



# FĀRĀBĪ VI. POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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## FĀRĀBĪ

### vi. Political Philosophy

The central theme of Fārābī's political writings is the virtuous regime, the political order whose guiding principle is the realization of human excellence by virtue. Fārābī conceives of human or political science as the inquiry into man insofar as he is distinguished from other natural beings and from divine beings, seeking to understand his specific nature, what constitutes his perfection, and the way through which he can attain it. Unlike other animals, man is not rendered perfect merely through the natural principles present in him, and unlike divine beings he is not eternally perfect but needs to achieve his perfection through the activity proceeding from rational understanding, deliberation, and choosing among the various alternatives suggested to him by reason. The initial presence of the power of rational knowledge and of the choice connected with it, is man's first or natural perfection, the perfection he is born with and does not choose. Beyond this, reason and choice are present in a human being to use for realizing his end or the ultimate perfection possible for his nature. This ultimate perfection is identical with the supreme happiness available to him. "Happiness is the good desired for itself, it is never desired to achieve by it something else, and there is nothing greater beyond it that a human being can achieve" (*Mabāde'*, ed. Dieterici, p. 46: cf. *Ketāb al-*



*sīāsa*, pp. 72-75, 78).

Yet, happiness cannot be achieved without first being known, and without performing certain orderly (bodily and intellectual) activities useful or leading to the achievement of perfection. These are the noble activities. The distinction between noble and base activities is thus guided by the distinction between what is useful for, and what obstructs, perfection and happiness. To perform an activity well, with ease, and in an orderly fashion requires the formation of character and the development of habits that make such activities possible. “The forms and states of character from which these [noble] activities emanate are the virtues; they are not goods for their own sake but goods only for the sake of happiness” (*Mabāde'*, ed. Dieterici, p. 46; cf. *Ketāb al-sīāsa*, pp. 43-44). The distinction between virtue and vice presupposes knowledge of what human perfection or happiness is as well as the distinction between noble and base activities.

The virtuous regime can be defined as the regime in which human beings come together and cooperate with the aim of becoming virtuous, performing noble activities, and attaining happiness. It is distinguished by the presence in it of knowledge of man's ultimate perfection; the distinction between the noble and the base and between the virtues and the vices; and the concerted efforts of the rules and the citizens to each and learn these things, and to develop the virtuous forms or states of character from which emerge the noble activities useful for achieving happiness.

The attainment of happiness means the perfection of that power of the human soul that is specific to man, of his reason. This in turn requires disciplining the lower desires to cooperate with and aid reason to perform its proper activity and also acquiring the highest arts and sciences. Such discipline and learning can be accomplished only by the rare few who possess the best natural endowments and who are also fortunate to live under conditions in which the requisite virtues can be developed and noble activities performed. The rest of men can only attain some degree of this perfection; and the extent to which they can attain that degree of perfection of which they are capable is decisively influenced by the kind of political regime in which they live and the education they receive. Nevertheless, all the citizens of the virtuous regime must have some common notions about the world, man, and political life. But they will differ with regard to the character of this knowledge, and hence, with regard to their share of perfection or happiness. They can be divided broadly into the following three classes: (1) the wise or the philosophers who know the



nature of things by means of demonstrative proofs and by their own insights; (2) the followers of these who know the nature of things by means of the demonstrations presented by the philosophers, and who trust the insight and accept the judgment of the philosophers; (3) the rest of the citizens, the many, who know things by means of similitudes, some more and others less adequate, depending on their rank as citizens. These classes or ranks must be ordered by the ruler who should also organize the education of the citizens, assign to them their specialized duties, give them their laws, and command them in war. He is to seek, by persuasion and compulsion, to develop in each the virtues of which he is capable and to order the citizens hierarchically so that each class can attain the perfection of which it is capable and yet serve the class above it. It is in this manner that the city becomes a whole similar to the cosmos, and its members cooperate toward attaining happiness.

The virtuous regime is a non-hereditary monarchical or an aristocratic regime in which the best rule, with the rest of the citizens divided into groups that (depending on their rank) are ruled and in turn rule—until one arrives at the lowest group that is ruled only. The sole criterion for the rank of a citizen is the character of the virtue of which he is capable and that he is able to develop through his participation in the regime and obedience to its laws. Like the regime itself, its citizens are virtuous, first, because they possess, or follow those who possess, correct similitudes of the knowledge of divine and natural beings, human perfection or happiness, and the principles of the regime designed to help human beings attain this happiness; and, second, because they act in accordance with this knowledge in that their character is formed with a view to performing the activities conducive to happiness.

