



# Al Farabi and the Birth of Political Science in Islam

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**Abstract:** This article on Al Farabi seeks to introduce the reader unfamiliar with the political thought of classical Islam, to one of the most relevant political thinkers of the Golden Age of Islam. Al Farabi was called the "Magister secundus", that is to say the most brilliant mind after Aristotle. The depth of his intellect placed him as the most important thinker of his time and the second most important in all of history, according to the Europe of the Middle Ages. His book on the Virtuous City was ahead of its time with the proposition that rulers should seek the happiness of their subjects. The theme of happiness arrived to the universities, and some of the most prestigious ones founded their own *Centers for Happiness*. In fact, the theme became one of the main preoccupations of the international organizations. The General Assembly of the United Nations itself in its resolution 66/281, decreed back in 2012, March 20 to commemorate The International Day for Happiness, as a way to recognize the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal aspirations for all human beings. In addition, it puts political thought above religious thought because it is more scientific. Al Farabi managed to displace religious thought, relegating it to second place after political thought, the only one that allows reaching the truth. Religious thought does not seek the truth, but to establish immutable truths that are not based on scientific reasoning, but on faith. For this reason, we can consider that with Al Farabi, the Political Science is introduced in Islam. His legacy is so deep that after him, Political thought in the Islamic World changed definitively.

**Keywords:** Islamic Thought, The Virtuous City, Religious Thought, Magister Secundus, Happiness

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the main work for the study of al-Farabi's political thought is his *The Virtuous City* [1-4] very often it is translated as *The Ideal City*, which does not convey his thinking. While Saint Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, wrote his *City of God*, a theological work, al-Farabi, on the contrary, rejects religion as a base for knowledge, placing political philosophy over the ecclesiastical knowledge. For him, the fundamental goal for all statesmen should be, according to the author of *al-Madina al-Fadila*, to pursue happiness for the subjects. We have to wait until the 21st. Century when this theme has been taken again in the West as a way to measure the good government.

No longer than two decades ago, the indicators to measure the countries were based mainly on the hard data such as the GDP and the PPP, to define the level of development of a country. Lately it was included the HDI (Human Development Index), which gathers besides various

traditional variables, the educational indicators, among others, in order to form a more precise instrument for measure.

Finally, a subjective variable was included, that is happiness, as a measure for the population's well-being. Obviously, happiness depends on the person himself or herself, and of his or her perception of the environment and, as we know, there are no indicators to demonstrate it. However, nowadays it is an instrument for the national indicators.

## 2. The Boom of University Courses Dealing with Happiness

The theme of happiness arrived to the universities, and some of the most prestigious ones founded their own *Centers for Happiness*. In fact, the theme became one of the main preoccupations of the international organizations. The General Assembly of the United Nations itself in its resolution 66/281, decreed back in 2012, March 20 to

commemorate The International Day for Happiness, as a way to recognize the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal aspirations for all human beings. It was also added the importance to include happiness and well-being in the governmental policies. The Happy Planet Index has been designed to measure the persons' happiness and satisfaction. This Index is based on the well-being that each country offers to its citizens as well as for how long-life expectancy is, besides the environmental impact.

There is no doubt that the issue of happiness was not exclusively to al-Farabi. Various Greek philosophers had written several works concerning this matter. Furthermore, in "Ancient Greece existed a movement called the "Epicurus", who searched for pleasure. Epicurus of Samos (341 B.C.-Athens 270 B.C.), a Greek philosopher founder of the school called "The Garden", in Athens, a place and school where all were welcome to enter and to join, i.e., women, prostitutes slaves, etc., a practice that at that time was not very common. Epicurus defended a philosophy based on the 'pursue of pleasure', pointing out and insisting on the fact that it should be moderate and led by reason. In fact, he asserted that happiness consists in the prudent administration of pleasures and pains—the ataraxia or imperturbability of courage (thought) and friendship [5].

Although Epicurus talked about happiness, his aim was to obtain pleasure, which brings happiness, not the search for happiness *per se*. Besides, some other philosophers were also interested in this theme: "For Democritus happiness 'is the tranquility of the spirit' Plato, on the other hand, places it as the good life, the "good living", and he believes that to reach it is necessary to know ourselves" [6]. It is necessary to point out that the more extensive and precise work concerning the Greek thought about happiness is the one by David Vergara [7] Even though many Hellenic Philosophers were worried about this theme, the difference with al-Farabi is that our author places it as a major responsibility of the Statesman, and not as a search by individuals, which could lead to mix and confuse pleasure with happiness.

Antisthenes (444 B. C. – 371 B.C.) considered happiness only reachable through virtue. He proposed as a result to return to natural life. 'Complete happiness can only be attained through self-sufficiency, because independence is the true good, and not wealth or lust' [7]. On the other hand, Plato (427 B.C. –347 B.C.) developed the idea that a virtuous person was really happy, and because individuals always wish their own happiness, they always long for what is moral. For that virtuous person, happiness is a synonym of "good living", the Absolut development of the personality of man as a rational being, as well as a moral individual. This is, the harmonical relations of the various parts of the soul. "The knowledge of oneself leads to happiness" (Aristotle 384 B.C. – 322 B.C.), which makes happiness consist of the acquisition of excellence (virtue) of the character of the intellectual faculties. "Happiness consists of the active realization, and it is compromised with the inner capabilities of man" [7].

