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FĀRĀBĪ III. METAPHYSICS
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FĀRĀBĪ

iii. Metaphysics

The question of determining the subject matter of metaphysics has always been a matter of dispute. Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, with which metaphysics as a discipline originates, exhibits ambiguities and oscillates between two main projects: (1) a study of what is common to all beings, i.e., being as such and other universal notions such as oneness, and (2) a study of the ultimate causes, i.e., God and other immaterial beings. The two projects later became known as general metaphysics and special metaphysics respectively (Frede, pp. 81-95).

This ambiguity led to the well-known different positions taken by Avicenna and Averroes on this issue. Avicenna gives primacy to general metaphysics, whereas Averroes assigns priority to the study of God. Recently, Dimitri Gutas has shown (Gutas, pp. 238-54) that Avicenna's position stems from his reading of a brief treatise by Fārābī on the purposes of metaphysics (*Aġrāż mā baʿd al-ṭabīʿa*, ed. F. Dieterici in *Alfārābī's philosophische Abhandlungen*, Leiden, 1890, pp. 34-38 [repr. Osnabrück, 1982]; part. tr. by D. Gutas in Gutas, 1988, pp. 240-42; tr. Th.-A. Druart in Druart, 1982, pp. 38-43). This text presents a rather complicated introduction in which Fārābī explains the purpose of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (tr. Gutas, pp. 240-42), followed by a presentation of the purpose of each book (ed. Dieterici, pp. 34-38; tr. Druart, pp. 40-43). In this introduction Fārābī carefully distinguishes metaphysics from *kalām*, denying that the purpose of the *Metaphysics* is to examine God, the Intellect, and the Soul. The

real concerns of the *Metaphysics* are with common notions, i.e., being as such, oneness, their "species and consequent properties, things which are not specific accidents of each individual object studied by the particular sciences (like priority, posteriority, potentiality, actuality, perfection, imperfection, and similar things), and the common first principle of all beings, which [alone] ought to be called by the name of God" (tr. Gutas., p. 241). God, then, far from being the subject matter of the *Metaphysics*, is only part of it and this only in an indirect manner as the common first principle of all beings. General metaphysics is so central that special metaphysics becomes included in and subordinated to it. "Theology ought to belong" to metaphysics simply "because God is a principle of absolute being, not of one being to the exclusion of another" (ibid.). This constitutes Fārābī's understanding of Aristotle's own project and purpose, thus distinguishing it from the enterprise and purpose of *kalām* and from the conception of many others who remain unspecified.

Here Fārābī follows Aristotle rather strictly, but he is well aware that the *Metaphysics* leaves many questions unanswered. In working out his own conception of metaphysics, the "second master" (*al-moʿallem al-ṯānī*) hints that Aristotle made short shrift of special metaphysics and neglected relevant aspects developed by the Neoplatonists. This may explain why in his *Falsafat Arasṭūṭālīs* (ed. M. Mahdi, Beirut, 1961; tr. M. Mahdi as "The Philosophy of Aristotle" in Mahdi, 1962, pt. 3) Fārābī says little about the *Metaphysics*. On the one hand, he limits himself to stating that full understanding of natural and human science cannot be achieved "without completing the inquiry into, and investigation of, the beings that are *above* things natural in their rank of being" and that Aristotle in a book called *Metaphysics* proceeded "to inquire into, and to investigate, the beings in a manner different than natural inquiry" (tr. Mahdi, p. 130). On the other hand, a few lines further down, he does not hesitate to claim that "we do not possess metaphysical science." This last claim cannot mean that Fārābī does not have Aristotle's text, but rather that in his opinion this text remains unsatisfactory; while developing a general metaphysics, its presentation of special metaphysics remains far too narrow, confined as it is to book lambda (*lām*). It is a simple assent to a principle of *motion* rather than of *being* and does not include a descent grounded in emanationism (Druart, 1987).