Once the main features of the virtuous regime are clarified, the understanding of the main features and the classification of all other regimes become relatively simple. Fārābī divides them into three broad types: (1) The regimes whose citizens have had no occasion to acquire any knowledge at all about divine and natural beings or about perfection and happiness. These are the “ignorant” regimes. Their citizens pursue lower ends, good or bad, in complete oblivion of true happiness. (2) The regimes whose citizens possess the knowledge of these things but do not act according to their requirements. These are the “wicked” or “immoral” regimes. Their citizens have the same views as those of the virtuous regime; yet, their desires do not serve the rational part in them but turn them away to pursue the lower ends pursued in ignorant regimes. (3) The regimes whose citizens have acquired certain



opinions about these things, but false or corrupt opinions, that is, opinions that claim to be about divine and natural beings and about true happiness, while in fact they are not. The similitudes presented to such citizens are, consequently, false and corrupt, and so also are the activities prescribed for them. These are the regimes that have been led astray or the erring regimes. The citizens of such regimes do not possess true knowledge or correct similitudes, and they, too, pursue the lower ends of the ignorant regimes. The regimes in error may have been founded as such. This is the case with the regimes “whose supreme ruler was one who was under an illusion that he was receiving revelations without having done so, and with regard to which he had employed misrepresentations, deceptions, and delusions” (*Mabāde'*, ed. Dieterici, p. 63; cf. *Ketāb al-sīāsa*, pp. 103-4). But they may also have been originally virtuous regimes that had been changed through the introduction of false or corrupt views and practices.

All these types of regimes are opposed to the virtuous regimes because they lack its guiding principle, which is true knowledge and virtue or the formation of character leading to activities conducive to true happiness. Instead, the character of the citizens is formed with a view to attaining one or more of the lower ends. These ends are given by Fārābī as six, and each of the general types mentioned above can be subdivided according to the end that dominates in it: (1) the regime of necessity (or the indispensable regime) in which the aim of the citizens is confined to the bare necessities of life; (2) the vile regime (oligarchy) in which the ultimate aim of the citizens is wealth and prosperity for their own sakes; (3) the base regime is the purpose of whose citizens is the enjoyment of the sensory or imaginary pleasures; (4) the regime of honor (timocracy) whose citizens aim at being honored, praised, and glorified by others; (5) the regime of domination (tyranny) whose citizens aim at overpowering and subjecting others; (6) the regime of corporate association (democracy) the main purpose of whose citizens is being free to do what they wish.

#### PHILOSOPHER-KING AND PROPHET-LEGISLATOR

To combine divine and political science is to emphasize the political importance of sound beliefs about divine beings and the principles of the world. Both Islam and classical philosophy are in agreement concerning this issue. Muslims believed that the primary justification of their existence as a distinct community was the revelation of the truth about divine things to Moḥammad, and that, had he not come to them with his message, they would



have continued to live in misery and uncertainty about their well-being in this world and the next. It was also because of such considerations that Plato thought that kings must become philosophers or philosopher-kings. Once the quest for the best regime arrives at the necessity of combining divine and political science, it becomes necessary that the ruler should combine the craft of ruling with that of prophecy or philosophy. The ruler-prophet or the ruler-philosopher is the human being who offers the solution to the question of the realization of the best regime, and the functions of the ruler-prophet and of the ruler-philosopher appear in this respect to be identical.

Fārābī begins his discussion of the supreme ruler with the emphasis on the common function of the ruler-philosopher and the ruler-prophet as rulers who are the link between the divine beings above and the citizens who do not have direct access to knowledge of these beings. He is the teacher and guide “who makes known” to the citizens what happiness is, who “arouses in them the determination” to do things necessary for attaining it, and “who does not need to be ruled by a human in anything at all” (*Ketāb al-sīāsa*, pp. 78-79). He must possess knowledge; not need any other human to guide him; have excellent comprehension of everything that must be done; be excellent in guiding all others in what he knows; have the ability to make others perform the functions for which they are fit; and have the ability to determine and define the work to be done by others and to direct such work toward happiness. These qualities evidently require the best endowments, but also the fullest development of the rational faculty. (According to Aristotelian psychology as Fārābī presents it in his political works the perfection of the rational faculty consists of its correspondence to, or “contact” with, the Active Intellect; see ‘AQL.) The supreme ruler must be a human being who actualizes his rational faculty or who is in contact with the Active Intellect.

This supreme ruler is the source of all power and knowledge in the regime, and it is through him that the citizens learn what they ought to know and to do. As God or the First Cause of the world directs everything else, and as everything else is directed toward Him, “the case ought to be the same in the virtuous city; in an orderly fashion, all of its parts ought to follow in their activities in the footsteps of the purpose of its supreme ruler (*Mabāde’*, ed. Dieterici, pp. 56-57; cf. *Ketāb al-sīāsa*, pp. 83-84). He possesses unlimited powers and cannot be subjected to any human being or political regime or laws. He has the power to confirm or abrogate previous divine laws, to enact new ones, and “to change a law he had legislated at one time for another if he



deems it better to do so” (*Ketāb al-sīāsa*, pp. 80-81). He alone has the power to order the classes of people in the regime and assign in them their ranks. And it is he who offers them what they need to know.

