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Article abstract

It has generally been assumed that Alfarabi's understanding of Aristotle was distorted by his reliance on Aristotle's transmitters. Owing to this, scholars regularly resort to seeking Alfarabi's sources rather than seriously asking whether he could have, nonetheless, accurately grasped Aristotle's teaching. This essay attempts, primarily through an analysis of the *Philosophy of Aristotle*, to reassess such assumptions. In particular, it argues that the *Philosophy of Aristotle* reveals a deep understanding of two aspects of Aristotle's teaching about philosophy: the way to philosophy and the way to reestablish it when it has become confused or extinct. Rather than merely dogmatically describing Aristotle's account of the origin, progress and perplexities of philosophy, as many scholars erroneously expect, Alfarabi enacts this account. Starting from the generally accepted opinions of his own time, Alfarabi dramatically portrays man's experience as man and thus compels his readers to begin philosophizing for themselves. In this way, Alfarabi truly follows Aristotle's deepest intention.

ALFARABI'S REESTABLISHMENT OF PHILOSOPHY IN *THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARISTOTLE*¹

SHAWN WELNAK

Frequent studies of Alfarabi tend to cast doubt on the authenticity of his Aristotelianism, assuming that his writings are dependent on the interpretations of his Syriac Christian masters.² In contrast to this approach, another school of thought emphasizes Alfarabi's acute understanding of Aristotle, which was deliberately obscured to avoid political persecution.³ Although I follow the second approach in maintaining that Alfarabi well understood Aristotle, I shall argue here that he strove to accurately articulate Aristotle's intention to his readers, rather than obscure it. Though tinged by political considerations, Alfarabi's rhetoric was chiefly governed, in my view, by an authentically Aristotelian pedagogy.⁴

This essay thus attempts to clarify this debate by elucidating Alfarabi's pedagogy primarily through an analysis of the first three sections of *The Philosophy of Aristotle* (59.5-71.4, hereafter, *PA*).⁵ I contend that the *PA* reveals

1. Thanks to Charles E. Butterworth for his unreserved support with all things Arabic, as well as to Ronna Burger and Richard Velkley for their indispensable criticisms of this paper.

2. See Abū Naṣr AL-FĀRĀBĪ, *On the Perfect State*, ed. and transl. Richard WALZER, Chicago, Kazi Publication, 1998, p. 8. The complete references are given in alphabetical order in the final bibliography. Dimitri Gutas continues Walzer's quest in "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," pp. 5-25, with a particularly aggressive response to the "political approach," pp. 19-25. Also closely following the philological approach of Walzer is, among many others, David REISMAN, "Al-Fārābī and the Philosophical Curriculum," pp. 52-71.

3. Compare Ralph LERNER, "Beating the Neo-Platonic Bushes," pp. 510-517, which highlights the extremes to which Walzer is willing to go with his philological approach to deny "any significant originality on Farabi's part," thus leaving us in "a Serbonian bog where armies whole may sink," p. 516. For a provocative discussion of the problems with the philological approach to Arabic philosophy in general, as well as of its political alternative, see Charles E. BUTTERWORTH, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy Today," pp. 94-98. The modern focus on Alfarabi's political rhetoric was introduced by Leo Strauss in "Farabi's Plato," *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and "How Fārābī Read Plato's *Laws*."

4. For an elucidation of Alfarabi's pedagogy, see my article "A Note on Alfarabi's Rhetoric: Following Deeds, not Words."

5. Pagination refers to the Arabic edition *Falsafat Ariṣṭūṭālīs*. My approach to the *PA* is similar to that of Miriam GALSTON, "A Re-examination of Alfārābī's Neoplatonism," pp. 13-32.

a deep understanding of two central aspects of Aristotle's teaching: the "way to philosophy," and the "way to reestablish [it] when it becomes confused or extinct."⁶ We shall see that Alfarabi understands perplexity to be the only way (طريق) to bring about the love of wisdom, philosophy, in one's soul; this way, however, must be rhetorically transformed based on the particular historical situation of the writer. The "reestablishment" of philosophy thus requires an ascent from the generally accepted opinions of one's time. By starting there, Alfarabi starts from the things more known to "us Muslims," rather than those more known to "us Greeks" (τὰ γνωριμώτερα ἡμῖν), as Aristotle began – or those more known to "us moderns," as contemporary scholars seem to expect. Whereas Aristotle may have been able to begin with the assumptions (ὑπολήψεις) of the people of his time – for example, about the wise man (*Metaphysics*, 982a6-982b10) – Alfarabi begins from different initial assumptions at a time when the wise man and opinions about him had largely, if not wholly, disappeared. One might say that the way to philosophy is the *natural* way, while the way to reestablish it is the way *for us*.⁷ Since neither Aristotle nor Alfarabi begin with either the things more known by nature (τὰ γνωριμώτερα τῇ φύσει) or the things more known to us moderns, their teachings have become confused and obscured.⁸

We both hold that its introduction is most useful for assessing Alfarabi's understanding of Aristotle.

