

Chapter 23: Al-Farabi

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Abu Nasr al-Farabi was born in about 258/870 and he died in 339/950. Eminent founder of a philosophical system as he was, he devoted himself entirely to contemplation and speculation and kept himself aloof from political and social perturbations and turmoils. He left a considerable amount of literature. Besides his immediate pupils, there were many who studied his works after his death and became his followers. His philosophy set the standard for scholarly speculation both in the East and the West long after his death.

Since the last decades of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, several attempts have been made to write his biography, to collect his still unpublished works, and to elucidate some obscurities in his philosophy. In 1370/1950, on the occasion of the millennium of his death, some Turkish scholars discovered some of his works still in manuscript and removed certain difficulties concerning his thought. We cannot say if they have all been resolved. We do not even know if it is easy to resolve them unless we add further to our knowledge of his life and works. Public and private libraries still keep a considerable number of Islamic manuscripts behind closed doors; and we think it is time for these manuscripts to be brought to the light of the day.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to deal briefly with al-Farabi's life, his works, and his philosophy, with special reference to some of the lost links and misconceptions about or objections raised against his doctrine. [1](#)

Life

Contrary to the usage among some of the Muslim scholars, al-Farabi did not write his autobiography, and no one among his disciples managed to give an account of his life as al-Juzjani did for his master Ibn Sina. Material for that in the works of the biographers is quite unsatisfactory and inadequate. The rather lengthy biography in Ibn Khallikan's *Wafayat al-A'yan*,[2](#) is open to criticism as regards its authenticity. Thus, in the life of al-Farabi, several obscure points and some unsolved problems are still

to be investigated and settled.

His life falls into two distinct periods, the first being the time from his birth till about the age of fifty. The only information we have about this period is that he was born at Wasij, a village in the vicinity of Farab in Transoxiana, in about 258/870. In spite of the scanty information we have about his family, his childhood, and his youth, it has been believed that he was Turkish by birth, that his father was a general, and that he himself worked as a judge for some time.³ What is better known is the cultural and intellectual movement which flourished and spread with the introduction of Islam in Farab at the beginning of the third/ninth century, and that the reputed philologist al-Jauhari, the compiler of *al-Sihah*, was one of his eminent contemporaries.

Al-Farabi was able to draw largely on this movement. The basis of his early education was religious and linguistic: he studied jurisprudence, Hadith, and the exegesis of the Qur'an. He learnt Arabic as well as Turkish and Persian. It is doubtful whether he knew any other language, and what has been stated by Ibn Khallikan about al-Farabi's mastery of "seventy tongues" is more akin to the fabulous than to exact history.⁴ From his interpretation of the word *safsafah* (sophistry), it is obvious that al-Farabi had no knowledge of the Greek languages.⁵

He did not neglect to benefit himself from the rational studies which were current in his time, such as mathematics and philosophy, although it appears that he did not turn to them until much later. Contrary to what has been held, it does not appear that he paid much attention to medicine.⁶ And when he became extremely interested in these rational studies, he did not remain content with what he had acquired in this respect in his native town. Spurred by intellectual curiosity, he had to leave his home and wander abroad in pursuit of more knowledge.

That marks the second period of his life, the period of old age and full maturity. Baghdad, as an outstanding centre of learning throughout the fourth/tenth century, was naturally his first destination where he encountered various scholars among whom were philosophers and translators. It was the study of logic which attracted him to that circle of distinguished logicians of Baghdad of whom the most renowned was Abu Bishr Matta ibn Yunus considered to be the foremost logician of his age. Al-Farabi studied logic under Ibn Yunus for some time. He surpassed his teacher and, on account of the eminent position he had gained in this field, he came to be called "The Second Teacher." Another famous logician, Yahya ibn 'Adi, was his disciple.

Al-Farabi remained twenty years in Baghdad and then his attention was engaged by another cultural centre in Aleppo. There, in the brilliant and scholarly Court of Saif al-Daulah, gathered the most distinguished poets, philologists, philosophers, and other scholars. In spite of the strong Arab sympathies of that Court, no racial bias or prejudice could mar the scholarly and cultural atmosphere in which Persians, Turks, and Arabs argued and disputed and agreed or differed in the name of disinterested pursuit of knowledge.

In that Court al-Farabi lived, first and foremost, as a scholar and seeker after truth. The glamour and the glory of Court life never allured him, and, in the garb of a Sufi, he addressed himself to the hard task of a scholar and a teacher; and he wrote his books and his treatises among murmuring rivulets and the thick foliage of shady trees.

Except for several short journeys abroad, al-Farabi remained in Syria till his death in 339/950. Ibn Abi Usaibi'ah maintains that al-Farabi visited Egypt towards the end of his life.⁷ This is most probable, as Egypt and Syria have been closely linked for a long time in history, and cultural life in Egypt at the time of the Tulunids and the Ikhshidids had its attractions. However, the alleged report of the murder of al-Farabi by some highwaymen while he was travelling between Damascus and `Asqalan quoted by al-Baihaqi is incredible.⁸ Al-Farabi had reached such an exalted position in the Court of Saif al-Daulah that the Amir in person, together with his immediate *entourage*, attended the funeral service in honour of the dead scholar.