In order to understand better Fārābī's own approach to metaphysics, we need to examine other texts purporting to offer his own views:

1. *Ketāb taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* (ed. J. Āl Yāsīn, Beirut, 1981; tr. M. Mahdi as "The

Attainment of Happiness" in Mahdi, 1962, pt. 1). This text is fundamental for understanding Fārābī's philosophy. Its presentation of theoretical virtue, i.e., the sciences, explains what Fārābī expects from metaphysics and provides it with a program, albeit a rather sketchy one. The text reveals that Fārābī's own conception of metaphysics includes much more than the content of the Aristotelian text. As Fārābī makes clear, his aim is to search for the principles of *being*. The physical inquiry into the heavenly bodies shows that they require principles that are neither natures or natural things nor bodies or something in bodies (tr. Mahdi, p. 21). In contrast, metaphysics will provide these principles, since it is "the science of what is *beyond* natural things in the order of investigation and instruction and *above* them in the order of being" (ibid., p. 22). In the same way, the inquiry into the rational animal, its soul and intellect, leads to a discernment of those principles for the sake of which such entities are made. These principles are metaphysical beings which possess no matter at all; hence investigating them will bring us to the discovery of a being which "is itself the first principle of all [these] beings," since it is their efficient, formal, and final cause (ibid., p. 24) whereas Aristotle's unmoved mover was only a final cause of *motion*. Once the ascent to a first principle of being has been achieved, one must then set out on a descent which investigates "what properties the other beings possess as a consequence of their having *this* being as their principle and the cause (*sabab*) of their being" (ibid., p. 24). The descent should begin "with the being whose rank is higher than the rest (that is, the one furthest from the first principle). One will thus come to know the ultimate (*aqṣā*) causes of the beings. This is the divine inquiry (*al-naẓar al-elāhī*) into them. For the first principle is the divinity, and the principles that come after it—and are not bodies or in bodies—are the divine principles" (ibid., p. 24).

The *Taḥṣīl al-saʿāda* provides only a partial view of Fārābī's overall metaphysics, neglecting the perspective on general metaphysics to focus almost entirely on the ascent to the ultimate principle and the subsequent descent from it. Fārābī may have thought that Aristotle had given us the essentials of general metaphysics, while curtailing any full account of complete ascent to an ultimate principle of being and completely neglecting any account of the ensuing descent. Beings are hierarchically organized, and this requires a proper explanation. An emanationist descent would offer such an explanation, and this is the theme explored by Fārābī in the first part of both *Mabādīʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāżela (*Opinions of the people of the virtuous city) and *al-Sīāsa al-madanīya* (Political regime).

2. In his own metaphysical works, *Ketāb al-wāḥed wa'l-waḥda* (ed. M. Mahdi as *Alfarabi's On One and Unity*, Casablanca, 1989) and the *Ketāb al-ḥorūf* (ed. M. Mahdi as *Alfarabi's Book of Letters*, Beirut, 1990), Fārābī does not merely offer refinements on Aristotle's general metaphysics but also develops a full blown special metaphysics, thereby completing Aristotle's project. Yet scholars still encounter significant difficulties in their attempts to comprehend the details of al-Fārābī's metaphysical views, since they are scattered in various texts whose chronology, intended audience, and purpose remain obscure. The emanationist texts seem to be among the last of his writings.

The *Ketāb al-wāḥed wa'l-waḥda* is firmly rooted in the tradition of general metaphysics, with emphasis on a common notion, oneness. It illustrates a point Fārābī himself makes in his introduction to *Aġrāż mā baʿd al-ṭabīʿa*: "The primary object of this science is absolute being and what is equivalent to it in universality [*ʿomūm*], namely, the one. But since the knowledge of contrary correlatives [*motaqābelāt*] is one, theoretical inquiry into privation and multiplicity is also included in this science" (tr. Gutas, p. 242). So the text begins and ends with some elaboration of the many ways a thing can be said to be one, as in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 5.6, 10.1. The central part, on the other hand, completes Aristotle's own contribution in dealing with the many ways in which things are said to be many, "the elaborate account of the various types of opposition between 'one' and 'many,' the 'many' generated from each one of the classes of 'one,' and the various ways in which 'one' and 'many' are related to one another" (*Ketāb al-wāḥed*, tr. Mahdi, preface). Mahdi remarks that the elaborate discussion of the generation of 'many' from 'one' does not refer to the origination or emanation of many things from the First One, as is the case in the emanationist texts (ibid.). This observation is perfectly true but not surprising, since the origination or derivation in question is of the logical order and not of the ontological order. The *Ketāb al-wāḥed wa'l-waḥda* limits itself to general metaphysics.