6. ALFARABI, *Attainment of Happiness* (hereafter, *AH*), 47.3-5. Pagination refers to the Arabic edition *Tahṣīl al-sa'ādah*. Translations from the *AH* are adapted from Muhsin MAHDĪ, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (hereafter *PPA*). For Aristotle's account of this way to philosophy, see *Metaphysics* A, ch. 1 and 2, and B, in particular: 995^a24-^b4. For Aristotelian perplexity with its concomitant wonder such as Γ'm assuming, see, for example Michael DAVIS, *Wunderlust*, pp. xi-xvii; Denise SCHAEFFER, "Wisdom and Wonder in 'Metaphysics' A: 1-2," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 52 (1999), pp. 641-56, particularly part 3; John SALLIS, "... A Wonder that One Could Never Aspire to Surpass," particularly section 2. Lastly, Heidegger's most extensive account of wonder and its relationship to philosophy for the Greeks is extraordinarily insightful, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected "Problems" of Logic*, particularly pp. 131-end.

7. Cf. *Physics* 184a16-21, NE 1095b2-4 and *Posterior Analytics* 71b33-72a5 for "more knowable by nature" and "more knowable to us." As Ross (1960) points out, Aristotle's seeming implication in the *Post. An.* that we begin from τὰ γνωριμώτερα τῇ φύσει is "because Aristotle is there stating the nature of scientific proof" (456). Such is not the way to knowledge, but the way from it *via* scientific proof after having arrived at it (*cp.*, NE 1095a30-1095b1). Also, consider Aristotle's discussion of the τρόπος ἐπιστήμης at *Metaphysics* 994b32-995a6: "Things heard are agreed upon according to customs; for as we have been accustomed, so we deem things worthy to be discussed, and things [discussed] contrary to these do not appear similarly [worthy of being discussed], but on account of their not being a part of the common custom of the community, they are less known and more foreign. For the common custom of the community is 'known.' And what extraordinary strength the common custom of a community has is made clear by the laws, in which the mythic and childish things have more strength on account of custom than the cognizance of them [*i.e.*, the cognizance of why they ought to be followed]."

8. Cf. Alfarabi's *Short Treatise on the Syllogism* (*Kitāb al-qiyaṣ al-ṣaḡhīr*), 68.11-70.5.

I.

Rather than relaying Aristotle's account of the natural origins, progress and perplexities of philosophy – thus allowing, if not implicitly encouraging, his readers to dogmatically take his word for it (as scholars such as Walzer seem to expect) – Alfarabi enacts his understanding of the Aristotelian way of perplexity through what one might characterize as a dramatic portrait of the human experience. Alfarabi imagines a sort of state of nature from which he displays man's educational development. Rather than having written a treatise, in the strict sense, discursively explaining the human educational experience leading to philosophy, Alfarabi offers a poetic presentation of that experience; his procedure thus foreshadows modern political theorizing, while harkening back to poetic stories of a golden age. In this way, Alfarabi compels his readers to begin to truly philosophize for themselves. Precisely such a procedure promotes the reestablishment of philosophy at a time “when any memory of the true meaning of classical [i.e., Aristotelian] political philosophy was on the verge of disappearing from the earth.”⁹

The thread that will guide us will thus be Alfarabi's use of “perplexity” and its associated ideas; for Alfarabi carefully constructs his ascent to philosophy in the *PA* by precisely such means.¹⁰ In particular, we shall see that there are seven fundamental steps in this ascent. First, man comes to a “standstill” regarding his needs, leading him to reflection, thought, investigation, and deliberation. Second, in attempting to move beyond this point, man often times “utterly perplexes himself” about what is either useful or harmful to him. Third, while investigating the proper end for the sake of which he labors, man comes to discover that there is most assuredly “a place for perplexity” among the possible ends. Fourth, these possible ends raise the further question not only as to which end ought be chosen, but also what the most excellent *state* of each end is, thereby revealing another “place for perplexity” and “diverse presumptions.” Fifth, man's perplexity now distinguishes him from the animals insofar as he “theorizes about” and “wonders at” the causes of the things in the heavens and on earth. Sixth, having come to this theoretical standpoint regarding the things in the heavens and on earth, man then finds not only another “place for perplexity and diverse presumptions,” but also “places for reflection” about the goodness of his theoretical desires. At this stage, man's soul takes a decisive turn, for in the matters that perplex him

9. ALFARABI, *PPA*, vii. My thoughts here owe much to the work of Muhsin MAHDI, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, in particular chapter 9, “On Aristotle's Starting Point.”

10. Mahdi, in his translation of *PPA*, uses “perplexity” to translate both حيرة and its cognate تحير (unfortunately, he also translates حيرة at 81.17 as “bewilderment”). Since Alfarabi understands these two words in very distinct ways, the reader's ability to clearly see the important role of perplexity (حيرة) in Alfarabi's way to philosophy is obfuscated.

he is no longer willing to prefer one alternative to another “without proof.” Lastly, Alfarabi shows how man’s investigation, having begun from merely immediately useful and necessary (practical) considerations, compels him to the necessity of answering *the* philosophical (theoretical) questions about his being: What is man? By what is man? From what is man? And for what is man? In *truly* asking these questions, that map on to Aristotle’s four causes, man ascends to philosophy itself.¹¹

II.