Works

He left a considerable amount of literature; yet, if we accept the reports of some of the biographers, such as al-Qifti and Ibn Abi Usaibi'ah, the number of his writings is seventy, small compared with that of his contemporaries, namely, al-Kindi and al-Razi the physician. However, we must bear in mind that in the lists of the works of these scholars, the biographers have often mentioned the same book under two, maybe more, different titles, and that most of the works they have listed were mere articles or short treatises.

Al-Farabi's works may be divided into two equal parts, one dealing with logic and the other with other studies. The logical works are concerned with the different parts of Aristotle's *Organon*, either in the form of commentary or paraphrase. Most of these writings, however, are still in manuscript; and a great many of these manuscripts are not yet available.⁹

The second category of his works deals with the other branches of philosophy, physics, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. A good part of it is available, and it gives a clear idea of the various aspects of al-Farabi's philosophy. But some of it is doubtful and his authorship of it is a subject of controversy, as in the case of *Fusus al-Hikam* (Gems of Sageness) or *al-Mufariqat* (Separateness).¹⁰ In this category, no really scientific study was attempted; al-Farabi did not even mention medicine, and his discussion of chemistry was rather in the nature of a defence than in the form of elaboration and analysis.

Ibn Khallikan is probably right when he maintains that al-Farabi wrote most of his books in Baghdad and Damascus.¹¹ There is no evidence of his having written any of his books before the age of fifty, and even if he did write any, it is not certain whether it was theological or philosophical. The biographers have not reported anything contradictory.

Some scholars have attempted to make a chronological list of his works.¹² But one wonders what the value of such a list would be since all his works were written in the last thirty years of his life, when he began to write as a fully mature philosopher; and there was certainly no noticeable change or development in his thoughts or doctrine during this period.

The style of al-Farabi is characteristically concise and precise. He deliberately selects his words and expressions as he profoundly thinks of his ideas and thoughts. His aphorisms are pregnant with profound significance. That is why Max Horten has given a large commentary to explain the small treatise entitled *Fusus al-Hikam*.¹³ Al-Farabi has a particular style; anyone accustomed to it can well recognize it. He avoids repetition and redundancy and prefers brevity and conciseness.

It seems that al-Farabi was in favour of esoteric teaching and believed that philosophy should not be made available to the uninitiated among the masses,¹⁴ and that philosophers should expound their ideas garbed in obscurity, mystification, and ambiguity.¹⁵ Even today, it is not an easy task to comprehend the meaning implied in some Farabian aphorisms.

His method is almost identical with his style. He collects and generalizes; he arranges and harmonizes; he analyses in order to compose; he divides and sub-divides in order to concentrate and classify. In some of his treatises, division and classification seem to be his only objective. His treatise entitled "What Should Be Learnt Before Attempting Philosophy" is in the form of an index of the Greek schools of philosophy, the meanings of their titles and the names of their originators. He has been chiefly concerned with the study of the aims and the style of the works of Aristotle.¹⁶ His "Classification of Sciences" is the first attempt of its kind in the history of Islamic thought.¹⁷

Al-Farabi is fond of opposites; in fact, he gives the opposite of almost every term he uses: thus negation implies affirmation; and Being, Non-Being. He wrote a treatise in answer to the questions he had been asked. In this treatise he gives the proposition with which he is confronted and contrasts it with its opposite, in order to get an adequate solution. This reminds us of Plato's Parmenides.

His main concern has been to elucidate the basis of a theory and the foundation of a doctrine, to clear up obscurities, and to discuss controversial questions in order to arrive at the right conclusions. However, he pays scant attention to ordinary topics; and what he supposes to be self-evident is passed by without the slightest attempt at an explanation. A good example of this is his treatise, "The Aims of the Stagirite in Every Chapter of His Book Named the Alphabet."¹⁸ This study is almost akin to our introduction to or criticism of a new book. It can be favourably compared to a similar work by a contemporary philosopher.¹⁹ No wonder, Ibn Sina found in this treatise the key to Aristotle's "Metaphysics"²⁰.

The works of al-Farabi became widespread in the East in the fourth and fifth/tenth and eleventh centuries, and they eventually reached the West where some Andalusian scholars became the disciples of al-Farabi.²¹ Some of his writings were also translated into Hebrew and Latin, and had their influence

on Jewish and Christian scholasticism.²² These works were published in the last decades of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, and some of them were translated into various modern European languages. Yet there is still great need for their republication with meticulous editing, especially now that the libraries of Istanbul are much more available to us than before, and we can fill some gaps through them.

Philosophy

The philosophy of al-Farabi has its distinct features and clear-cut aims. He has adopted some of the doctrines of previous philosophers, reconstructed them in a form adaptable to his own cultural environment, and made them so closely knit that his philosophy has become most systematic and harmonious. Al-Farabi is logical both in his thinking and expression, in his argument and discussion, and in his exposition and reasoning.

