamica* 45 (1977), 57-65. ; Lahoud N., "Al-Fârâbî: On Religion and Philosophy," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*, 57 (2004), 283-301. ; Mahdi M., "Alfârâbi on Philosophy and Religion", *Philosophical Forum* 4 (1973), 1-25.

20. *Kitâb al-Milla wa Nuşûs Ukhrâ*, in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (ed. & trans. M. Ali Khalidi), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, 88. ; Galston M., *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990, 76. ; Lerner R., "Beating the Neoplatonic Bushes", *Journal of Religion* 67 (1987), 510-517. ; Marmura M., "The Islamic Philosophers' Conception of Islam", in Richard Hovannisian – Spyros Vryonis (eds.), *Islam's Understanding of Itself*, Undena Publications, Malibu 1983, 87-102.

21. *Kitab al-Huruf*, 1-2.

22. *Kitab al-Huruf*, 20-21.



of philosophers is a precarious one and they may be subject to prosecutions, it is more prudent for them to counter religious dogmas which contradict philosophy instead of attacking religion as a whole<sup>23</sup>. The emergence of philosophy and political science does not presuppose nor does it indicate the existence of an apocalyptic religion, theology or jurisprudence. Their coexistence in the Islamic paradigm, as al-Fārābī has in mind, is coincidental and does not thereby create a historical precedent. Notwithstanding this position, al-Fārābī does not hesitate to ascribe to the divinely-inspired legislator elements which pertain to the ruler or even the king<sup>24</sup>. A powerful state and a prosperous society presuppose a religion established upon philosophy and the involvement of philosophers in the application of political power. The ecumenical state needs philosophy as its founding element and philosophers for its guidance.

Nevertheless, al-Fārābī's ecumenism did not inspire subsequent thinkers, even in the Islamic world. Ibn Sīnā, for example, matches the virtuous state with the community of the Muslims. According to Ibn Sīnā, the ideal legislator is the prophet himself, e.g. Mohamed, and not the philosopher. His word is the only truth, despite the fact that Ibn Sīnā admits that religion lies on philosophy. The bonds of the Muslim community are prayers and jihad, while the subordination of the infidels is the duty of the citizens<sup>25</sup>.

Al-Fārābī's ecumenism is integrated in the intellectual climate of his era, but at the same moment it lacks the cornerstone of the Abbasid's ideology, namely Islam. It is worth mentioning here that al-Fārābī suggests ecumenism as a gradual process starting from the city. It is the progress and not the outcome of imposition by a certain authority. The city-states should unite so as to form nations while nations, in turn, should form the union of the inhabited part of the world. In this way, al-Fārābī avoids the hazard of tyranny and imposition.

As I mentioned before, al-Fārābī was well aware that ecumenism can easily convert to tyranny if a certain city-state attempts to impose its laws outside its territory. State legislation depends on specific cultural

23. *Kitāb al-Huruf*, 21-22.

24. Mahdi, *Al-Fārābī*, 92-93.

25. Crone P., *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2005, 187-188. ; Galston M., "Realism and Idealism in Avicenna's Political Philosophy", *The Review of Politics* 41 (1979), 561-577.

and historical factors which deprives it from being universal because culture and history could not unite different nations in an ecumenical state. Legislation has to be built on universal premises, e.g. on philosophy, so as to serve the needs of a global state. Philosophy is the bond which unites humans and communities, while religion and legislation are disruptive factors. Despite the fact that in our days there are different philosophies, philosophy encourages dialogue, not hatred. As a result, al-Fārābi was right when he founded his ecumenical state on philosophy. Consequently, philosophers ought to persuade the citizens through rational arguments, dialectic, symbols and religion so as to accept the existence of an ecumenical state. The goal of this state is the supreme good, understood as the theoretical living. Al-Fārābi's ecumenism is a means for the perfection of human beings and societies and not simply for the augmentation of wealth, as it is seen today. Al-Fārābi dreams of an anthropocentric ecumenical state. I support that this should be the form of modern ecumenism. While modern scholars have strong objections to the governing of philosophers, we should agree that philosophy is the appropriate universal language. The persistence on power and other divisive factors, such as religion or tradition, is doomed to fail.