Through the full title of the *PA*, Alfarabi tells us that he will provide, among other things, “the place from which [Aristotle] started.” This place is his opinion (رأى) that there are four things every man seeks by nature from the outset (59.3; 59.10).¹² All men pursue the soundness of the body, the soundness of the senses, the soundness of the capacity for cognizing what leads to the soundness of the body and the senses, and the soundness of the power to labor at what leads to their soundness (59.11-13). We are astounded to hear that this was Aristotle’s starting point, for Alfarabi’s account here seems to be based upon little, if anything, in the Stagirite’s works.

Further, we are informed that the cognizance of what leads to the soundness of the body and the senses, as well as the labor that secures their soundness, is merely useful and necessary (النافعة الضرورية) for man’s life. Presumably, we are meant to infer that because the soundness of the body and the soundness of the senses are immediately, i.e., naturally, desirable as ends, the cognizance and labor associated with them as means are useful and necessary to those ends.¹³ Nevertheless, what we have here are thoroughly practical means and ends.

From this point, Alfarabi then tells us that man’s soul is desirous of understanding the causes of sensible things, of matters observed in heaven and earth, and of what man sees (رأى) in his own soul (60.1-3). This understanding seems grounded in the nature of what the soul desires, despite the fact that it goes beyond what immediately appears necessary and useful. It is a desire for a cognizance that is *not* useful for the soundness of any of the four things everyone desires from the outset, or for the sake of anything else (60.6-7).¹⁴ It is a desire for a cognizance that seems to complete itself in the very act of cognition alone. For Alfarabi tells us that when man understands he finds it

11. Viz., formal, efficient, material, and final causes, respectively. See *Physics*, 195a15-26 and *Metaphysics*, 1013b16-28.

12. For a brief discussion of this passage and its context, see COLMO, Christopher, *Breaking with Athens*, pp. 17-23.

13. Muhsi MAHDI, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, p. 203.

14. Cp. *Metaphysics*, 982b19-28.

pleasant and delights in it (60.8). We have abruptly moved from merely useful and necessary knowledge, to seemingly useless and unnecessary knowledge.

This leaves us with two apparent classes of desires: the merely useful and necessary, from which Alfarabi suggests Aristotle begins, and the useless and unnecessary, at which he ends.¹⁵ Owing to this division in ends desired by the soul, Alfarabi informs us that knowledge is divided from the outset among all men into the practical (useful and necessary) and the theoretical (useless and unnecessary) (60.19-61.2).¹⁶ But having described these two desires, which point in apparently opposite directions, Alfarabi turns back to reconsider the senses not merely as useful and necessary for those four ordinary pursuits, but as ends in themselves. For man, Alfarabi says, also desires to apprehend sensible things, such as statues, sceneries, or objects delightful to hear, smell or touch, for no other purpose than having them as pleasurable objects of sense perception (61.6-11).

At this point Alfarabi has nearly arrived at the start of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle provides the love of the senses as a sign illustrating his initial claim that all men desire to know (εἰδέναι), independently of any utility from such knowledge.¹⁷ All that has come before this point in the *PA* seems to be Alfarabi beginning prior to where Aristotle begins. By beginning at this prior point, Alfarabi not only makes Aristotle intelligible to his readers, but also provides an opening through which they might reconsider their customary presuppositions regarding supposedly useful and useless desires.

From pleasure in useless sense perception, Alfarabi turns to a more developed stage of the same desire. For there are other cognitions (معارف) obtained by sense perception that man may desire solely for the sake of apprehending and for the pleasure he experiences in apprehending them (61.11-13). He provides imitations (that is, poetic works) of myths, stories, and histories as examples (61.13-14).¹⁸ The sense-perceptive thus becomes blurred with that which is known, bringing practical and theoretical desires more closely together by means of pleasure. Imitations share aspects of both the theoretical,

15. Everything after this seems to be a dialectic of this fundamental duality. Galston also notices the dialectical character of this section, though understands it differently, 24.

16. The Arabic here leads to a grammatical ambiguity, with سمي at 61.1 being readable as either سَمِي or سَمِيَ. Diverging from Mahdi's translation in *PPA*, I read this verb passively: "The first kind is called 'practical,' and the second [is called] 'theoretical knowledge'."

17. *Metaphysics*, 980*21-22.

18. Note that Alfarabi has just suggested these myths, stories, histories of peoples, and histories of nations are not for any use, but rather "solely for knowing," although he then continues with man putting them to work. While repeatedly emphasizing the impracticality here (see فقط at 61.12, 14, 15, 16, and 19), Alfarabi nonetheless claims that we put this impractical thing into practice (استعمل), by using a cognate with the "practical" (عملي) knowledge just mentioned at 61.2. He speaks the same way at 61.18 where the man who delights in poems puts them to work (استعمل) for his pleasure in what he comprehends, thus preparing his readers for the collapse of the theoretical and practical sciences.

as useless objects of contemplation, and the practical, as objects of the senses (61.4-5, 61.7). Although initially man seems naturally drawn in the opposite directions of the supposedly useful and useless, poetry—through the pleasurable apprehension of sensible-intelligible objects of imitation—decreases this opposition. In fact, pleasure begins to be seen as the very ground of the practical and theoretical, since what is pleasurable, Alfarabi tells us, is nothing other than the most excellent apprehension of a most excellent object—whether that apprehension is intellectual or sense-perceptive.¹⁹ Both the practical and the theoretical seem to have pleasure as their shared end, putting into question the fact that all men initially conceive of them as opposites. Alfarabi's ascent from generally accepted opinion is well underway, and has prepared the ground for the first step towards philosophy.