For most people, this knowledge has to take the form of an imaginative representation of the truth rather than a rational conception of it. This is because most people are not endowed, or cannot be trained to know divine things in themselves, but can only understand their imitations, which should be made to fit their power of understanding and their special conditions and experience as members of a particular regime. Religion contains such a set of imaginative representations. The divine law is legislated for a particular group of human beings. It is necessitated by the incapacity of most human beings to conceive things, especially the highest or divine things, rationally. Still, they need to know these things in some fashion. They need to believe in the imitations of divine beings, and of happiness and perfection, as presented to them by the founder of their regime. The founder must then not only present a rational or conceptual account of happiness and the divine principles to the few, but also adequately represent or imitate these same things for the many. All the citizens are to accept that with which he entrusts them: “the ones who follow after happiness as they cognize it and accept the [divine] principles as they cognize them are the wise human beings; and the ones in whose souls these things are found in the form of images, and who accept them and follow them as such, are the believers” (*Ketāb al-sīāsa*, p. 86).

Thus far, Fārābī identifies the ruler-prophet and the ruler-philosopher. They are both supreme rulers absolutely, and both have absolute authority with regard to legislating beliefs and actions. Both acquire this authority in virtue of the perfection of their rational faculty, and both receive revelation from God through the agency of the active intellect. Wherein, then, does the ruler-prophet differ from the ruler-philosopher?

The first and primary qualification that the ruler of the virtuous regime must possess is a special kind of knowledge of divine and human beings. Now, a human being possess three faculties for knowledge: sensation, imagination, and reason (both theoretical and practical), and these develop in him in that order. Imagination has three functions: (1) It acts as a reservoir of sensible impressions after the disappearance of the objects of sensation. (2) It combines sensible impressions to form a complex sensible image. (3) It produces imitations. It has the capacity to imitate all sensible things (human desires, temperament, passions) through sensible impressions or certain combinations



of them. When later the rational faculty develops, and a human being begins to grasp the character, essence, or form of natural and divine beings, the faculty of imagination receives and imitates these rational forms also, that is, it represents them in the form of sensible impressions. In this respect, imagination is subordinate to the rational faculty and depends on it for the “originals” that it imitates; it has no direct access to the essence of natural and divine beings. Further, the imitations that it fabricates are not all good copies; some may be more true and nearer to the originals, others defective in some respects, and still others extremely false or misleading copies. Finally, only the rational faculty that grasps the originals themselves can judge the degree of the truth of these copies and of their likenesses to the originals. The rational faculty is the only faculty that has access to the knowledge of divine or spiritual beings, and it must exercise strict control to insure that the copies offered by the imaginative faculty are good or fair imitations. It may happen in rare cases that this imaginative faculty is so powerful and perfect that it overwhelms all the other faculties, and proceeds directly to receive or form images of divine beings. This rare case is the case of prophecy (*Mabāde’*, ed. Dieterici, p. 52).

The description of the nature of prophecy leads to the distinction between the faculty of imagination and the rational faculty. It explains the possibility of prophecy as the perfection of the faculty of imagination, and that imagination can almost dispense with the rational faculty and receive the images of divine beings directly and without the latter’s mediation. There are two powers by means of which a human being can communicate with the Active Intellect: his imagination and his rational faculty or his intellect. When he communicates with it by means of his imagination, he is “a prophet who warns about what will happen and who informs about what is taking place now”; while when he communicates with it by means of his rational faculty he is “a wise human being, a philosopher, and has complete intelligence” (*Mabāde’*, ed. Dieterici, pp. 58-59).

#### LAW AND LIVING WISDOM

Wisdom or philosophy is an indispensable condition for the founding and survival of the virtuous city. Prophecy, on the other hand, is indispensable for founding a virtuous city, but not for its survival. In enumerating the qualities of the supreme ruler or the founder of the virtuous city, Fārābī stipulates the coincidence of excellent rational and prophetic faculties. This requirement is imposed by composition of the virtuous city as a political community, that is,



the fact that it must be made up of two broad groups: (1) the few who are philosophers or can be addressed through philosophy, and who can be taught the theoretical sciences and hence the true character of divine and natural beings as they are; (2) the many who (because they lack the necessary natural endowments or have no time for sufficient training) are not philosophers, who live by opinion and persuasion, and for whom the ruler must imitate these beings by means of similitudes or symbols.)