His philosophy might have depended on some false presuppositions, and might have expounded some hypotheses which modern science has refuted, yet it played a very significant role and influenced several schools of thought in subsequent times. Beginning with his logical studies, we will briefly explain the characteristics and the chief elements of his philosophy

1. Logic

It has been already mentioned that a considerable part of the works of al-Farabi is devoted to the study of logic; but it is almost limited to the delineation of the *Organon* in the version known to the Arabic scholars of that time. He holds that “the art of logic gives, in general, the rules which, if followed, can correct the mind and direct man to the right way to truth away from the pitfalls of error.²³ For him, logic stands in the same relation to intelligibles as grammar to words, and prosody to verse.²⁴ He emphasizes the practical and applied aspects of logic, indicating that intelligibles are to be tested by its rules, as dimensions, volumes, and masses are by measurement.²⁵

Logic also helps us in distinguishing truth from error and attaining the right way of thinking or in guiding other people along this way; it also indicates where to start our thoughts and how to conduct them necessarily to their final conclusions.²⁶ Practice in rhetoric and dialectical discourses, or in geometry and arithmetic, can never be a substitute for logic, in the same way as learning a considerable number of poems and speeches is of no avail to a man ignorant of grammar.²⁷ The art of logic – as is generally thought – is not an unnecessary ornament, because it can never be replaced by natural aptitude.²⁸

However, al-Farabi has always had in mind the difference between grammar and logic; for the former is concerned with words only, while the latter deals with meanings and is related to words in so far as they are the embodiments of meanings. Moreover, grammar is concerned with the laws of language, and languages are as diverse as peoples and races; but logic deals with the human mind which is always the same anywhere and everywhere.²⁹

The subject-matter of logic is its topics in which the laws of intelligibles are studied. They are classified under eight heads: (1) Categories, (2) Interpretations, (3) First Analytics, (4) Second Analytics, (5) Topics, (6) Sophistics, (7) Rhetorics, and (8) Poetics, all of which constitute the real aim of logic. The fourth part is the most significant and noble of all the others; what is anterior may be considered to be an introduction and what follows an application and comparison leading to the avoidance of error and confusion.³⁰

It is obvious that al-Farabi follows in the footsteps of Aristotle, although he considers rhetorics and poetics as branches of logic. The same error was committed by the Peripatetics, especially by those of the school of Alexandria.³¹ Some of them even claimed that Porphyry's *Isagoge* was a part of the *Organon* of Aristotle; but this claim is not supported by al-Farabi known as "The Second Teacher," Aristotle having been taken to be the First.

Undoubtedly, "Demonstration" was regarded by Aristotle as important, but he was rather proud of his discovery of syllogism.

The contribution of al-Farabi to logic is two-fold. First, he has succeeded in properly and lucidly expounding the logic of Aristotle to the Arabic-speaking world. In the introduction of one of his recently published treatises, he indicates that he will explain the principle of syllogism after Aristotle in terms familiar to the Arabs; consequently, he substitutes examples from the daily life of his own contemporaries for the otherwise vague and unfamiliar examples originally cited by Aristotle. His process is in no way detrimental to the study of the logic of Aristotle, nor does it alter or vitiate the significance of his philosophy.³²

On the other hand, al-Farabi lays the basis for the quinary division of reasoning, indicating that it is demonstrative if it leads to certainty; dialectical if it leads to a semblance of certitude through good intention; sophistical if it leads to a semblance of certitude through bad intentions and falsity; rhetorical if it leads to a probable opinion; and poetical if it leads to imagery giving pleasure or pain to the soul.³³ These different kinds are used according to the situation and the standard of the audience.

Philosophers and scholars make use of demonstrative reasoning, theologians resort only to dialectic syllogisms, and politicians take refuge in rhetorical syllogisms. It is obvious that the way of addressing any group of people should be adapted to the standard of their understanding; and, thus, to use demonstrative syllogisms when addressing the populace and the masses is absurd.³⁴

2. The Unity of Philosophy

Al-Farabi maintains that philosophy is essentially one unit. Thus, it is imperative for great philosophers to be in accord, the pursuit of truth being their one and only aim. Plato and Aristotle, "being the originators of philosophy and the creators of its elements and principles and the final authority as regards its conclusions and branches,"³⁵ are closely in accord in spite of some of their apparent and

formal differences.

Thus, al-Farabi believes in the existence of only one school of philosophy, the school of truth. Therefore, the terms Peripatetics, Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans denote only names of groups of philosophers; all constitute one single school of philosophy. Parties and cliques are a nuisance in philosophy as well as in politics.

Al-Farabi, as a philosopher and historian; has been fully aware of the danger of partisanship in philosophy. This partisanship was caused more or less by the fanatics among the disciples of the great philosophers. Instead of attempting to harmonize the doctrines of various philosophers, these disciples managed to widen the gap between two masters by stressing shades of difference and sometimes even by altering and misrepresenting their doctrines.³⁶ This attitude of al-Farabi is identical with the attitude of the twelfth/eighteenth-century philosophers towards the disputes and dissension of the Renaissance philosophers.