In addition to the cognitions apprehended by the senses, there are cognitions that are said to be Divinely Constituted (فطرت) within man, and naturally provided to him (62.4-5): man's Qur'anic Divine Constitution (فطرة *fiṭra*) or nature (طبع) – for Alfarabi equivocates between the two – seems to supply these.²⁰ And although the *PA* doesn't clarify the character of these new cognitions, the *Selected Aphorisms* provides some insight. In describing the theoretical intellect, Alfarabi claims that it is the faculty by which we innately know, rather than by examination or syllogistic reasoning, the principles of the sciences, such as that the whole is greater than its parts.²¹ Man discovers these Divinely Constituted cognitions because he frequently uses the cognitions gained solely from the senses and finds them insufficient for his needs; he thus supplements the sense cognitions with those that are Divinely Constituted to attempt to satisfy his needs (62.5-6, 62.7-8). However, when he devotes himself to seeking what is needful, he sees that his Divinely Constituted cognitions are also insufficient (62.8-10). Neither the senses nor the Divinely Constituted cognitions fulfill man's needs.

This insufficiency leads to a novel experience for Alfarabi's dramatically portrayed man, who thus takes his first step on the way to philosophy: “Consequently, [man] comes to a standstill regarding many of his needs and

19. Cp. Miriam GALSTON, “A Re-examination of Alfarabi's Neoplatonism,” p. 26.

20. See *Qur'an* 30:30 and 35 الفاطر. See also the Tradition cited in Alghazali, *Deliverer from Error*: “Every infant is born endowed with the *fiṭra*: then his parents make him Jew or Christian or Magian,” p. 63. Alghazali holds firm to the Divine Constitution (*fiṭra*) in the *Deliverer*, and argues against nature (طبع) in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p. 17. The difference between one's Divine Constitution and one's nature is passed over by Mahdi in his translation of the *PA*. The decisive importance of this distinction, however, for the possibility of philosophy is suggested by Strauss in *Natural Right and History*, chapter 3, “Origin of the Idea of Natural Right.” For an elucidation of this distinction, see my article “The Discoverer of Being: Law or Philosophy?”

21. ALFARABI, *Selected Aphorisms in The Political Writings: 'Selected Aphorisms' and Other Texts*, 50.8-51.1. Pagination refers to the *Fuṣūl Muntaza'ah*. Note how nothing is said here about these cognitions being Divinely Constituted; nature alone supplies them.

does not do anything about them until he reflects, takes thought, investigates, and deliberates" (62.10-11). Unfortunately, this creates a problem, since man is not Rightly Guided (أرشيد) to undertake such investigations by his Divine Constitution (62.14-15). With sense-perceptive and innate cognitions, one's apprehensions come easily. This is not the case with respect to such modes of thinking as reflection, investigation, and deliberation. When Aristotle claims in the *Metaphysics* that all humans by nature desire to know, he does not, as Benardete notes, "mean that all of us desire to learn. To love wisdom is not in the same sense natural, for the condition that excites it is never more than necessary; but to aim at being in a state of knowing—*eidenai* is a perfect—is always present and at work."²² To move beyond the cognizance effortlessly gained from the senses and innate cognitions, to the cognizance gained from thought, requires labor on man's part: neither God nor nature provides this.

However, when man comes to a standstill and does not believe he can discover through his own efforts what he needs, he frequently attempts to obtain it by asking others (62.11-13). And since what happens frequently – that is, always or for the most part – happens *essentially*, it is apparently in man's very nature to attempt to obtain such knowledge from others.²³ Yet Alfarabi grants that if man tries, he may discover, on his own, a cognizance he did not have from the outset. Most of the time, however, when he makes such an attempt, "he utterly perplexes himself [تَحِير] and is unable to determine which of two alternatives is useful and which harmful" (62.15-17). With perplexity named as the cause of his standstill, man arrives at the second step on his way to philosophy. And the useful is no longer juxtaposed to the useless, but rather to the harmful: the useless is the harmful, and the useful is the beneficial.

Man's standstill notwithstanding, his immediate practical needs continue to press him forward. For man cannot discover, much less labor after, what is either useful or harmful to him without first cognizing the end for the sake of which he should labor (63.11-13). Man thus begins to inquire into this end, and in so doing takes his third step towards philosophy: "if one proceeds to reflect and investigate carefully which one of these four [things pursued from the outset] is the end of the others, and which are the ones pursued for the sake of this end [...], there will surely be a place for perplexity (حيرة) in this" (63.15-19). If the senses themselves are the end, then we must conclude that the three other originary desires must all ultimately aim at the soundness of the senses (63.18-64.2). Alfarabi tells us, however, that one could also claim the opposite: for we use the senses to apprehend what is useful for the soundness of our

22. Seth BENARDETE, "On Wisdom and First Philosophy: The First Two Chapters of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A," pp. 205-215, 206.