While the few can be made to grasp rationally the meaning of human happiness and perfection and the rational basis for justification of the virtuous activities that lead to a human being's ultimate end, the many are incapable of such understanding and have to be taught to perform these activities by persuasion and compulsion, that is, by explanations that could be understood by all the citizens regardless of their rational capacity, and by prescribed rewards and punishments of an immediate tangible kind. The supreme ruler teaches the few in his capacity as a philosopher, and he presents similitudes and prescribes rewards and punishments for the many in his capacity as prophet. To be believed and practiced by the many, these similitudes and prescriptions should be formulated by the prophet, and accepted by the citizens, as true, fixed, and permanent; that is, the citizens should expect definite rewards and punishments for belief and unbelief, and for obedience and disobedience. The prophetic faculty culminates, then, in laying down laws concerning both the beliefs and the practices of the many, and the prophet who assumes this function becomes a prophet-legislator. The rational faculty, on contrast, culminates in teaching the theoretical sciences to the few. In his summary of Plato's *Laws*, Fārābī also understood Plato to say that these virtuous few "have no need for fixed practices and laws at all; nevertheless they are very happy. Laws and fixed practices are needed only for those who are morally crooked" (*Talkīsá*, p. 41).

It is only as viewed by the subjects that laws are fixed and are of unquestionable divine authority. The supreme rule of the virtuous regime is the master and not the servant of the law. Not only is he not ruled by any human being, he is also not ruled by the law. He is the cause of the law, he creates it, and he abrogates and changes it as he sees fit. He possesses this authority because of his wisdom and his capacity to decide what is best for the common good under given conditions, and conditions can arise under which the changing of the laws is not only salutary but indispensable for the survival of the virtuous regime. In so doing he must be extremely cautious not to



disturb the faith of the citizens in their laws, and should consider the adverse effect that change has on attachment to the law. He must make a careful appraisal of the advantage of changing the law as against the disadvantage of change as such. Thus he must possess, not only the authority to change the laws whenever necessary, but also the craft of minimizing the danger of change to the well-being of the regime. But once he sees that changing the law is necessary and takes the proper precautions, there is no question as to his authority to change the law. Therefore, so long as he lives, the rational faculty rules supreme and laws are preserved or changed in the light of his judgment as philosopher.

It is this coincidence of philosophy and prophecy in the person of the ruler, or at least the coincidence of philosophy and rulership, that insures the survival of the virtuous regime. As long as rulers who possess such qualities succeed one another without interruptions, the same situation obtains (*Ketāb al-mella*, pp. 49-50).

The coincidence of philosophy and prophecy is extremely rare, and chance may not even favor the virtuous regime with the availability of a human being who possesses all the necessary natural endowments and whose training as philosopher proves successful. Thus the question arises as to whether the virtuous city can survive in the absence of a human being with all the qualifications required of the prophet-philosopher-ruler or of the philosopher-ruler. Granting that the best possible arrangement demands the existence of such qualifications in one person who must rule, can the regime originated by the prophet-philosopher-ruler survive at all in his absence and in the absence of a philosopher-ruler as his successor? Fārābī is willing in the *Mabāde'* to consider the possibility that this city can survive in the absence of both such rulers, but only if provisions are made for the presence of proper substitutes for prophetic legislation. These substitutes consist of (1) the body of laws and customs established by the "true princes," and (2) a combination of new qualities in the ruler that make him proficient in the "art of jurisprudence," that is, knowledge of the laws and customs of his predecessors, willingness on his part to follow these laws and customs rather than change them, the capacity to apply them to new conditions by the deductions of new decisions from, or the discovery of new applications for, established laws and customs, and the capacity to meet every new situation (for which no specific decisions are available) through understanding the intention of previous legislators rather than by the legislation of new laws or by any formal change of old ones.



So far as the law is concerned, this new ruler is a jurist-legislator rather than a prophet-legislator. He must, however, possess all other qualities, including wisdom, that enable him to discern and promote the common good of his regime at the particular period during which he rules.

In the event that no single human being should exist who possesses all these qualifications, then Fārābī suggests a third possibility: a wise man and one other human being (who possesses the rest of the qualities, except wisdom) should rule jointly. Were even this to prove unobtainable, he suggests finally a joint rule of a number of human beings possessing these qualifications severally. This joint rule does not, however, affect the presence of the required qualifications but only their presence in the same human being. Thus, the only qualification whose very presence may be dispensed with is prophecy. The substitutes for prophecy are the preservation of old laws and the capacity to discover new applications for old laws. To promote the common good and preserve the regime under new conditions as these emerge, neither the coincidence of philosophy and prophecy in the same human being, nor the coincidence of wisdom and jurisprudence, proves to be an indispensable condition. It is sufficient to have wisdom in the person of a philosopher who rules jointly with another human being or a group of human beings who possess, among other things, the capacity to put old laws to new uses. Unlike prophecy, wisdom cannot be dispense with, and nothing can take its place. Unlike the presence of prophecy, the absence of wisdom is fatal to the existence of the virtuous regime. There is no substitute for living wisdom.

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