There is no novelty in this doctrine of al-Farabi; it has been previously held by the philosophers of the later Greek schools, especially those of the school of Alexandria. When Porphyry speaks about his master, he points out that he has found the ideas of the Peripatetics and the Stoics fused in Plotinus' works.³⁷ In fact, Porphyry has devoted several treatises to the attempt of reconciling the philosophy of Plato with that of Aristotle;³⁸ and a number of scholars of the school of Alexandria followed in his footsteps;³⁹ but none of these scholars ever thought of combining all the philosophers in a single school. This has been an omission, and al-Farabi has been profuse in his writings in an attempt to point this out.

Religious truth and philosophical truth are objectively one, although formally different. This idea rendered possible the accord between philosophy and the tenets of Islam. Al-Farabi undoubtedly has been the first scholar to raise a new edifice of philosophy on the basis of this accord; later philosophers have followed the lines chalked out by him; Ibn Sina has been to a certain extent occupied in the exposition and delineation of its Platonic aspects, while Ibn Rushd has been busy indicating the accord between Aristotelian philosophy and religion.

This doctrine of reconciliation has been based on two main points: first, revising the Peripatetic philosophy and garbing it in a Platonic form, in order to make it more consonant with Islamic tenets; and, secondly, giving a rational interpretation of religious truths. In fact, al-Farabi expounds philosophy in a religious way and philosophizes religion, thus pushing them in two converging directions so that they may come to an understanding and co-exist.

This revision of the Peripatetic philosophy has been concerned with two theories, one cosmological and the other psychological, viz., Theory of the Ten Intelligences and that of the Intellect. His rational explanation depends on two other theories; the first is concerned with prophecy and the second with the interpretation of the Qur'an. The whole philosophy of al-Farabi is summed up in these four theories which are inter-related and all of which aim at one end.

3. Theory of the Ten Intelligences

This theory constitutes a significant part in Islamic philosophy; it offers an explanation of the two worlds: heaven and earth; it interprets the phenomena of movement and change. It is the foundation of physics and astronomy. Its chief concern is the solving of the problem of the One and the many and the comparing of the mutable and the immutable.

Al-Farabi holds that the One, i. e., God, is the Necessary by Himself; hence, He is not in need of another for His existence or His subsistence. He is an intelligence capable of knowing Himself; He is both intelligent and intelligible. He is quite unique by His essence. Nothing is like Him. He has no opposite or equivalent.⁴⁰

If the above premises are admitted, what would be God's influence on the universe and the relationship between Him and the many? Only through a kind of emanation has al-Farabi laboured to elucidate these problems. He holds that from the Necessary One flows or emanates only one other by virtue of its self-knowledge and goodness. This emanent is the first intelligence. Thus, knowledge equals creation, for it is enough for a thing to be conceived in order to exist. The first intelligence is possible by itself, necessary by another; and it thinks the One as well as itself. It is one-in-itself, and many by virtue of these considerations.

From this point al-Farabi starts the first step towards multiplicity. From thinking by first intelligence of the One flows another intelligence. By virtue of its thinking of itself as possible in itself flow the matter and form of the "first heaven," because every sphere has its specific form which is its soul. In this way, the chain of emanations goes on so as to complete the ten intelligences, and nine spheres and their nine souls. The tenth and last intelligence, or agent intelligence, is that which governs the sublunary world. From this intelligence flow the human souls and the four elements. ⁴¹

These intelligences and souls are hierarchical. The first intelligence in this hierarchy is the most transcendent, and then follow the souls of the spheres and then the spheres themselves. The last in order is the earth and the world of matter, which falls in the fourth rank.⁴²

The ancient Greeks held that anything celestial is sacred and anything terrestrial is impure. The tenets of Islam categorically assert that heaven is the *qiblah* of prayer, the source of revelation, the destination of the "ascension." Everything in heaven is pure and purifying. Al-Farabi here conforms to both the religious tenets and the philosophical teachings; but his main difficulty lies in maintaining that the impure earthly world has evolved from the sacred celestial one.

The number of intelligences is ten consisting of the first intelligence and the nine intelligences of the planets and spheres, because al-Farabi adopts the same theories as held by the Greek astronomers, especially by Ptolemy according to whom the cosmos is constituted of nine encircling spheres all of which move eternally and circularly around the earth. Intelligences and souls are the originators of this

movement. Every sphere has its own intelligence and soul.

The tenth intelligence manages the affairs of the terrestrial world. The soul is the immediate mover of sphere: However it acquires its power from the intelligence. It moves through its desire for the intelligence; and pursuit of perfection moves its sphere. Thus, its desire is the source of its movement. Intelligence in its turn is in a state of perpetual desire. The lower desires the higher and all desire the One which is considered the Prime Mover although It is immovable.[43](#)

The movement of the spheres is effected by a kind of spiritual attraction: the inferior sphere is always attracted towards the superior. This process is a spiritual dynamism similar to that of Leibniz in spite of its dependence on unequal spiritual powers. It seems that al-Farabi, the musician, is attempting to introduce into the world of spheres the system of musical harmony.