Nevis Balanta [8] expressed the same ideas of Vergara

concerning the position of the Greek philosophers on happiness, although in a more summarized way. "For Democritus happiness is 'the tranquility of the spirit'. Plato describes it as the "good living" and he believes that in order to reach it is necessary to know ourselves. Epicurus sees it as the abode of fear and certain negative emotions. Aristotle, on the other hand, relates it with virtue; this is that happiness is the supreme good, because for him a man is happy when 'he lives well and acts well'. We should not forget the virtues which, according to Aristotle, will make us happy: courage, temperance, patience, justice, sympathy and generosity, among others" [8].

In the definitions of the Greek philosophers, happiness is the individual responsibility, not of the collectivity, and least of all the State's responsibility. It is this last discussion that gives al-Farabi his originality. His position has been discussed in various Universities and world boards to reach happiness. In the International Board of Sciences of Happiness 360 that Tecmilenio University will held in November 2nd and 3rd. 2021, well-known University professors are scheduled, such as Tal Ben-Shahar, a pioneer professor at Harvard University for the study of happiness, mainly through his class 'Positive Psychology'; Professor James Pawelski, director of Education of the Center for Positive Psychology of the University of Pennsylvania, and Executive Director and Founder of the Positive Psychology International Association.

According to the Happy Planet Index [9] which is published every three years by the New Economic Foundation, Costa Rica and Mexico are in the first positions of the 2020 final list of the happiest countries of the world. This index deals with 140 countries and the last two places are Chad, in the last position, and curiously, Luxemburg is placed in the penultimate position. The data that Happy Planet Index offers, undoubtedly leaves us numerous questions. Mexico, for example, despite its very high level of delinquency, is placed in the second position even before many other countries which are more stable and with a higher level of security. In fact, the top ten are almost exclusively Latin American countries, where the local populations show their disagreement with the national domestic situations migrating to the United States.

It is in the universities where the research is taking place more seriously. In England, Anthony Seldon was one of the pioneers of the courses about happiness in education. Back in 2006 he started in the Wellington College in Berkshire, 'the course for well-being and happiness'. In this way it is spread out, as well as widely expressed the ranking of the different countries. Through various inquests to people and through the Government participation it is possible to establish the rankings for the levels of happiness. This verification was done the same year when Seldon established his course. Its impact led to the establishment of the first course of happiness at Harvard University in United States [10].

On the other hand, Yale University, also in United States, offered the course The Science of Well-Being in January 2018. This course is led by Professor Laurie Santos.

“At Princeton University in United States is well known the work of the Scottish professor and scientist Angus Deaton, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economy, 2015, for his study of poverty and well-being. Another example is the course concerning social conditions for human happiness in the Erasmus University in the Netherlands. The contributions of professor Ruut Veenhoven have been fundamental, as he demonstrates that people satisfied with their lives live, as an average, ten years more than those not satisfied” [10].

Not only the universities have been involved in the notion of people's happiness. The Coca Cola Institute for Happiness is an initiative born with the purpose to research and spread the scientific knowledge about “... happiness with the purpose to contribute to improve the life quality...” [11].

Some courses have also been developed online with the goal to gain happiness, as was the case of Happiness Studies Academy of Tal Ben-Shahar. His course is an academic one thought online by Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, which provides “knowledge and the necessary tools in order to generate happiness at the individual level, as well as inter-personal, organizational and national”, as the course itself is advertised.

The University of Yucatán also created the Center for Happiness and Well-Being, in the School of Psychology. Some private centers have also taken advantage of this boom for well-being. Among many, one can mention the case of the Integral Well-Being Center founded by Arlen Solodkin, a disciple of Dr. Martin Seligman, considered the father of the Positive Psychology. “The Integral Well-Being Center is one of the most renowned institutes in the Spanish-speaking countries. It is also considered the leader in the fields of the Positive Psychology and the Science of Well-Being. The IBI (in Spanish), is well known for using the most professional techniques and educational models, which are the most efficient ones nowadays” [12].

### 3. A Long Philosophical Tradition

Al-Farabi, our author, is not an isolated case of Islamic thought. We can situate him inside the great philosophical tradition of Islam in the Golden Age, next to al-Kindi, Avicenna, Averroes, Ibn Khaldun, among many others. Even though many of them were inspired by the classical Greek works, those by Aristotle [13], and those by Plato, they were able to insert the Hellenistic contributions to the reality of the Muslim world. Undoubtedly, they enriched the previous philosophy. The Spanish translator of the classic work by al-Farabi, Manuel C. Feria García, asserted about al-Farabi, that he “offers a new approach to Arab philosophical tradition, the one that he wrote from his own interior. It is an approach that attempts to respond both to the nowadays scientific conditions, and to the ideological questions, born from the nationalist renaissance of the end of the 19th. century which stimulated the attainment of the Arab heritage. Researchers very often start from the premise that Arabic philosophy does not consist, like the Greek or the Modern and Contemporary European Philosophies, in a reinterpretation incessantly renewed of their own history, but rather in a group of

interpretations, independent among themselves, of another philosophy, the Greek; interpretations which subordinated the same cognitive material to ideological goals, which are different and even divergent.”

The themes of the philosophical debates of the first centuries of Islam were developed in Europe only from the 18th century on, or as in the case of Ibn Khaldun only from the 19th. century on with Engels and Marx. Ibn Khaldun's interpretation of history [14] with the dichotomous between city and countryside (*hadari* and *bedui*, or the inhabitant of the city and the bedouin, this last one meaning harsh, uncivil) is a model, undoubtedly, precursor of Hegel's thesis and antithesis. This idea was later taken by the Marxist dialectic.

Even though the Islamic World has had a large list of philosophers during the Classical Age, al-Farabi outstands among all of them “Even over for thinkers of the caliber of Avicenna and Averroes (al-Farabi was) the equivalent of Plato or Aristotle” [15].