23. For Alfarabi's discussion of "essential" and its tie to that which is always or for the most part (frequently), see *Book of Letters (Kitāb al-Ḥurūf)*: §61 and 77. Compare Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.1-8 and *Metaphysics*, 6.2.

bodies (64.3-4). The soundness of the body appears to be as likely a candidate for the end of man as was the soundness of the senses. Or, we could further assume that each is, in circular fashion, the end of the other – though Alfarabi immediately wonders how in the world *this* could be possible. Or, finally, we might entertain the idea that a part of each should be made the end (64.6-8). Owing to his pedagogic presentation, both Alfarabi's carefully constructed man and we readers arrive at perplexity through any attempt to understand the relation of the soundness of the senses and the body.

Nonetheless, Alfarabi tells us, it is *necessary* that man understand the truth of these things so that his labor will be directed toward the proper end (64.7-9). Man's needs compel him into perplexing questions regarding the soundness of the senses and the body – and, of course, not only the senses and the body. For why should one conclude that these themselves are the end? “For proof is necessary here as well.” (64.10-12) Man must further reflect on the possibility that those two are merely preparatory to some higher end. For if he confines himself to the soundness of only the body and the senses, he may be pursuing a thing that is not itself the end, and may thus be confining himself to childhood (64.11-18). It *may* turn out – Alfarabi tips his cards for just a moment – that the soundness of the body prepares man for another end, and that the senses might be a principle to be used in laboring toward that end (64.16-18). But even if man does confine his search for the end to the four originary things pursued from the outset, Alfarabi asks the reader whether he should not also reflect on what the most excellent state of each of those four is (64.18–65.3).²⁴ Through this reflection, we take our fourth step on the ascent to philosophy; for, “here too there will be a place for perplexity and diverse presumptions” (65.4).

A downright dangerous situation now arises, if we suppose, as Alfarabi does, that man again turns back and reflects on the highest excellence of each of the four originary things. Man will then be compelled to ask himself whether the soul's desire to reach the highest excellence is either an inhuman excess among its yearnings, or the most perfectly human thing for man to achieve (65.6-9).

This question regarding man's excessive yearnings raises the further question of the highest excellence of an end for which the senses and the body may be merely preparatory. How do things stand, Alfarabi asks, if man again sets out (شرع) to theorize about how his soul calls (تدعو) him to seize upon the truth (65.10-12)? Artfully using religious language that evokes the Law's call to prayer – thus implicitly suggesting the possibility that *God himself* calls man to seize upon the truth²⁵ – Alfarabi introduces the following problem: If the perfection of the senses or the body is an excess among his yearnings, an

24. Cp. 59.17, where this question was foreshadowed.

25. Cp. Socrates' call to action on behalf of the god in the *Apologia Socratis*, 20^e ff. Alfarabi seems to follow Socrates' use of theological language: philosophy may be commanded by God.

overreaching (تعدّ) insolence before God, then *theorizing* about that perfection would be even less fitting for man (65.13-14).²⁶ Alfarabi thus introduces Aristotle's disagreement with Simonides, who claimed that "Divinity alone can have this prerogative," and that it is "unfitting that man should not seek the science that concerns him."²⁷ While Aristotle can simply "refute" this possibility with the dogmatic assertion that the poets tell many lies (983^a3-4), this move, of course, is not open to Alfarabi; a more gentle strategy must be deployed.

On the other hand, Alfarabi continues, theorizing about this knowledge may be an overreaching toward what is truly human since it is more specifically human compared to the four ordinary pursuits that man shares with the animals (65.14-16). By his very wording, Alfarabi challenges the reader to question whether such a *truly* human activity could still reasonably be understood as overreaching. Nevertheless, he proceeds without further comment on the problem and takes us on our fifth step towards philosophy. For, he tells us, an animal does not seek to understand the causes of either the sensible things or what it sees within the heavens and earth, nor does it wonder (تعجب) at those things (65.17-19). Alfarabi's dramatized man has gone from wondering at himself and at what he has apprehended (60.13-14) to theorizing about and wondering at the causes of things in the heavens and on earth.²⁸ With this move, Alfarabi has arrived at Aristotle's connection in the *Metaphysics* between the desire to know and wonder. Two things distinguish man from the animals: his desire to theorize about the causes of seemingly useless things in both the heavens and earth, and the wonder that corresponds with his theorizing. Man had already met with perplexity along his ascent towards discovering the answers to the questions raised by his four ordinary pursuits. But now, when he begins to theorize, this perplexing path reveals man's capacity to wonder as an essential part of his nature.

However, an objection arises: why does man have a natural desire to know the causes of things within the heavens and earth (65.20-21)? For a knowledge of such causes still seems useless. But this question immediately points to an even more dangerous question that goes *beyond* nature: why – if this knowledge isn't human – was man given a Divinely Constituted desire for it and primary cognitions that Rightly Guide him to the truth about it (65.21-22)? If these desires are beyond the human – that is, if they are truly insolent yearnings – why has God provided them to us for Right Guidance? Simonides' worry is thus reintroduced, though modified. By means of religious language,

26. Cf. *Qur'an* 2:29: "These are the limits of Allah; overreach them not. For whoever overreaches Allah's limits are the wrongdoers."

27. *Metaphysics*, 982^b28-983^a2.