However, al-Farabi's conclusions about physics are closely connected with his theories of astronomy. From the tenth intelligence flows the prime matter, or *hyle*, which is the origin of the four elements, and from the same intelligence flow the different forms which unite with the *hyle* to produce bodies. The terrestrial world is only a series of different kinds of forms united with matter or separated from it. Generation is the result of the unity of form and matter, and corruption is the result of their separation. The movement of the sun produces hotness and coldness necessary for change. All the separate intelligences provide the movements appropriate to the terrestrial world. In this way physics is fused with cosmology and the terrestrial world is subjected to the heavenly world.[44](#)

Nevertheless, al-Farabi repudiates astrology which was prevalent at his time, and which had been cherished by the Stoics and the Alexandrian scholars before him.

Al-Farabi does not deny the law of causality and the connection between causes and effects. For causes may be either direct or indirect; and if it is an easy matter to discover the former, the latter are more difficult to detect. Hence happens chance or coincidence; and there is no way of controlling coincidence. For how could an astrologer associate the death of an Amir with an eclipse? Or how could the discovery of a new planet have any connection with a war? However, belief in fortuitous happenings is essential in politics and in religion, because it imbues men with fear and hope, and stimulates obedience and endeavour. [45](#)

It is, thus, through the doctrine of the ten intelligences that al-Farabi solves the problem of movement and change. He has made use of the same theory in his attempt at solving the problem of the One and the many, and in his reconciliation of the traditional Aristotelian theory of matter and the Islamic doctrine of creation. Matter is as old as the ten intelligences, but it is created because it has emanated from the agent intelligence. To vindicate the unicity of God, al-Farabi has resorted to the mediacy of these ten intelligences between God and the terrestrial world.

Some of the elements of the Theory of the Ten Intelligences can be traced to the different sources they have been derived from. Its astronomical aspect is closely identical with Aristotle's interpretation of the

movement of the spheres. The Theory of Emanation has been borrowed from Plotinus and the school of Alexandria. But, in its entirety, it is a Farabian theory, dictated and formulated by his desire for showing the unity of truth and his method of grouping and synthesis. He reconciles Plato and Aristotle and religion and philosophy.

This theory met with some success among the philosophers of the East and those of the West in the Middle Ages. Yet reconciliation necessitates, from one side or the other, some concessions; and if it pleases some, others are sure to resent it. Hence, this theory has been fervently embraced by Ibn Sina who has given it a concise and elaborate exposition, while al-Ghazali is loud in denouncing it. Among the Jewish scholars, Ibn Gabriol does not give it even the slightest notice, while Maimonides enthusiastically subscribes to it. And in spite of the objections of Christian scholars to this theory, it has always elicited their respect and esteem.

4. Theory of the Intellect

The psychology of Aristotle has long been reputed for its conciseness and precision; and as an objective study it has not been less noteworthy. Aristotle's classification of the faculties of the soul is the first of its kind. He has emphasized its unity in spite of the plurality of its faculties and explained its relationship with the body. He has but inadequately dealt with the Theory of the Intellect, and in consequence stirred a problem which has puzzled the moderns as well as the ancients. However, his treatise "On the Soul" is the best of its kind among ancient works on psychology, and it even surpasses some of the modern works. In the Middle Ages it was as much in vogue as the *Organon*.

This book was introduced to the Arabs through translations from Syriac and Greek, together with ancient commentaries, especially those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and Simplicius.⁴⁶ It was the subject of extensive study with Muslim philosophers, who in their turn commented on it and paraphrased it. Influenced by Aristotle and drawing on his work, these philosophers wrote various theses and treatises on psychology. They were chiefly concerned with the question of the intellect which stood out among all the problems studied by the scholastic philosophers.

Al-Farabi has been fully aware of the significance of this problem, and has recognized in it an epitome of the whole Theory of Knowledge. He has closely identified it with his own philosophy; for it is related to the Theory of the Ten Intelligences, and it is also the foundation of the Theory of Prophecy. He has dealt with the problem of the intellect in several places in his works; and he has devoted to its elaboration a whole treatise, "On the Different Meanings of the Intellect." This treatise had a wide circulation among the scholars of the East and the West in the Middle Ages, and it was translated into Latin at an early date.

He classifies the intellect into practical intellect which deduces what should be done, and theoretical intellect which helps the soul to attain its perfection. The latter is again classified into material, habitual, and acquired.⁴⁷

The material intellect, or the potential intellect as al-Farabi sometimes calls it, is the soul; or is a part of the soul, or a faculty having the power of abstracting and apprehending the quiddity of beings. It can be almost compared to a material on which the forms of beings are imprinted, just like wax which becomes one with the inscriptions carved on it. These inscriptions are nothing but perceptions and intelligibles.

Thus, the intelligible exists in potentiality in sensible things; and when it is abstracted from the senses, it exists in the mind in actuality.⁴⁸ That explains perception and abstraction, the important operations of the mind which bring the intelligibles from potentiality to actuality; and when these intelligibles are conveyed to the mind, the intellect in its turn is transformed from an intellect in potency to an intellect in action.

