

Al-Fārābī's Political Strategy in his Account of Prophecy

Mohammad Abdullah Al-Tawallba^{1*}, Duaa khalil Ali², Ayman Al-Khalayleh³, Asma Alsharab⁴

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the possibility that the theory of prophecy within Al-Fārābī's philosophy can be explained as an expression of an ideology which sought to provide solutions to some problems that the Islamic state was experiencing during his time. This ideology was depicted in the form of elevating the philosopher over the prophet. Al-Fārābī's theory of prophecy was first introduced with focus on how he distinguished between the philosopher and the prophet, highlighting the differences between the rational and imaginary faculties and how he employed these differences to serve the Islamic community. Al-Fārābī's strategy of defending prophecy can be conceived as a sort of maneuvering to monopolize power for the Prophet and his descendants, i.e., even in favor of the Twelve Imams (*al-A'imma al-Ithnā 'ashar*), who were considered free of errors. According to Al-Fārābī, a philosopher never existed in Islam. Given the historical situation, the defense of the Prophet was necessary until an Islamic philosopher existed.

Keywords: Al-Fārābī; Prophet; Philosopher; the Virtuous City

1. Introduction

Al-Fārābī is credited for his consolidation of Islamic philosophy, which shaped his philosophical formulation for long. Indeed, his philosophy is an innovative mixture of Platonism and Neoplatonism on the one hand and the Aristotelian philosophy (the Peripatetic School) on the other (Badawi, 1984, 118). Al-Fārābī has formed the link between Islamic and Greek philosophies and "oriental" Islamic thought, which is mainly based on inspiration and revelation (Hilal, 1977, 9-33).

2. Al-Fārābī's Account

Al-Fārābī's view of the universe has arguably been the major motive to ignore the differences between Plato

and Aristotle, where he reconstructed what Neoplatonism formed in an attempt to bring old thoughts together to satisfy the intellectual and religious ambitions at the same time (al-Hanafi, 1999, 163). In so doing, Al-Fārābī had to combine the views of the two wise men (Plato and Aristotle) as a desire to bring together the Islamic states and sects under a unified state. He also brought together the relevant ideas with theoretical and practical wisdom. However, his utopia ended with the combination of the Prophet and the philosopher and the miraculous imagination and the supernatural mind (Zayezir, 2000, 326).

Al-Fārābī's main goal was reportedly to move the issue from religious or sectarian origins to another essence, which was probably shared by all, regardless of their differences with respect to their innateness and origins. This can be attributed to the fact that political and religious issues were merged during Al-Fārābī's time, especially considering that his era coincided with the vanishing of the last Imam in AH 260. For example, Imamate (Arabic: إمامة / Persian: امامت) was no longer secular but a divine position (Mabruk, 1993, 133). Imamate, from a Shī'a point of view, means the

^{1*} Department of Philosophy, School of Arts, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan, m.tawallbeh@ju.edu.jo

² Department of Philosophy, School of Arts, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan, d.khalil@ju.edu.jo

³ Department of Philosophy, School of Arts, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan, aymang3000@yahoo.com

⁴ Ministry of Education, Jordan, asma.alsharab@yahoo.com

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leadership of the Islamic society, designated by God to Prophet Mohammad in all religious and worldly affairs, and to his successors thereafter. Indeed, this manifestation of Imamate was among the principles of Shī'a religious school and one of the main points of differences between Shī'a and Sunni, which led Shī'a to be titled in some, if not in most cases, as Imamiyya (Momen, 1985,174).

3. Reading and interpretation of Al-Fārābī's philosophy

Since reading and interpretation of Al-Fārābī's tendencies and religious and political affiliations depends on the reader's horizon and subject matter, we directed our focus on his intellectual tendencies towards what appeared to be a form of hidden Shī'ite philosophy. This matter was pointed out by Alshahrastani (2000, 117). However, the reader of Al-Fārābī's philosophy has no doubt that its hidden connotations differ from what appears to be the apparent meaning. In fact, this is one of Shī'a's principles, which goes back to the forms and ideas in Plato's theory of forms and ideas (Hilal, 1977, 156-151). This might be considered as obvious when we consider Al-Fārābī's differentiation between "the intellect" and "prophecy".