28. That is to say, he begins to theorize here about "the things at hand spoken against all who philosophize: 'the heavenly things and the things under the earth....'" *Apologia Socratis*, 23^d4-6. Cp. *Metaphysics*, 982^b12-17.

Alfarabi prudently suggests that if God has given us these divine desires that Rightly Guide us, then they simply couldn't be in opposition to His will: "Thus these things may be human" and, accordingly, not insolent yearnings (65.22–66.1).²⁹ Alfarabi conflates the philosopher's "nature" with the Qur'anic "divine constitution" and then has this synthesis Rightly Guide us. The potential impiety on our way to philosophy is thus rhetorically placed at bay.

Instead, man might become more perfectly human by knowing the causes of things; for the knowledge of these things, Alfarabi tells us, might itself be the essence (جوهر) of man (66.1-2, 66.2-3).³⁰ This seemingly insolent yearning may instead be a truly pious yearning for the perfection of our humanity – something perhaps *more* useful and necessary than its initial appearance as a useless theoretical yearning (60.21). The four useful and necessary things from which Alfarabi began have led us to the *necessity* of cognizing the essence of man (66.3-6). The scope of the necessary is thus, again, expanded beyond the four originary pursuits (cp. 64.7-9, above), and the dichotomy between the practical and theoretical, apparent to man from the outset, emerges as illegitimate.

With the question of the necessity or uselessness in cognizing the essence of man, we ascend to the sixth step on our way to philosophy. Alfarabi wonders whether the soul's desire for this potentially overreaching knowledge must be removed and suppressed or brought to completion (66.11-13). Owing to this dilemma, he proclaims that "in all this there is a place for perplexity and diversity of presumptions, and places for reflection. Man does not prefer one of these alternatives to the other without a proof to persuade himself or others—and the place for disagreement among the opinions of those who theorize about them is great." (66.13-15) At this step man is no longer in danger of giving up and turning to other men for answers – for he will no longer prefer one of two alternatives without proof. We are tied in an intellectual knot.³¹ Shall we bring our soul's natural desire for these things into completion, or remove and suppress it? And the consequence of not untying the knot is grave: for, confining oneself to what might not be the end condemns (يقضي) man to a rank beneath his proper one (66.16-17). We simply *must* persevere – so much so that Alfarabi subtly suggests to his readers the possibility of divine condemnation through his choice of verbs (قضاء); the potential impiety in our investi-

29. Alfarabi's emphasis on man's Divine Constitution is perhaps the clearest example of how he follows the intention, rather than the surface, of Aristotle. The problem that arises with nature for Aristotle's time arises even more strongly for Muslims with respect to the Divine Constitution. That is to say, Simonides' worry must be taken much more seriously by Alfarabi. Though poets may be said to tell many lies, even if like the truth, such may not be so cavalierly said about God's utterances.

30. I have chosen to translate جوهر as "essence," rather than "substance" since this seems to be Alfarabi's intended sense. He explains that ذات is one of the meanings of جوهر at *Book of Letters*, 100.17–101.4.

31. Compare Aristotle's discussion of the effects of an intellectual knot (δεσμός) in *Metaphysics*, 995^a24–^b4 to Alfarabi's discussion of such knots (عُقُل) at *PA*, 82.12-13.

gation has been slowly replaced with a potential divine condemnation for *not* investigating! And the depth of the problems tied up in this investigation is highlighted by the fact that we have our first “great” place for disagreement among the “theorists.” The only thing that will satisfy man when he reaches the “theoretical,” arrived at through the “practical,” is proof.

All of the problems that we have seen so far relate to what has been given to man by God or by nature. The question just raised as to whether these desires might need to be removed or suppressed, however, leads us from an inquiry into nature to an inquiry into will and choice, which generates an almost humorous expansion in the number of perplexities to be resolved. If man reflects on what nature provides him, and then theorizes about what will and choice provide him, the following plethora of corollary questions emerges. Does nature sufficiently provide man with the instruments needed for achieving the soundness of his body and senses as it provides for other things in nature? If the soundness of the body and the senses are themselves the end, and the instruments nature provided are sufficient for achieving their soundness, why was man provided with will and choice? Could nature have thus provided man with will and choice because of infirmity and intemperance on its part? And setting aside the glaringly (though, surely, deliberately) ignored question of how this infirmity and intemperance on nature’s part relates to God’s will, should man’s will and choice be eliminated or suppressed?³² But how are will and choice to be suppressed? By will and choice, or by nature?

But if will and choice are properly human, do they exist for the sake of the soundness of the body and the senses provided to him by nature? Or are they a natural failing making him either less than or more than human? Or is what belongs to him by nature for the sake of what he acquires by will and choice? Or do nature and choice cooperate so that man might achieve, by them, still another thing? And is the ultimate perfection attained by man possible solely through nature? Or is nature, without will and choice, insufficient for man to achieve his ultimate perfection? Further, does the perfection accomplished by will and choice perfect man’s essence? Or is the perfection by both will and choice as well as nature the perfection of man’s essence? Or is it the perfection of an attribute specific to him that perfects his essence?