Therefore, the intellect in act, or the habitual intellect as it is sometimes called, is one of the levels of the ascension of the mind in the acquisition of a number of intelligibles. Since the mind is incapable of comprehending all the intelligibles, it is intellect in action with regard to what it perceives, and intellect in potency with regard to what it has not yet perceived. The intelligibles themselves exist in potency in the sensibles. Once they are stripped of them, they become intelligibles in action. And once man has attained to this level of the intellect in action, he can comprehend himself. This kind of comprehension has no relation with the external world; it is a mental, abstract comprehension. ⁴⁹

Once the intellect becomes capable of comprehending abstractions, it is raised again to a higher level, that of the acquired intellect, or the level where human intellect becomes disposed to conceive abstract forms which have no connection with matter.

The difference between this rational conception and sense-perception is that the former is a kind of intuition and inspiration; or, in other words, it is a kind of immediate apprehension. This is the noblest level of human apprehension, and it is reached only by the few and the select who attain to the level of the acquired intellect, where the hidden is unveiled, and come in direct communion with the world of the separate intelligences.⁵⁰

Thus, the intellect is capable of rising gradually from intellect in potency to intellect in action, and finally to acquired intellect. The two consecutive levels are different from each other, though the lower always serves as a prelude to the higher. While the intellect in potency is just a receiver of sensible forms, intellect in action retains the intelligibles and comprehends the concepts. The acquired intellect rises to the level of communion, ecstasy, and inspiration. Conceptions are of different levels: originally, they are intelligibles in potency existing in matter; once abstracted from matter they become intelligibles in action. Still higher are the abstract forms which can never exist in matter.⁵¹

However, this gradual elevation is not spontaneous; for its initial stage is the intelligibles and the intellect in potency, and its transition from potentiality to actuality can never be effected except through the influence of a prior actuality whose action is appropriate to it. This actuality is the agent intelligence, the last of the ten intelligences.

Human knowledge depends on a radiation from the separate intelligences; and agent intelligence stands in the same relation to human intellect as the sun to our eyes: our eyes depend on daylight for sight, and in the same way our intellect is capable of comprehension only, when it is unveiled by the agent intelligence which illuminates its way.⁵² Thus, mysticism is fused with philosophy, and rational knowledge coincides with ecstasy and inspiration.

The above-mentioned theory of al-Farabi concerning the intellect is obviously based on Aristotle. Al-Farabi himself declares that his theory depends upon the third part of *De Anima* of Aristotle,⁵³ but he has his own contribution to add. His conception of the acquired intellect is alien to Aristotle; for it is almost identified with the separate intelligences, and serves as the link between human knowledge and revelation. Thus, it is different from the acquired intellect, as found in the theory held by Alexander of Aphrodisias and al-Kindi; and it is the outcome of al-Farabi's mystic tendency and his leaning towards Plotinus' system.

This fact becomes clearer if we consider the influence of the agent intelligence in the acquisition of knowledge, since it is the outcome of vision and inspiration; it offers also to the mind the abstract forms and enlightens the way for it. This theory helps in fusing psychology with cosmology, but it underestimates the activity of the human mind, since it is made: capable of comprehension only when it is illuminated by heaven; but would the Sufis care about this deficiency of the human mind?

The general acceptance of this theory in the Middle Ages is clear from the fact that Ibn Sina has not only embraced it, but has also added to it vigour and clarity; and in spite of Ibn Rushd's strict adherence to the teachings of Aristotle, he has also come under its influence. Among the Jews, Maimonides has copied it almost to the letter. With the Christians, this theory has stood at the top of the problems of philosophy, because it is concerned with the theory of knowledge and is closely connected with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

This theory has also given rise to different schools, some favouring and the others opposing it. To sum up, al-Farabi's Theory of the Intellect has been the most significant of all theories developed by Muslim thinkers, and it has exercised a great influence on Christian philosophy.

5. Theory of Prophecy

The basis of every revealed religion is revelation and inspiration. A prophet is a man endowed with the gift of communion with God and the ability of expressing His will. Islam, as well as all the great Semitic religions, has Heaven as its authority. The Qur'an says: ***"It is naught but revelation that is revealed - the Lord of mighty power has taught him."*** (Iiii, 4-5).

It is most imperative for a Muslim philosopher to give due reverence to prophethood, to conciliate rationality with traditionalism, and to identify the language of the earth with the words of Heaven. This has been the endeavour of al-Farabi. His theory of prophethood may be considered to be one of the

most significant attempts at the reconciliation of philosophy and religion. It may also be considered to be the noblest part of his system; it has its foundation both in psychology and metaphysics; and it is also closely related with politics and ethics.

Influenced by his political and social environment, al-Farabi has stressed the theoretical study of society and its needs. He has written several treatises on politics, the most renowned of which is his "Model City." He visualizes his city as a whole of united parts, similar to bodily organism; if any part of it is ill, all the others react and take care of it. To each individual is allotted the vocation and the task most appropriate for his special ability and talents. Social activities differ according to their aims; the noblest of these activities are those allotted to the chief, for he stands in the same relation to the city as the heart to the body and is the source of all activities and the origin of harmony and order. Hence, certain qualifications are the prerequisite of his station. The chief must be stout, intelligent, lover of knowledge, and supporter of justice, and he must also rise to the level of the agent intelligence through which he gets revelation and inspiration.⁵⁴

These attributes remind us of the attributes of the philosopher-king in Plato's Republic, but al-Farabi adds to them the ability of communion with the celestial world, as if the city is inhabited by saints and governed by a prophet. Communion with the agent intelligence is possible through two ways contemplation and inspiration. As already mentioned, the soul rises through study and quest to the level of the acquired intellect when it becomes recipient of the divine light. This level can be attained only by the sacred spirits of the philosophers and sages, those who can penetrate through the unseen and perceive the "world of light."