4. Intellect and prophecy

As we already stated, Al-Fārābī was trying to integrate both, the Greek and the Islamic inherited ideas and principles. This is very clear in all his writings, especially those related to the themes of the virtuous city, prophecy, and happiness. All these themes seem to use symbols and indicators which reflect the mental deficiency of man. From this point of view, Al-Fārābī developed the concept of mind; he moved from the meaning of power or instruments to action and perception (Khulifat, 1987, 31). However, although Al-Fārābī adhered to the Aristotelian account with respect to the concept of reason, it is evident that he employed

this account in Islamic thought by a different manner which can be expressed as an ideological way of thinking. This employment becomes clear especially when discussing the emanation process and the intellect, which was categorized into four categories first by Aristotle and thereafter by Al-Fārābī, based on the power or faculty of the mind. These categories include (1) the potential intellect (also known as material or passive) (*'aql bi-l-quwwah*), (2) the actual intellect (*'aql bi-l-fi'l*), (3) the acquired intellect (*'aql al-mustafād*), and (4) the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*), the intellect of the tenth sphere, that is, the sphere of the moon (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 14-32).

5. How to attain prophecy as compared to philosophy?

Eventually, the categorization of the intellect draws more attention in Al-Fārābī thought which goes beyond his fictional virtuous city to the man who began to search for the acquired intellect (*'aql al-mustafād*). This is to be the closest to the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*) to have its last essence. This search, according to Al-Fārābī is the final frontier for the man to achieve his perfection, which is referred to by Al-Fārābī as achieving the afterlife. Afterlife in Al-Fārābī's thought is the attainment of the ideal life, where the acts of the man and his self, become one thing. At that moment (afterlife), the man does not need his body to be his substance of being or existence (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 31). In this way, if it ever exists in the afterlife (*ḥayāh al-ākhirah*) (Al-Fārābī LI, 27; 32; LC, 220; OI, 75). This is precisely the ultimate goal and happiness (*sa'ādah*) of human beings and constitutes the way through which they attain definitive perfection (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 24)

Al-Fārābī adds that the attainment of the primary intelligibles by the man is his first completion, and it happens, too, if the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*) flows to the rational faculty, where sensible things in the faculty of imagination produce intelligibles in the rational

faculty (Al-Fārābī, 2002: 156). Therefore, the attainment of primary intelligibles starts from the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*) through the emanation process with intelligibles. This emanation, according to Al-Fārābī, is continuous but has obstacles that stand in its way.

If these images or intelligibles are met with a ready and prepared faculty of imagination, then the faculty of imagination can perceive them by mimicking them with sensible visual objects. These imaginary things come back and draw in the special sensual faculty which affects the visual faculty to conceive the drawings in the air. When such drawings are perceived in the air, they seem to be a subject outside the self (like sensible things), then the special sense of interest brought them back to the faculty of imagination. It is worth mentioning that the intelligibles or images that transcend from the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*) and their acceptance by the faculty of imagination must complete their journey outside the self, as if it were a picture in a subject outside the self and where it then appeared to be a tangible matter for the senses to be processed and treated by the man. Perfection means that the acquired intellect is united with the active intellect. Both intellects are of the same type and nature (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 27). Through the intellectual process, the active intellect brings about the acquired intellect and makes the forms which are of matter progressively more immaterial. Therefore, the acquired intellect ends up acting only within itself, equating its own action with its own existence. When this stage is reached, the body is no longer needed, as is matter, in order to subsist, whereas it was initially needed for actions such as sensation and imagination to take place. Nevertheless, the way in which Al-Fārābī understood such a relation between the agent intellects and the acquired, was criticized by Averroes who judged it impossible to conceive the transformation of the material intellect within the perishable human being into an immaterial and eternal substance at the level of the agent intellect