Al-Farabi re-introduced in the Islamic thought of the 10th. century, Plato's, and Aristotle's philosophies, and he demonstrated that the philosophies of those Greek thinkers were the only ones capable of explaining the challenge of revealed religions to the philosophical thought. The disciple of the school of Alexandria, considered to be the founder of the Islamic political philosophy, was poorly appraised in the West during several centuries<sup>1</sup> [16]. Therefore, philosophy is superior to religion, according to al-Farabi, but he does not deny the importance of this last one. Religion is a symbolic representation of truth, which allows the prophet to use it “to let people know the idea of the principles of the beings and happiness” [17]. We are far away from an idealization of the religious sphere, which is seen as a practical and useful category for an appropriate government. Religion “consists of opinions and actions which are specific and limited by all the rules enunciated for a community by its statesman; as well as for their use by the statesman. The ruler attempts to obtain for the community or through it a determined object that is his” [18]. Al-Farabi's vision of religion, which has a lower importance than philosophy, and according to him is utilitarian. A good government uses religious principles appropriately in order to educate the subjects, while an ignorant statesman approves various laws which indeed hinder the ultimate happiness. Only a virtuous government fully acquires the realization of the ideals of society.

Ancient Greek notions of good and evil, virtue and viciousness, the public and private spheres, were overthrown by the emergence of revealed religions, in particular Islam, mainly due to its vision of the society governed by divine laws. Concerning the major questions of political life,

<sup>1</sup> Muhsin Mahdi has devoted countless years of research to spread the works of this philosopher of Islam. In the first part of the book, he places al-Farabi in his historical and philosophical contexts, and he later moves to his commentaries about his political and philosophical work, in particular *The Virtuous City*. In the last part he presents the reading of Aristotle and Plato by al-Farabi himself, to explain the influence of the Muslim thinker on the Jewish philosophy developed by Maimonides in the 12th. century, as well as on the Christian Western thought developed by Saint Thomas in the 13th. century.

theologians and jurists were indifferent, unconcerned and they could not solve the dilemma between the political community governed by human laws, and the Islamic community organized according to divine revelation. Theology, on the other hand, was also unable to respond to the existence of multiple political systems, even those born from the same religion.

Various philosophers of the first Islamic period faced similar problems, but they focused on the individual not on the community. With the development of the political philosophy, al-Farabi was able to respond to these dilemmas. "He had to return to the fundamentals of philosophical research in order to introduce politics in the Islamic thought and to attract the classical philosophy towards Islam" [15]. Political philosophy allowed him to re-introduce "the philanthropic spirit of the philosophy", according to Muhsen Mahdi, emphasizing on the place that man occupies in the city, in the nation or in the religious community. This emphasis allowed to reinforce the public sphere over the private one, and the collective over the individual.

According to Muhsen Mahdi "throughout the ten centuries which separate Cicero from al-Farabi, non-important philosophy was able to approach the political philosophy, nor was able to insert in its bosom a dominant position, central and decisive to the political philosophy" [19] as this was accomplished by the Second Master.

#### 4. Between Aristotle and Plato

The Magister Secundus (the Second Master) in the Middle Ages (Aristotle was considered the Magister Primus) was al-Farabi [16, 20]. He was born in the small town of Wassij, near the city of Farab in Transoxiana in 870, [21] (he died in 950 at the age of 80 years). He was known as Abu Nasr Mohammad Ibn Mohammad Ibn Tarjan Ibn Uzalagh al-Farabi. His parents were Persians who migrated to the historical Turkestan (nowadays divided between Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). Today's University of Kazakhstan provides al-Farabi his major historical glory, since the National University of Kazakhstan is named after him, as al-Farabi. Since 1993 the national bills over 200 tenges (the national currency of Kazakhstan) show his supposed image. It is important to keep in mind that the town where al-Farabi was born is nowadays in Uzbekistan.

Al-Farabi was the son of a military general, and he completed his studies in Farab and later in Bukhara'. Shortly afterwards he moved to Baghdad for his more advanced studies. He managed to dominate several fields including technology. He was a restless traveller, and he visited various regions of the Muslim World, in particular Syria (Damascus and Aleppo) and Egypt. However, he very often returned to Aleppo to the court of Sayf al-Dawla, with whom he had a strong friendship. It was precisely in this city from where his fame went beyond the borders of the Muslim World.

For some time he worked as a qadi (Muslim judge), but later on he devoted himself exclusively to teaching, which

became his major vocation. His knowledge reached a real pinnacle when he made original contributions to science, philosophy, logics, sociology, medicine, mathematics, and even music.<sup>2</sup>[22]. Despite of all that, his major contribution continues to be in the field of political philosophy.

Al-Farabi travelled all his life all over the Muslim World, from city to city, searching to be in contact with different philosophers and the wise men of his time to learn more about the secrets of nature.

This anecdote about the author shows several points: the illustration of various monarchs, as in the case of Sayf al-Dawla, and the encyclopedic knowledge of al-Farabi, which caused admiration in the public.

In fact, after answering all the philosophical questions they asked him, he was inquired if he, being such a learned man, knew something about music. According to the legend, al-Farabi did not answer the question, but he started playing the lute, which such perfection for both, romantic music, and dances, to the point that everybody was astonished. At the end of the day, the monarch, Sayf al-Dawla, begged him to stay in his palace, but al-Farabi told him that he could not rest until he finds the "philosophical stone". Then he went to Damascus and after leaving this city, he died in the desert, probably attacked by thieves. Notwithstanding, al-Farabi did not die in the desert, but in Damascus, instead, according to the majority of the sources.