The sacred soul, preoccupied with what is above, gives no heed to what is below; and its external sensation never overwhelms its internal sensation; and its influence may go beyond its own body affecting other bodies and everything in this world. It receives knowledge direct from the High Spirit and angels without any human instruction.⁵⁵ Thus, through continuous speculative studies, the sage gets into communion with the agent intelligence.

This communion is also possible through imagination, as happens to the prophets, for all their inspiration or revelation is caused by imagination. Imagination occupies an important place in al-Farabi's psychology. It is closely connected with inclinations and sentiments, and is involved in rational operations and volitional movements. It creates the mental images which are not imitations of sensibles and are the source of dreams and visions.

If we could have a scientific interpretation of dreams, it would help to give us an interpretation of revelation and inspiration, for prophetic inspirations take the form either of true dreams in sleep or of revelation in waking- The difference between these two forms is relative; they are distinct only as regards their degree. In fact, a true dream is but one aspect of prophecy.

When imagination gets rid of conscious activities as in sleep, it is wholly occupied with some of the

psychological phenomena. Influenced by some bodily sensations and feelings, or by some emotions and conceptions, it creates new images or composes, from retained mental images, their new forms. Thus, we dream of water or swimming when our temperament is humid, and dreams often so represent the fulfilment of a desire or the avoidance of fear that the sleeper may move in his bed responding to a certain emotion, or leave his bed and beat a person unknown to him, or run after him.⁵⁶ It is needless to point out that these views in spite of their simplicity are similar to the ideas of modern psychologists, such as Freud, Horney, and Murray.

It is within the power of imagination to create mental images after the pattern of the spiritual world. The sleeper may, thus, behold the Heaven and its inhabitants, and may feel its enjoyments and pleasures. Imagination may also rise to the celestial world and commune with the agent intelligence from which it can receive the heavenly judgments relating to particular cases and individual happenings. Through this communion which may occur by day or at night, prophecy can be explained, since it is the source of true dreams and revelation.

According to al-Farabi: "If the faculty of imagination is so powerful and perfected in a certain person, and is not completely overwhelmed by external sensations ... it gets into communion with the agent intelligence from which images of the utmost beauty and perfection are reflected. He who sees those images would testify to the sublime and wonderful majesty of God... Once the imaginative faculty in man is completely perfected, he may receive, when awake, from the agent intelligence the pre-vision of the present and future events ... and thus he would, through what he has received, prophesy divine matters. This is the highest level to which imagination may be raised, and which man can attain through this faculty."⁵⁷

Thus, the chief characteristic of a prophet is to have a vivid imagination through which he can commune with the agent intelligence during waking time and in sleep, and can attain to vision and inspiration. And revelation is but an emanation from God through the agent intelligence.

Some persons, although in a lower degree than the prophets, have a powerful imagination through which an inferior kind of vision and inspiration can be achieved. In this way al-Farabi places the saints in a degree lower than the prophets. The imagination of the populace and the masses is so weak that it does not admit of rising to union with the agent intelligence, neither at night nor by day.⁵⁸

Al-Farabi's attempt at reconciliation was not the only motive behind this theory. In the third and fourth/ninth and tenth centuries a wave of scepticism refuting prophecy and prophets was prevalent. Its spokesmen copied some of the arguments held by the unbelievers in prophecy. At the head of these sceptics was Ibn al-Rawandi who was once one of the Mu'tazilites but later rejected their doctrine, and Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi the physician, a tough and powerful adversary. The latter, in particular, refuted any attempt to reconcile philosophy and religion, assumed that philosophy is the only way to reform both the individual and society and that religions are the source of conflict and strife.⁵⁹

This attack aroused all the various Islamic centres to defend their dogmas. Al-Farabi had to contribute to that defence. He explained prophecy on rational grounds and gave it a scientific interpretation.

He borrowed his explanation from Aristotle's theory of dreams, which had already been introduced to the Arab world. Al-Kindi,⁶⁰ the forerunner of al-Farabi, adhered to that theory. It assumes that dreams are images produced by the imagination the capacity of which increases during sleep after getting rid of the activities of wakefulness.⁶¹

Aristotle, however, denies that dreams are revealed by God, and never admits of prophetic predictions through sleep, otherwise the populace and the masses – who have so many dreams–would claim foretelling the future.⁶² Here, al-Farabi diverges from his master, and asserts that man through imagination can commune with the agent intelligence, but this is available only to the privileged and the chosen.

The agent intelligence is the source of divine laws and inspirations. It is, in al-Farabi's view, almost similar to the Angel charged with revelation, as in the tenets of Islam. It is within the capacity of the prophet or the philosopher to commune with the agent intelligence – the former through imagination and the latter by way of speculation and contemplation. This is understandable for the two draw together upon the same source and get their knowledge from high above. In fact, religious truth and philosophic truth are both the radiation of divine illumination through imagination or contemplation.