The *Ketāb al-ḥorūf* is a difficult and unusual book which gives us further clues about Fārābī's conception of metaphysics. The Arabic title is rather ambiguous. It may mean "the book of letters," i.e., a traditional name in Arabic for Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (since each of its books is designated by a letter of the alphabet). Mahdi adopts this translation and even adds a subtitle, "Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*" (*Ketāb al-ḥorūf*, ed. Mahdi, English title page). However, the title may also mean "the book of particles" referring to the parts of speech called particles (*ḥorūf*) in classical Arabic grammar

(prepositions, conjunctions, etc.), since several sections of the book focus on interrogative particles. The latter title reflects more accurately the content of the book, which contains far more explicit references to Aristotle's logical works than to the *Metaphysics*.

The main focus of the *Ketāb al-ḥorūf* seems to be a reflection on the categories (*maqūlāt*) and their relation to the various disciplines, including rhetoric and poetry as well as the demonstrative sciences. The categories themselves appear to be derived from questions about the various ways something can be said to be. This explains the importance given to interrogative particles (*ḥorūf al-soʾāl*) and to the ways of answering them. The categories state in how many ways sensible material things can be said to be. After distinguishing the primary intelligibles (*maʿqūlāt*), which refer to things outside the mind, from secondary intelligibles (*maʿqūlāt ṯawānī*) which refer to things inside the mind (such as our cognition of the primary intelligibles) Fārābī then applies this distinction to separate the categories as objects of logic from the categories as objects of metaphysics. The logical categories refer to the "utterances qua utterances" of the primary intelligibles, e.g., genera and species. In contrast, the properly philosophical categories deal with the intelligibility of things existing outside the mind. This interpretation explains why Aristotle treats the categories both in logic and in the *Metaphysics* (5.7).

The relation to the categories underpins the examination of the section on the primary subjects of the arts and sciences (*Ketāb al-ḥorūf*, pp. 66-70). Physics deals with natural things inside the categories; yet in studying their causes it discovers an ultimate efficient cause of being as well as an ultimate final cause, both of which are outside the categories. Metaphysics deals with things that lie outside the categories; it is this science which "examines such things, tries to know them, and examines what is comprised by the categories in as much as those things are their causes, including what mathematics and politics comprise as well as the practical arts encompassed by politics" (ibid, p. 69). This brief description of metaphysics reveals a lively interest in "metaphysical beings" and in special metaphysics generally. Then from such beings considered as causes it derives what concerns the categories, mathematics, and even politics broadly constructed and so provides principles for the sciences, be they theoretical or practical. This derivation is linked to the descent accomplished in the more formal and detailed first part of the emanationist texts.