He was a real living encyclopedia (according to his biographers, he knew seventy languages, Turkish, Arabic, Persian, among many others) [23]. Al-Farabi studied grammar, philosophy, music, mathematics, sciences. His vocation was philosophy and he portrays himself as a philosopher who should rescue wisdom which was born in Mesopotamia, and Chaldea, later it passed through Egypt, and finally it moved to Greece. He said that it should return it to his native land.

Despite that most of his works have been lost, we know that he wrote 117 books (43 dealing with logics, 11 on metaphysics 7 on ethics, 7 on Political Science, 17 on music, medicine, and sociology, and 11 commentaries on the Greek works [24]. Alfarabius, his Latin name, died in Damascus at the age of eighty years, in December 950 (339 H.).

In Baghdad he studied medicine with the Christian physician Yuhanna ben Haylan, and he was the classmate of the also Christian Abu Bisr Matta. Besides, he travelled all over the Middle East in search for knowledge. His works cover a wide range of specialties such as philosophy, mathematics, medicine. Notwithstanding, his commentaries on the works by Plato and Aristotle, gave him fame. Many of his books have been lost. However, 30 of his works have been found in Arabic, the original language, besides six in Hebrew and three in Latin.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Farabi also surpasses in music, first as and theoretical author of various essays on musical theory like *Kitab al-musiqa al-Kabir* [*The Great Book of Music*]. Besides, he manufactured several instruments or improved the sound of those already in existence. Finally, he was an artist capable for playing several instruments.

## 5. His Contributions to the Political Philosophy

Among his major works we find *Fusus al-Hikam*, which for many centuries was the fundamental work to teach and to study in many institutions, both Muslims and in the West, and his *Kitab al-Ihsa al 'Ulum* (*The Catalogue of the Sciences*, or *De Scientiis*, in Latin [25]). This last book presents in a very didactical way the various sciences known up to that time, which shows the reasons for its importance. Al-Farabi also wrote *Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila* (*The Virtuous City*), which is an early contribution to the knowledge of Political Science and sociology.

We can emphasize three points of al-Farabi's philosophy:

- 1) His thesis on the difference not only logical, but also metaphysical between essence and existence of the created beings. The existence is not a constitutive character of essence, but it is, instead, a predicate, an accident of the last one.
- 2) Theory on the Intellect<sup>3</sup> the emanation of the First Intelligence, starting from the First Being (God), and its three contemplative acts, (which generate a three-group of a new Intelligence, new Soul, and a new Heaven), which repeat themselves in each of the hierarchical intelligences, until the tenth (the agent intelligence). The first divine essences, the gods-stars in Aristotle turned into 'separated intelligences' in al-Farabi. Avicenna characterized them as Angels. In *Risalat fi'l 'aqil* [26] the author clearly defines his levels of the intellect: the intellect in potency, the intellect in act, the acquired intellect, the agent intellect, all of whom will become the reference point of the classical Muslim philosophers up to Averroes.
- 3) His theory of *The Virtuous City* has a Greek background, because of his inspiration in Plato. Notwithstanding, it responds to the philosophical aspirations, as well as the mystical spheres of a Muslim thinker. His City comprehends the totality of Mankind and not only a part of it. This City has its own Prophet-Imam,<sup>4</sup> as a supreme guide. This theory was later taken by the Jewish Scholastics, in particular Maimonides. *The Virtuous City* is not an aim in itself, but rather the means to accomplish the final happiness of all men. Al-Farabi's interest for this accomplishment is not limited to the individual salvation, but also for the whole community's salvation, which is social as well as political. Furthermore, his interest is not limited to one

single city, nation or community, but rather to the totality of mankind.

In his *Catalogue of the Sciences* (*Kitab al-Ihsa al 'Ulum*), the Second Master asserts that "our purpose to write this book is to count the known sciences, as such, and to give knowledge to what each one of them comprehends, and the parts of those which have them, and what each one of these parts embraces. We have divided this book in five articles: 1- Regarding the science of language and its parts. 2- Concerning the science of logics and its parts. 3- Referring the science of mathematics, which embraces: arithmetic, geometry, optics, astronomy, mathematics, music, the science of balances and the science of engineering. 4- Concerning physics and its parts and metaphysics and its parts. 5- Regarding politics, law and Kalam (Islamic theology)" [27].

The work itself has several aims, as this is explained by the author. First of all, the book is addressed to the student who wants to learn and to explore any of the previously described sciences. This way the student will know where to go and where to research (the desired knowledge), as well as the benefit he could acquire by learning this science. Secondly, the book can be consulted to compare the sciences, in all that is referred to excellence, usefulness, precision, among other things. In the third place, al-Farabi attempts to evaluate ignorant people who pretend to dominate a particular science, by asking them if they would be able to enumerate the parts of that science and its contents. The fourth issue deals with the use that can be performed of the work in order to verify someone's knowledge of that particular science, and this leads us to determine how profound his knowledge is. Finally, the book can help those who search for a quick education, and want to know the major lines of knowledge of each science, so that they could imitate scientists with the purpose to feel themselves as members of the cognitive *élite*.

His *Kitab al-Ihsa al 'Ulum* is a shorter encyclopedia for the reader who pursues to understand the principles and purposes of the known sciences of his time. In fact, al-Farabi warns the reader of the dangers of generalizations and of the superficiality in the argumentation. For this reason, the master recommends that if the reader requires to dig deep in knowledge, he should read his work, but if he only wants a superficial argumentation, for a short discussion among friends, there is no need for him to waste his time with wisdom.