(Averroes LCD, 387–388). For Al-Fārābī, the difference between the images that emanate from the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*) and the images that emerge from the senses is that the former do not exist in a substance and are not considered as a subject outside the self originally, whereas the latter do exist in a substance outside the self. Because the intelligibles are not of the same nature as the faculty of imagination, the faculty of imagination has no ability to accept intelligibles as intelligibles. Rather, it has to imitate them to what mimics the sensible (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 172), until it reaches its final completion (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 156). This process results in the acceptance of the present and future events or their simulations (Slaiba, 1973, 349) of the senses as well as the simulations of the intelligibles and other virtuous beings (and their visualization). Therefore, one comes to have the prophecy of the divine objects from those intelligibles which he received (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 25). Nevertheless, Al-Fārābī wonders about these images stepping down from perfection to a lesser degree of perfection and whether this is part of its perfection as long as it is possible to exist without substance? (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 31-32).

6. The doctrine and the criticism

The doctrine of the intellect (and how it works) and his theory of prophecy were the reason for the accusations faced Al-Fārābī that he elevated the philosopher to the level of the Prophet, and his elevation of philosophy (*falsafa*) over the virtuous religion (*milla*), in terms of using rational faculty (Al-Fārābī, 1986, 47). Here, we must ask the following two questions concerning Al-Fārābī's views of the Prophet, these are: Who might be considered as the prophet? And how would he become a prophet? Indeed, Al-Fārābī did not hesitate to answer these questions, despite his reservation, which was arguably to preserve the dignity of philosophy. According to Al-Fārābī, prophecy is the readiness of the self and the faculty of imagination, with

its relation to meditation and revelation. This indicates that prophecy occurs in certain ways and that the Prophet becomes a prophet only under certain conditions. The main source of these ideas is perhaps the dominance of the *Philosophy of Illumination* on the theory of knowledge, which considers the illuminating knowledge, from Al-Fārābī's point of view, an exclusive tool to connect the prophet to the active or agent intellect ('*aql al-fa'āl*') - the omniscience that contains all sciences and knowledge, such connection falls within the realm of prophecy. This is evident as Al-Fārābī did not hesitate to integrate the theory of knowledge with the content of his theory of prophecy. The elements that must participate in prophecy are the active or agent intellect ('*aql al-fa'āl*') and its emanation of the first intelligibles to the acquired intellect. Nevertheless, the emanation of the intelligibles comes only from the nature of the active or agent intellect ('*aql al-fa'āl*') (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 32), and the ratio of the active or agent intellect ('*aql al-fa'āl*') to the acquired intellect ('*aql al-mustafād*') is the proportion of the sun to the eye (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 25).

However, to receive such a flow of emanation, the faculty of imagination must reach the end of perfection, provided that it is not influenced by external sensations or serving the rational faculty; the self has a capacity of more than the use of senses to serve as a rational faculty. This capacity was termed by Al-Fārābī as "*Faql*", which is enough to do its own actions. Al-Fārābī mentioned that the self-state of the mind when it is awake must be similar to its condition at sleep. In our judgement, this is to emphasize that the faculty of imagination must be minimal in its service to other faculties (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 169). Furthermore, Al-Fārābī added the physiological factor to this where the imagination of extraneous faculty is only possible when the temperature of the heart is limited to a certain degree (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 147). He added, from the qualities of the faculty of imagination, that it can mimic the nutritive, sensitive,

appetitive, and rational faculties and simulate the coincidences of the body's mood (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 169), where the faculty of imagination either accepts these imagined objects or mimic them with sensual things. In fact, the faculty of imagination does not accept intelligibles as intelligible because they are not of the same nature (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 171). However, Al-Fārābī added that there are variations in the faculty of imagination in humans, and it has certain symptoms that might be exposed to the person in order to damage the temperament and his imagination (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 185). The fact lies in the assumption that the perfectness of the faculty of imagination does not mean the occurrence of prophecy while all of its conditions must be fulfilled together. Therefore, communion with the active or agent intellect ('*aql al-fa'āl*'), for Al-Fārābī, is not absolute because it depends on the availability of the conditions mentioned above. Therefore, it varies according to the same conditions. The stronger the faculty of imagination is, with more stable factors and conditions, the higher is the communion. On the other hand, the faculty of imagination is at its lowest level whenever it becomes more preoccupied with other faculties. In fact, communion with the active or agent intellect ('*aql al-fa'āl*') takes place "by voluntary acts: some of which are intellectual acts and some of which are physical acts" (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 164).