While the beginning of Part I, the *Ketāb al-ḥorūf* highlights issues in special

metaphysics and the descent from the ultimate principles, subsequent sections develop aspects of general metaphysics by studying universal notions that cut across the categories, such as "being" (*al-mawjūd*; ibid., pp. 110-28) "itself" (*al-ḏāt*; ibid., pp. 106-10), and "thing" (*al-šayʾ;* ibid., pp. 128-29). Interrogative particles, such as "wherefore" (*allaḏī men ʿajlehe*; pp. 129-30) and "wherefrom" (*ʿan*; p. 130), are also considered, leading to the affirmation of the existence of beings outside the categories. The section on being, for instance, explains why the Arabic term *mawjūd* was chosen to reflect the Greek "on," lists its various philosophical meanings (as in *Metaphysics* 5.7), and states the possibility of the existence of a being outside the categories. On the other hand, the chapter on substance (*jawhar*; *Ketāb al-ḥorūf*, pp. 97-105; Druart, 1987, pp. 88-97) inquires whether one can properly speak of a substance existing outside the categories, all the while recognizing that such a substance would be more substance than any other. This last question remains unresolved, although in the emanationist texts Fārābī applies the term substance to the first cause. Part II leaves aside general notions in order to focus on the origins of words, of philosophy, and of religion, across various cultures and languages (tr. Berman, pp. 171-78). Part III returns to an examination of interrogative particles. The whole text exhibits striking attempts at adapting general metaphysics to the Arabic language, and at developing such metaphysics in an original fashion.

3. The emanationist texts: *Mabādeʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāẓela* (ed. and tr. R. Walzer as *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's Mabādiʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*, Oxford, 1985) and the *Ketāb al-sīāsa al-madanīya* (ed. F. Najjār as *Ketāb al sīāsa al-madanīya al-molaqqab be-Mabādeʾ al-mawjūdāt,* Beirut, 1964). In their first half, both texts follow the program laid down for metaphysics in the *Ketāb al-ḥorūf*. They study the metaphysical beings which are beyond the categories and are neither bodies nor in bodies (the First Cause and the Ten Intelligences) as well as the principles of natural beings, thereby providing principles for physics. The latter principles are not bodies but are in bodies (*nafs,* "soul"; *ṣūra*, "form"; and *mādda,* "matter"). They also offer a metaphysical descent from such principles to all beings. The second half of each book presents a political science derived from the study of these principles. The focus here will be on the *Ketāb al-sīāsa al-madanīya, w*hich is metaphysically more sophisticated.

The *Ketāb al-sīāsa al-madanīya* begins abruptly by stating that there are six principles for all beings. These are listed in descending order: the First Cause, the Secondary Cause (the first nine intelligences), the Agent Intellect or Tenth

Intelligence (*al-ʿaql al-faʿāl*), soul, form, and matter. The secondary principles emanate from the First Cause either directly or indirectly—directly in the case of the First Intelligence, indirectly for all the others. Each of the secondary causes emanates directly from the one above it or from the First Cause, and through intelligizing the First Cause, originates another Intelligence and through intelligizing itself originates an ensouled celestial sphere. The number of intelligences and celestial spheres are in accordance with Ptolemy's astronomical system. As for the last Intelligence, or Agent Intellect, it only originates the sphere of the moon and the intelligibles for human intellects, thereby actualizing this lower rung of intellect.

The celestial spheres are a kind of intermediary between the metaphysical beings, which exist beyond the categories, and the realm of nature, which is within the categories. Although these spheres have neither form nor matter in the proper sense and, therefore, are not subject to the hylomorphic composition, they nevertheless have both a substrate and a form-like soul. Consequently, "only the most excellent categories belong to them" (*al-Sīāsa al-madanīya*, p. 54). From the motions common to all celestial spheres emanates matter, and from the motions proper to each and their combination emanate the various forms. The hylomorphic or possible sublunary beings emanate from forms (including souls) and matter.

This constitutes special metaphysics and includes a descent that derives the various principles from one another as well as from the various beings. The First Cause is the ultimate efficient and final cause of all. Yet the perspective of general metaphysics is not entirely neglected. The examination of the First Cause or God reveals that the universal notions, being and oneness, which cut across the categories, belong primarily and perfectly to the First Cause, since all other beings receive from the First Cause their own derivative and limited being and oneness. The focus is no longer on the ways things can be *said* to be, but on the ways they *are* and why they are.

Unfortunately, we do not possess a complete presentation of Fārābī's metaphysics in which the relations between general metaphysics, special metaphysics, and the descent would be carefully explored and developed.

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