This farabian argumentation has a modern resonance in the work by Luis Villoro [28], *Creer, Saber y Conocer, [to Believe, to Know, to Comprehend]* who argues the same differences between *creer* (*to believe*), which is the common knowledge of the street man, concerning any topic; *saber, to know*, which is a more profound knowledge, due to education and readings, and *conocer, to comprehend*, which implies a profound analytical study of the phenomenon's, which is acquired through research and reflection. We can find these same differences in al-Farabi's *Kitab*.

For al-Farabi, the logic is not only a discipline, but also an art, because it allows the "canons whose major purpose is to rectify knowledge and to guide man directly on the way of

3 Davidson in his work makes the difference between potential intellect and active intellect, as this was developed by Aristotle. Many Medieval philosophers, Muslims, Jews and Christians, considered this difference as the key to decipher the nature of man and the universe. After this analysis, Davidson focusses on how Al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes solved this problem, and in particular the development of the active intellect and the existence of various intellects within the cosmological and epistemological teachings. Furthermore, he studies the impact on the thoughts of other Muslim, Jewish and Scholastica writings.

4 The Imam is the guide of men. For al-Farabi he has all the human and philosophical virtues. He is a Plato dressed of the Prophet Muhammad.

prudence and to provide him the security of the truth in all the rational argumentations in which he could err. Furthermore, logic provides the rules which will preserve him and will place him out of error and the sophism in rational matters; besides, it provides the necessary rules to closely examine the truth in those knowledges in which there is a possibility that comprehension may fall into error. It is possible to observe that among the rational judgements in which error is possible, but there are also others, notwithstanding, in which it is not possible at all that comprehension errs, i.e., those judgements that man finds engraved in his soul, as if it would have been created with a right knowledge of them. Such are the following: «The whole is major than the part» «All numbers three are odd numbers» There are, besides, other judgements in which it could err, and be away from the truth to [fall] in what is not the truth. These judgements are the ones that are acquired through reflection and reasoning, this is through syllogism and induction. To acquire the truth with certainty in these judgements –but not in others–, the canons of logic are for man who looks for the truth in all his speculations” [29].

In the fifth part of the work the philosopher from Farab provides us a clear definition of the reasons why the Political Science, and its repercussions, besides its own aims “deals with the diverse topics of actions and voluntary customs, of the habits, characters, inclinations and natural dispositions, from which derive those actions and customs; the purposes for which actions exist; how convenient that they exist in man, and which is the way to order them in the convenient direction that they exist in him, and the way to preserve them. It distinguishes between the goals for which the actions are taken and the customs are used (...).

“It analyses the actions and the customs, and demonstrates that those (actions and customs) from which real happiness is obtained are the good works, honest and virtuous. What do not produce this are the bad, dishonest and imperfect (actions and customs); the cause that they exist in man is for that good acts and customs are to be practiced in cities and in the ordained collectivities, and they are to be performed in common. It demonstrates that all of this cannot be acquired but through an authority (...) That power is the kingdom and the royalty, or any other name man would want to give it; politics is the consequence of this force.

Authority consists in two classes: one that makes actions, customs and voluntary habits possible, from which naturally derives what is really happiness (...) and authority that makes possible that the cities have actions and dispositions, from which are derived things that appear as happiness, which in fact it is not happiness. This is ignorant authority. This last class is divided in many others, and each one of them acquires its name from the goal it has and it serves, and they would be as many as the things they search for, according to the goals or intentions; if one of them searches for wealth, it will be called the authority of avarice; if another one goes for honors, it will be called the authority of vaingloriousness; and if another one is preoccupied of another different thing, it will be called with the name of the

thing that has for its aim.

“It demonstrates that the real good power is composed of two forces; the first, the force that is founded on the universal laws; the other, the force that man acquires through the production of civil actions and by means of practices of operations (...)

“Political Philosophy provides the general rules concerning all the aspects about the acts, customs, voluntary habits and all the other issues it is occupied with, and it also gives the rules in order to measure these actions in each case and in each time, and it teaches how, as well as with what and with which it is necessary to measure (...)

It also studies the modes and the habits to govern, and the means which are necessary to put into practice, when the cities have become ignorant cities, in order to return to its primitive situation. Moreover, it demonstrates how many things form part of the real good force, because some are the speculative and practical sciences, and they possess an adjunct force which is the result of the held practice during the repetition of the acts in the cities and collectivities, and this is the force on which behalf the laws are invented, with which the actions are possible, as well as the habits and customs, according to each tribe, or each city, or each town, and according to each condition or accident (...)

“It teaches what is convenient to do in order that the governments of the kings are not interrupted. It shows what conditions and natural characters are convenient to search for in the kings’ sons and in other persons of this class, so that and because of them it will be meritorious to be elected king, after the disappearance of the previous monarch. Besides, it teaches the conduct that should be followed by him who has these natural conditions. Furthermore, it teaches how convenient it is to educate him in order that he acquires the real force, and he would become a complete king; and next to it (it teaches) that it is not convenient to choose kings, no matter what, among those whose authority is the ignorant authority (...)” [30].

According to him, Political Science should be indorsed by Law, which should be distinguished from the religious dogma itself. However, the religious dogmas are not discussed, but accepted because they are: “the established assertions about God or concerning His attributes, or concerning the world or similar things; the operations are, for example, the acts through which God is honored, and the other ones with which the rules of the cities are obtained. Because of this, Law has two parts: one which deals with the dogmas; the other which is occupied on the operations” [30].