Based on these questions, Alfarabi then claims that, “in general it is *necessary* for man to theorize about what the end is that is the ultimate perfection of man” (67.13, my emphasis). Is it his essence? Or an action he performs after his essence is realized? Is it attained for him by nature? Or does nature supply him only with a material and a preparation for this perfection and a principle and an instrument for his will to use in reaching it? Is then the soundness of his

32. Note that the previous conflation between man’s Divine Constitution and his nature would now work against Alfarabi’s aims; here, they need to be carefully distinguished.

body and senses what brings about his perfection? Or is this absurd, since it is common to all animals? Or are they both a preparation and an instrument for achieving his human essence? Does man's desire to know the truth, to which he then exclusively confines himself, perfect his essence? Or does his desire perfect an attribute inherent in what perfects his essence? Or is knowledge of the truth one of the actions of his own essence, because of which his essence is realized in its final perfection?³³

In only twenty-seven lines (66.18–67.22), we readers, no less than the human being we are watching develop, seem faced with the necessity of answering this shower of questions by means of demonstrative proof. For only with such proof will we be able to answer the final, greatest, most necessary question to which all previous questions have pointed: what is the ultimate perfection of man? Alfarabi has developed, beginning from generally accepted opinion, the logical structure of the questions that man faces as man – and he does not provide answers for his readers. That is to say, he does not allow us, in our perplexity, to attempt to obtain the needed cognizance from him, if we were to presume that we couldn't infer and discover it fully by ourselves (62.11-13).

At this apogee of perplexity, the *PA* takes an important turn with Alfarabi drawing its first major conclusion: “Therefore (فلذلك) man is compelled to reflect and investigate: What is the essence of man? What is his final perfection? What is the action that, when man performs it, he attains the final perfection of his essence? And this amounts to knowing: [1] What is man? [2] By what and how is man? [3] From what is his being? [4] For what is his being” (68.1-4)? And these must be known “so that [man's] labor – when he labors – is a method for arriving at [the end of man]. For if he does not, *from his very own soul*, cognize this perfection, he will not cognize the end for the sake of which he labors” (68.4-6, my emphasis). From the merely useful and necessary knowledge arising for the sake of the four ordinary pursuits common to mankind – that is, *practical* science – Alfarabi concludes that man is “compelled” to conduct a *theoretical* investigation, an investigation into the knowledge that was first said to be beyond the merely useful knowledge and supposedly desired solely for its own sake (60.17–61.2). The critical importance of this theoretical investigation, however, is left unexplained in the *PA*; only by turning to the *Book of Letters* does it come to light. For there, we learn that this investigation's particular questions turn out to be what Alfarabi calls “the philosophical things sought,” i.e. the decisively *philosophical* questions. Namely: Is it? What is it? [1] By what is it? [2] From what is it? [3] and

33. The above three paragraphs are a close paraphrase of 66.18–67.22 intended to retain the enormity of the problem.

For what is it? [4]³⁴ Since we already know *that* man is (Is it?), the questions we are now compelled to investigate (68.1-6) capture precisely the remaining four philosophical questions.³⁵ If we readers have fully reflected on Alfarabi's careful framing of these questions, we have ascended, along with his artfully constructed image of man, to its seventh step: philosophy.

Surprisingly, however, Alfarabi does not stop here. We now learn that if man is a part of the world and we wish to understand his aim, it follows that we must first cognize the aim of the entire world. Then – and seemingly *only* then – will two things become clear to us: the aim of man, and that man must be a necessary part in the world for attaining, by his aim, the ultimate aim of the entire world (68.20–69.1).³⁶ But even this does not go far enough, since it's not possible to cognize the aim of the entire world without first cognizing all the parts of the world as well as their first principles (69.4-5). Apparently *we readers* are all compelled to possess, from our very own souls, demonstrative knowledge of the entire world, all its parts, and their first principles so that our labors are not completely vain!

But if man could come to possess, from his very own soul, such comprehensive, demonstrative knowledge of the whole, we learn that he could then finally resolve the very first standstill he encountered regarding which of any two alternatives is useful and which harmful towards satisfying his needs (62.10; 62.16). For when we are cognizant of man's perfection, Alfarabi now informs us, we also become cognizant of the fact that the ways of life by which this perfection is attained are the human, virtuous ways of life, while the ones that turn man away from this perfection are the base ways of life (69.19–70.2). It is thus incumbent upon man that he seek – in everything he investigates – *exclusively* after this knowledge of the whole. And Alfarabi entitles this knowledge of the whole “the certain science” (70.13-14).³⁷

Our progress through Alfarabi's argument finally entails the *complete* breakdown of the initial customary distinction between the practical and

34. *Book of Letters*, 212.1. Translations from the *Book of Letters* are adapted from an unpublished manuscript by Charles E. Butterworth, who kindly made it available to me.