The Farabian theory of prophecy had an obvious impact not only on the East and the West, but on medieval and modern history. Ibn Sina adhered faithfully to it. His elaboration of that theory is closely similar to that of al-Farabi. Ibn Rushd, admitting its validity, was much astonished at al-Ghazali's criticism of it; for it corroborates the religious tenets and affirms that the spiritual perfection can be attained only through man's communion with God.⁶³

When the theory was introduced into the Jewish philosophic thought, Maimonides subscribed to it and showed much interest in it.⁶⁴ It is noticeable that Spinoza in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* expounds a similar theory which he most probably borrowed from Maimonides.⁶⁵ It continued to be echoed by some of the modern philosophers in Islam, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and the Imam Muhammad `Abduh.

6. Interpretation of the Qur'an

Some of the religious tenets are traditional (*sam`iyyat*); they are matters indemonstrable by way of reason, such as miracles; and the Day of Judgment comprising the Doomsday and Resurrection, the Path and the Balance, the Judgment and the Punishment. Acceptance of these *sam`iyyat* is one of the pillars of religion. The believers have but to accept them and remain content with the veracity of their source.

But some thinkers in their attempt at giving a rational explanation interpret them in a certain way or

reduce them to certain natural laws. The Mu`tazilites made a noticeable endeavour in this field, for they went so far in the way of interpretation that they refuted the Transfigurists who qualified God with certain attributes contradictory to His transcendence and uniqueness.

Al-Farabi attempts a different interpretation. He admits the validity of miracles since they are the means of proving prophecy. He holds that miracles although supernatural do not contradict natural laws. For the source of these laws is to be found in the world of spheres and its intelligences which manage the terrestrial world; and once we get in communion with that world, matters other than those of the habitual course happen to us.

A prophet, as mentioned above, has a spiritual power by means of which he is associated with the agent intelligence. It is through this communion that he causes rain to fall, the moon to split asunder, the stick to be transformed into a snake, or the blind and leprous to be healed.⁶⁶ In this way al-Farabi tries – as the Stoics had done before – to reduce to causality matters beyond the habitual course of nature and even contradictory to it.

The Qur'an points to various *sam`iyyat*, such as the Tablet and the Pen. Al-Farabi holds that these should not be understood literally, for the Pen is not an instrument to write with, nor the Tablet a page on which sayings are registered,⁶⁷ but they are mere symbols for precision and preservation. The Qur'an is also full of extensive stories about the hereafter, Day of Judgment, and reward and punishment. No believer could deny these matters without undermining the principle of divine sanction and individual responsibility.

Although al-Farabi fully admits the eternal bliss or the painful suffering of the hereafter, yet he reduces them to spiritual matters having no relationship with the body and material properties, because the spirit, not the body, is that which enjoys or suffers, is happy or unhappy.⁶⁸

This interpretation conforms to the Farabian tendency towards spiritualism. Ibn Sina borrowed it and widely applied it. In Ibn Sina's view the Throne and the Chair are symbols of the world of spheres. Prayers are not mere bodily movements, but aim at imitating the celestial world.⁶⁹ It is as if these two philosophers wanted to lay the foundation of a philosophical religion and a religious philosophy.

However, al-Ghazali was dissatisfied with this attempt and he attacked it, taking the text of the Scripture literally. Ibn Rushd, although advocating accord between religion and philosophy, was also dissatisfied, because he claimed that for the sake of their security religion and philosophy should be kept separate. If combined, they would not be understood by the ordinary man and might lead astray even some of those capable of deep thinking.⁷⁰

Conclusion

We can now conclude that al-Farabi's doctrine is so fully harmonious and consistent that its parts are

completely inter-related. From the One, the First Cause, al-Farabi gets on to ten intelligences from which the two worlds of heaven and earth have flowed. His spheres are moved by the managing intelligences, and nature with its generation and corruption is subjected to these intelligences. The soul is governed by one of these intelligences which is the agent intelligence. Politics and ethics are no exceptions, for happiness pursued by men is but the communion with the celestial world. His "Model City" only aims at this end.

This doctrine is at the same time spiritualistic and idealistic, for al-Farabi reduces almost everything to spirit. His God is the Spirit of the spirits, his astronomical spheres are governed by celestial spirits, and the prince of his city is a man whose spirit transcends his body. This spiritualism is rooted in ideas and concepts, and is given wholly to speculation and contemplation. The One is the Idea *par excellence* and is the Intellect that intellects Itself. The other beings are generated by this Intellect. Through speculation and contemplation man can commune with the celestial world and attain the utmost happiness. No spiritualism is so closely related to idealism as that of al-Farabi.

Although al-Farabi's doctrine is a reflection of the Middle Ages, it comprises some modern and even contemporary notions. He favours science, advocates experimentation, and denies augury and astrology. He so fully believes in causality and determinism that he refers to causes even for those effects which have no apparent causes. He elevates the intellect to a plane so sacred that he is driven to its conciliation with tradition so that philosophy and religion may accord.

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