## 6. Political Science and Philosophy

A relatively complete work to interpret al-Farabi’s thought is the essay by Paul M. Bushmiller, entitled *Argument of al-Farabi’s Book of Religion* [31]. To accomplish his analysis, the author took as a point of reference al-Farabi’s works *The Catalogue of the Sciences*, the *Book of Religion* [32], *Selected Aphorisms* [33] and *The Attainment of Happiness* [34].

In this book, *The Book of Religion*, al-Farabi developed three arguments: two direct ones and the other an implicit one. First of all, he defines religion as it exists in a community (in clear reference to the umma, the Muslim community), as well as who founded this community and how it is led. His purpose is to discuss order and prosperity, which are recurrent themes in his works in his constant search for happiness, all derived from a common religion and from a common goal. This explanation comes to be a central argument in the development of a nation, notion which will appear in Europe as late as in the 18th. and 19th. centuries. However, for our author, these arguments proceed from a divine order. The implicit argument is included in the definition of Political Science within a human group, which received a revelation of a monotheistic religion. Hence, it is religion the practice that defines the community, which constitutes the framework that has the role and it is the starting point of Political Science. Philosophy (Political Science is part of it, at the time of al-Farabi) allows us through a reflection process, to understand God and the purposes of religion.

“Religion is a series of opinions well defined and prescribed for a community by its first statesman. If he is virtuous, the community will achieve happiness. If he is ignorant, he will search only for himself to obtain the goods and to make them instruments of his government” [35]. Al-Farabi’s vision of religion is not limited to one religion. He points out the possibility of the existence of various religions, but his criterion is not the Truth, but the realization of happiness.

For him, philosophy should understand what religion is all about. But if a philosopher tries to do it in a debate with another religion, but from his own religious perspective, this approach is not scientific. In order to understand a religion, the philosopher has to comprehend that religion is neither a science nor a philosophy. Religion consists of four elements: the theoretical opinions, the theoretical activities, the practical opinions and the practical activities. A point of convergence between philosophy and religion seems to be related with the issue of theory: both are focused on the totality of the world and what is superior. However, there is a fundamental difference between them. Religion expresses the truth in terms not scientific, but ordinary and common, but also using expressions in order to designate various categories of the religion itself. Due to this characteristic, to think about the creation of a philosophic religion or a scientific religion, undoubtedly these are contradictions, false arguments. This would mean that there is not a clear understanding of the essence of religion.

“The usefulness of philosophy is to know the truth, for religion it is to search for man’s happiness. If the first statesman is a virtuous one and his government is truly virtuous, meaning through what he has issued, and if he only attempts to obtain the ultimate happiness, then he would attain truth for him and for those under his government. (Then) this religion is a virtuous religion” [36]. The religious criterion stops being the revelation, but it develops the

practice, the pursuit of happiness. If a religion does not accomplish this, it must disappear as soon as the statesman-prophet, who installed it, dies.

The goods of the ignorant, as al-Farabi describes them, are wealth, pleasures, honor, glory and the conquests. The ignorant statesman pursues them in order to satisfy himself, and sometimes also his subjects. However, the wise leader should attempt to obtain a convergent policy with divine revelation. Hence, the community was established by God, but the leadership is for a man, a political leader chosen by God (i.e. the Prophet), who must have the wisdom to lead it through the time and the circumstances, even if they are negative. It is a kind of Luck and Science, but also a form of revelation.

Here it is important to underline the fact that his vision of the religion is not summarized to just one Absolut Truth, but to ‘actions’ and ‘opinions’. Revelation has its meaning and a purpose only in the hands of someone who has a very high level or reasoning. The purpose of the leader’s actions is to establish religion for the happiness of the group. However, happiness is understood only if personal creed fulfills the moral lines established by reason and harmony. Reason should be the only criterion of truth, and religion itself is a symbolic representation of reason.

In his *Selected Aphorisms*, al-Farabi calls our attention regarding an interpretation of happiness as a material reward. In fact, it is a knowledge that we should follow in order to obtain our own happiness. Political Science allows al-Farabi to analyze the society after the first statesman. The first leader, the Prophet, received the revelation with the aim to conduct his community. His successors are jurists<sup>5</sup> inside a body of traditions which they have to keep and rationalize for the polis order, while the religious community has another goal, symbolically expressed in the question: What is and for what purpose is man?

Al-Farabi’s vision concerning the role of Law as a rational instrument for social organization, comes from the position of the theological school of the mu’tazilites, also named the rational theologians of Islam. This school, accepted as the official interpretation of Islam up to 874, attempts to unite reason with faith. Faith cannot go against rational thought. They are the defenders of God’s unicity and Allah’s justice.

The mu’tazilites’ principles [37] are:

- 1) They deny God’s attributes (for fear of anthropomorphism). The Koran is Created. It is created because Allah is ‘the one who speaks’, which is a human quality, not a divine one.
- 2) Free Will.
- 3) The school has an intermediate position concerning a sinner Muslim. The question was: Is a sinner Muslim still a believer or is he to be considered an infidel?
- 4) Everlasting reward or punishment.

5 When al-Farabi talks about the jurists he refers to the learned men of the Muslim law, the Sharia. In fact, in Islam, theology was not a developed discipline, while jurisprudence allowed the jurist to interpret the laws included in the Koran and in the Sunna, the Prophet’s tradition. Hence, the first govern, the Prophet, did not need to be a jurist, because of the revelation itself. However, the caliphs (successors of the Prophet) needed to interpret and apply Islamic law.