7. What would Al-Fārābī prefer for his Virtuous city?

Although Al-Fārābī is biased towards the philosopher, he does not expel the prophet from public life. Rather, he keeps a moral political mission for him as he can be the ruler of the virtuous city; therefore, the limits of his authority go beyond the sphere of religion to the realm of civic life (Al-Fārābī, 2002, 32). However, although he is not the only one qualified to do so, he appears to prefer the prophet over the philosopher, because the philosopher's verbal statements might be insurmountable

to the public. Nonetheless, for Al-Fārābī, prophet and philosopher are both qualified to lead the virtuous city (Al-Fārābī, 1986, 43-44), although the philosopher might lead because of the absence of the prophet. Hence, in the absence of a prophet, Al-Fārābī would be very biased to the philosopher, stating that "the president must be a philosopher". This may be because for Al-Fārābī, both are equal at the cognitive level in terms of knowledge where the philosopher gains knowledge by the rational faculty, while the prophet gains knowledge by the imagination faculty (Al-Fārābī, 1995, p, 123). In another place, he proclaimed that in case that neither a prophet, nor a philosopher are the president, the Imam would be the person that is qualified to supersede the prophet in presidency (Al-Fārābī, 1995, 123).

8. Results

Although Al-Fārābī insisted that the first president of the virtuous city to obtain thorough knowledge of philosophy to attain happiness (Al-Fārābī, 1986, 69), a careful investigation of what Al-Fārābī claims indicates the impossibility of having a particular philosopher that would be the president, due to the fact that such a virtuous city would have so many philosophers who have the virtue of being a president. Moreover, one of the main problems faced Al-Fārābī is related to attaining the ideal status in such a virtuous city, where the worldly city will dissolve and vanish by moving to the ideal life where it must be, as we mentioned before.

8.1. The image of the virtuous city

From the point view of Al-Fārābī, if the selves of the virtuous city, after the attainment of the ideal life, would have left the city to nowhere and no time, as they are originally images in the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*) (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 32), then what would be left in Al-Fārābī's city (in this world), will be only ugly things, and some philosophers scattered here and there in time and place and surely waiting philosophy to get them out of this filthy world. This is based on the fact that

imagination is surely a temporal process, as compared to rational faculty activities which is permanent in nature. Therefore, there exists no other way to get to the eternal happiness but with the rational faculty, as it is a theoretical world which is not imaginary, a matter that necessitates to completely dispense the body and all the psychological forces, inevitably from the whole world.

Now let us suggest that it happened (i.e., there was a philosopher in the virtuous city), then according to the teachings of Al-Fārābī, the philosopher will soon be separated from his body and be attached to the world of images and meanings - active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*) - which is in the other world. This is because the virtuous city is supposedly designated for the acquired intellect (*'aql al-mustafād*) in life but never for the afterlife. In the afterlife, there exists no place for the acquired intellect. This can be supported by looking at Al-Fārābī when he distinguished between this life and afterlife or the thereafter (Al-Fārābī, 1986, 66).

Nevertheless, because the virtuous city can only be achieved by happiness, and because happiness is only present in the afterlife, thus the meaning of the virtuous city will be only in the afterlife itself. In either case, there exists no virtuous city in this world at all. For this reason, one may conclude that the virtuous city is a symbol; however, a symbol to what? This question remains open.