- 5) Revealed Law versus rational Law: Divine Will cannot contradict moral-rational law. The Prophet is NOT infallible, the Koran IS inimitable, the community IS infallible.

The fundamentals of these principles are to be found in the following outlines:

- 1) The Imam's main duty is the application of justice: Muslims have the right to rebel against him, even with weapons, if he does not comply with this duty.
- 2) God cannot be the cause of evil: the author of evil is man and therefore he is responsible for his acts (this is the principle of free will).
- 3) They forward the concept of 'the people of justice' (Ahl al 'adl): reason precedes the text, in the sense that reason is implicit in the Koran.
- 4) God does not prefer some of his creatures over others: all the creatures are equal in rights and duties, and for this reason even the Prophet or any other common Muslim are equal before divine justice.
- 5) They deny intercession in the Day of Final Judgement: while many theological schools portray Muhammad as the intermediary in the Final Judgement, the mu'tazilites assert that even the Prophet will be judged on that day.

Inside al-Farabi's thought clearly appears several mu'tazilite ideas. The mu'tazilites were the rationalists of Islam. All man's acts belong to God; however, man has the potential of the action, which allows him to have responsibility in the execution. Good and evil are done due to the voluntary actions of the human being. However, perfection cannot be attained only by one single man. Only the person acting in a group could accomplish happiness, getting away from error and evil. This position also has a mu'tazilite origin in such a way that for the rationalist theological school, only the community is infallible. This implies that it cannot err.

"Al-Farabi makes a clear-cut between governance of the world and that of a city: the first one fits inside God's natural order, while the second is complex and subject to the political debates among the leaders, in order to elaborate laws, or to prescribe some others. This leads towards divisions inside the community. According to al-Farabi, this explains the existence of different political regimes, even if they sprang from the same religion. However, the ruler's duty is to accomplish unity and harmony in the city, although this is not always possible. Virtue is not accepted the same way by all the people, according to al-Farabi. Even though the ruler tries to inculcate it, certain people will make it more for themselves, always depending upon their own personal experience. It seems that at the end this is al-Farabi's logic" [16].

## 7. Ara ahl al-madinat al-Fadhilat

The central theme of al-Farabi's political works is the virtuous regime, the political order, in which the guiding principle is the realization of excellence of human virtue. Al-

Farabi interprets political science as the pursuit of man, as man is different from all other natural beings, or divine beings. This allows him to understand man's particular nature, which constitutes his perfection and the major mean to obtain it.

Contrary to the other animals, man cannot be perfect only because of his natural attributes, which are lower than those of the animals, mainly referring to the physical faculties. Contrary to divine beings, man is not eternally perfect, but he has to accomplish perfection through rational activity. Hence, the pursuit of happiness, or to acquire virtue are essential to man.

*The Virtuous City (Ara ahl al-madinat al-fadila* [38] is al-Farabi's most outstanding work, which undoubtedly complements al-Kindi's philosophical contributions. Much has been discussed concerning the comparison between *Al-madina al-fadila* and Plato's *Republic*. However, it is important to underline the fact that al-Farabi's work continues to be Islamic, due to its religious essence. We can add that al-Farabi's work is Islamic in the first place, and afterwards it is Platonic. His thought reflects a new vision of reality, based on reason, in the bosom of a Muslim society ruled by norms of divine inspiration, as in the case of the sharia<sup>6</sup> (the Muslim law).

*The Virtuous City* is divided in two parts: the first one addresses a philosophical vision, while the second contains a political and social visions. "Al-Farabi expresses it from a philosophical point of view, mixing and uniting Aristotle's traditions with "Neoplatonic traditions: God is the One, the First Being, the First Cause, the First Intellect, the First Motor, who moves intelligently the universe. God is the One, for as long as He thinks of Himself to create, by emanation, the multiplicity of the universe (...) Things become, with a particular reason, as a principle of order. The order of the universe is necessary for the Muslim philosopher, in order to explain it in the world of men, of human society. For this reason, the State has to be ruled by norms which proceed from the human reason –the divine that is inside man-, this means, from the reflex or image of the Universal Reason. Then, if the State is founded on the rules of human reason, it will become a Perfect State, an Ideal City, where man can accomplish divine happiness" [39].

According to al-Farabi, the central theme of Political Science, i.e., 'the virtuous government', is the art of the ruler who governs and preserves the city or the virtuous nation. In this virtuous nation the final goal is true happiness, obtained by good, noble and virtuous acts. Indeed, this differs from the ignorant rulers, who create cities in which the pursuit of wealth and vaingloriousness are wrongly declared as the major principles for happiness.

To the question of what the meaning of the real virtuous activity is, the Second Master answers pointing out that Political Science has 7 functions: the first four ones are

6 The Sharia, the Muslim law is based first in the Koran, and in the second place in the Sunna, the Prophetic tradition, which is divided in the Sira (the right path or Muhammad's life) and the Hadith, sayings and deeds of the Prophet, and finally jurisprudence, or the interpretation of both the Koran and the Sunna.



devoted to the actions, the ways of life, the moral customs, from an abstract point of view. The fifth asserts that those qualities cannot exit in man without a communitarian practice. The following function explains the need that the government has to become 'a real virtuous art'. The last function is the virtuous art's content, which is divided in two powers, the quality based upon general rules and the other one, the *expertise*, which sprang from the long experience, observation, and practice.

According to al-Farabi, man reflects the universe of the three-group: body, soul, and intellect, which has two principles: matter, that is the body and the form which is the spirit. The Second Master's search is the universal peace and happiness, and not only the Hellenistic ones, as understood by Plato, but with the creation of tied relations among the different members, which would allow the two-ways help.

Man has to search for a state of perfection, towards which he has to lead his major efforts. He also has to exploit and to use his natural instincts. Furthermore, this state cannot be accomplished only by individual activity, but rather by a collective one. Perfection is gained in a close association with other individuals. For this reason, man is a 'political and social animal'.

Al-Farabi, after analyzing Plato's laws, and when he questions the divine or worldly origins of these laws, he points out the central discussion of political science, that is, to attain the best regime. In order to accomplish this virtuous government, al-Farabi analyses Plato's theory and he unites Plato's idea of the best regime, with the Islamic divine law, and the political community with the umma, the Muslim community. Then, the philosopher-king, or the prophet-philosopher is the human being more capable to govern, according to the virtuous principles. However, because a coincidence between prophecy and philosophy is exceptional, the art to govern, according to jurisprudence, turns to be a substitute in the absence of the perfect harmony prophet-ruler.

Al-Farabi, as Plato and Aristotle, considers the city as the main political unity, in which man can attain political perfection. But al-Farabi separates from them when he affirms that the polis is not the ultimate perfect entity, but the umma. Being Islam universal, the political entities which can become virtuous, go beyond the polis, and can even cover the entire planet.

This wide concept of the community leads al-Farabi to emphasize on the fact that the virtuous ruler, knowing the jurisprudence and the divine laws, should possess the virtues of a warrior. This is to oblige, to compel, if necessary, all those out of legality, to be on the side of virtue and divine law. However, war is not an aim in itself. Universal peace constitutes the perfect state of man, but a war led by a virtuous ruler with the purpose to reestablish law, is a just war. This way, al-Farabi deals with philosophical rationality, to justify the concept of a just war, and by extension to all conflicts, in order to carry the Islamic message all over the planet.

We can conclude that al-Farabi's thought seems to be the result of a reflection born from Greek philosophy, which has

the intention to be applied to the vivid reality. His reflection shows an attempt to introduce a rational issue of the reality of a society strictly religious, as it is the case of the Muslim society. Undoubtedly, it is this new approach of the reality, the one that could offer new norms, over which it would be founded a new perfect social order. This will have the ideal, the virtuous (*fadil*) order, in which man, defined as a social being by nature, could achieve his ultimate perfection, and therefore his happiness. These explanations anticipated, in many centuries, the Marxist idea of the social nature of knowledge and man. However, we need to keep in mind that al-Farabi's interpretation is fitted within a religious context.

This way, his philosophy "Has an essentially political character, since its final goal (...) is not other than the one to modify the fundamentals of the Muslim community, with the clear purpose to integrate them in other different communities. The source wouldn't be only the divine law, but a law coming from human reason, despite the fact that deep inside they both coincide, since they would be two expressions of one single and same law or Truth (...) Besides, (the) Philosopher attempts to prove the identity of both systems, precisely because philosophy and religion are two expressions of one single and the same truth. (Al-Farabi has reached this) conclusion because of his profound knowledge of the Greek philosophy" [40]

However, it is not only in *The Virtuous City* where al-Farabi explains his vision of society. The *Book of Political Government* [41] is the second source in importance, in which he deals with political philosophy. In this last book al-Farabi starts his explanations with a clear description of the First Being, or First Cause of the universe; and he later continues with a description of the universe, the description of man and the human soul, with its attributes. He concludes with an analysis of the city or the State. He distinguishes the virtuous city from those which are not virtuous. This last approach to politics must deal with the fact that politics is included in metaphysics, because of the final search for happiness in politics. "Happiness is the absolute good", writes al-Farabi, and he continues: "all that is useful in order to reach happiness is certainly good, although not by itself, but for the reason of its usefulness for happiness. All that is apart from happiness, from any point of view, is an absolute evil" [41].

Due to his interest in logics and in the political thought, al-Farabi managed to obtain a real Platonic-Aristotelian synthesis. However, he differentiates the accomplishments of each one of them.

## 8. Conclusion

Al-Farabi considers Plato and Aristotle as the pinnacle of the philosophical thought, and al-Farabi's works are focused on the search of the internal concordance between both philosophers "in line with the tradition of Neoplatonic syncretism. He does this work upon revising the texts and comparing them with the rigor of a philosopher. Al-Farabi's style is systematic, concise and dry. The rationalism of the

philosopher from Farab, will be severely criticized by al-Ghazali (d. 1111), but he leaves an open path which will be followed by Avicenna and Averroes.” [42].

Al-Farabi does not only manage to introduce Greek philosophy in the Muslim World, but he also integrates political thought to the Muslim society. He tried to attain a synthesis between prophecy and philosophical reflection.

By opening the doors of the study of politics, the Second Master even forwarded himself to the thought of his time. “An analysis of the term politics in its Greek meaning, was not possible during the Latin Middle Ages, at least not before the second half of the 13th. century. And even if it would have occurred, it wouldn’t have been relevant, because the reality of the term was unknown to Latins. Before this century, Latins completely ignored the concept of the State as an independent conjunct of citizens, autonomous and self-sufficient, who live according to their own laws (...). With all rigors, neither the State problem nor the political problems existed, terms which did not appear before the discovery and translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, and this happened well-advanced the 13th. century.

However, in a time way before the 13th. century, the Muslim World just had developed with all details and widely written, a state theory, expressed in the diverse doctrines of the caliphate, the imamate, and as a more general manner a political theory” [43].

Al-Farabi is precisely the cornerstone of the building of the Islamic political science.

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