This assumption dispenses with the opportunity for those who thought that Al-Fārābī was dissolved in the swamps of philosophy without a return, when he elevated the philosopher over the Prophet. We believe that this assumption is wrong in most of its aspects, as a careful study of the purposes of Al-Fārābī will turn out exactly to give the opposite. It may suffice to justify the view of Al-Fārābī in his position on the Prophet and the philosopher. Despite the high standing of the philosopher, Al-Fārābī never mentioned that it happened for once that there exists a philosopher someday, neither in substance nor in a body, that would

be in the position of a prophet. This can be implied in his philosophy, because when the acquired intellect is reached, the essence of man (or the tool by which he gets his essence) becomes the closest to the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*), where, at that point, according to Al-Fārābī, the man reaches his afterlife, ultimate happiness and his last perfection (Al-Fārābī, 1938, 30). Therefore, the existence of the philosopher is possible, but not impossible.

Accordingly, there will be nothing left to rule the virtuous city but the prophets and those who tend to stick to their lines, i.e., the descendants. This maneuvering may express an ideology to achieve political purposes, rather than pure philosophy; ideology may become indistinguishable from philosophy or science (cf. Parens 1995, 15). This could be due to the fact that Al-Fārābī had no other way to resolve the dissatisfaction of the

current state at his time, as it is not seeking the truth, which is the main task of philosophy. However, regardless of Al-Fārābī's possible affiliation to Shi'a Islam (Al-Fārābī, Talkhis, 62), this ultimately seems to be a maneuvering to manipulate the power in favor of the Twelver or *Athnā'ashariyyah* who take Imams' words and deeds as a guide and model to follow as they are free from error and sin (*'ismah* or infallibility) (Al-Fārābī, Tahsil, p. 93). Those Imams are the ones who must be chosen by divine decree, so people stick to the Prophet's lines and probably his descendants (Tabataba'i, 1977, 10). Finally, although we promised not to discuss Al-Fārābī's religious affiliation, it is worth asking some questions: What are the lines? Who are the descendants of the active or agent intellect (*'aql al-fa'āl*- the intellect of the tenth sphere, that of the moon)?

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استراتيجية الفارابي السياسية في روايته للنبوّة

محمد عبدالله الطوالبة، دعاء خليل علي، أيمن غازي الخلايلة، اسمى فرحان الشراب

الملخص

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو بيان أنه من الممكن تفسير نظرة النبوّة عند الفارابيّ تفسيراً ايديولوجياً، وذلك لسعيه لوضع بعض الحلول لبعض المشكلات التي كانت تعاني منها الدولة الإسلامية آنذاك. وقد كان ذلك من خلال تقديمه الفيلسوف على النبي. لتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، تم عرض نظرية الفارابيّ في النبوّة، وكيف فرق بين الفيلسوف والنبي من خلال القوة الناطقة والقوة المتخيلة، وكيف وظفها جميعاً في خدمة ما يعتقد به من أجل خدمة المجتمع، حيث أن تقديمه للفيلسوف على النبي لم يكن لهدف سوى أن تكون السلطة بيد من هم من سلالة الأنبياء، وذلك لأن الفيلسوف في نظر الفارابيّ لم يوجد بعد أو أنه من عالم الممكنات وهي النقطة الجوهرية للمناورة لاحتكار السلطة على الأئمة الإثني عشر المعصومين عن الخطأ أو من هم من صلبهم. لسبب حال الطريق، لزم ضروري يدافع النبوي حتى يجد الفيلسوف الإسلامي.

الكلمات الدالة: الفارابي، النبي، الفيلسوف، المدينة الفاضلة.

¹ * قسم الفلسفة، كلية الآداب، الجامعة الأردنية، عمان، الأردن

m.tawallbeh@ju.edu.jo

² قسم الفلسفة، كلية الآداب، الجامعة الأردنية، عمان، الأردن

d.khalil@ju.edu.jo

³ قسم الفلسفة، كلية الآداب، الجامعة الأردنية، عمان، الأردن

aymang3000@yahoo.com

⁴ وزارة التربية والتعليم، الأردن asma.alsharab@yahoo.com