35. See note 11 above.

36. Miriam Galston properly notes the importance of Alfarabi's conditional here. As she says, “[t]he need to study the whole world is, then, a hypothesis and not a demonstrated conclusion” (“A Re-examination of Alfārābī's Neoplatonism,” p. 29). Alfarabi uses a conditional to leave open the possibility that man is not, in fact, a proper part of the world and that we may thus not need to first cognize the aim of the entire world to grasp man's aim. Mahdi introduces this issue so: “The crucial question, however, is whether what is required for right action is primarily knowledge of all the beings or knowledge of man and the human things...” (*Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, p. xxvii)

37. Alfarabi insists upon Socrates' claim that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being (*Apologia Socratis*, 37^c3-38^a8). For, as Butterworth and Pangle aver: “we believe it is fair to say that no writer before or since [Alfarabi] has ever so intransigently contended that the theoretical way of life was the one and only true fulfillment of human existence,” *PPA*, p. xiv.

theoretical sciences.³⁸ The significance of this breakdown, as displayed in our investigation of *PA* i.1-3, is evident from the fact that we are already in a position to understand, for the most part, the final remarks of the *PA* as a whole. For Alfarabi tells his readers that its investigation has shown that the understanding of the causes of visible things is more human than those things *initially construed* to be necessary, that is, than the four things desired from the outset (132.4-7). The theoretical science that we initially presumed to be superfluous turns out to be, instead, necessary for reaching man's final perfection (132.7-10).³⁹

Alfarabi captures what has occurred here in a comment from the *Enumeration of the Sciences*:

Before being educated and trained, a human being objects to many things, finds them repugnant, and imagines that they are impossible. When he is educated by means of the sciences and given training in experiments, those presumptions disappear: the things that were impossible for him are transformed and become necessary, and he now comes to wonder about the opposite of what he formerly used to wonder about. (88.12-89.2)⁴⁰

Just as one untrained in geometry initially wonders at the fact that the diagonal of a square is not commensurable with its sides, but after having been trained in geometry wonders how the diagonal could *ever* be commensurable, so too the theoretical science, which initially appears to be superfluous (فضل), emerges in the end as unquestionably necessary, and virtuous (فاضل).⁴¹ For "it is necessary that the acquisition of this knowledge bring us, in a sense, to the condition opposite from which our searches began" (*Metaphysics*, 983^a11-12).

All this having been accomplished, Alfarabi then completes the *PA* with his shocking claim that we do not possess metaphysics. Perfect metaphysical knowledge remains outside human attainment:

And in fact, what long-ago, now, and *always is being sought* and *is always perplexing*: What is being? is this: What is beingness? [...] Whence, *most* of all, *first* of all, and – so to speak – *solely*, it is also necessary for us to theorize about such being: What is it? (*Met.* 1028^b2-7, my emphasis)

But since metaphysics seems necessary for a complete physics, and a complete physics seems necessary for knowing the end of man, which in turn, seems necessary for determining virtuous actions, "philosophy inescapably and

38. As Miriam Galston notes, "Al-Fārābī thus considers the distinction traditionally attributed to Aristotle between the theoretical and practical sciences as in some way provisional." ("A Re-examination of Alfarabi's Neoplatonism," p. 27) Aristotle himself indicates this most clearly, though no less subtly, through his use of two senses of "utility" in *Metaphysics* 982^b19-25.

39. On this passage, see the comments by Butterworth and Pangle in *PPA*, xii-xiii.

40. ALFARABI, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, in *The Political Writings: 'Selected Aphorisms' and Other Texts*. Pagination refers to the Arabic edition *Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm*.

41. Cp. *Metaphysics*, 983^a12-23.

necessarily comes to exist in every human being in the way possible for him” (133.2-3).

With these remarks, the sought-for certain science of wisdom seems to slip away from human attainment and *love* of wisdom, philosophy, becomes the newly discovered end of human life. Each man must pursue philosophy as the *attempt* to possess this certain science, which was initially intended to conclusively answer the questions raised by the four ordinary pursuits. Now, however, merely by philosophizing, i.e. becoming “one who loves and follows in the tracks of the highest wisdom,” man seems to perfect his being (AH 39.1). We are led to infer that man may not, in fact, be a proper part of a divinely ordered whole such as was previously hypothesized (68.20-69.1); for if so, far from perfecting man’s being, mere philosophizing would make all man’s actions vain.

III.

Reflecting back on my goal here, I hope that the educational ascent, upon which Alfarabi has guided us, sheds some light on how cleverly he, through his art of writing, followed Aristotle’s intention: the establishment of philosophy. For as Alfarabi says in the *Short Treatise on the Syllogism*, only an ignoramus attempts to follow in Aristotle’s footsteps by imitating the mere appearance of his deeds; the authentic Aristotelian must follow him in accordance with the *intention* of his deeds.⁴² And it is this intention, at least in part, to which Alfarabi points us at the end of the *Attainment of Happiness*, when he claims that Plato and Aristotle have not only given us an account of philosophy, but also an account of the way to it and of the way to reestablish it when it becomes confused or extinct (AH 47.3-5). The way to philosophy is the way of perplexity: men, at *any* time, must become perplexed if philosophy is to take hold in their souls.⁴³ Or, as Alfarabi says in the *Book of Letters*, such aporetic investigations are of use in the sciences if “the art that the ancients had fully inferred became extinct and people needed to recommence theorizing into matters and investigating them, or if it occurred in a nation where philosophy had not fully come to be” (*Book of Letters*, 210.13-15). The way to reestablish philosophy, on the other hand, is the particular mode by which the natural way to philosophy is presented: men of a particular time must be prudently

42. *Short Treatise on the Syllogism*, 69.4-5.

43. Perplexity’s central role in philosophy is highlighted by Alfarabi’s summary of the aim of *Metaphysics* B, which “contains an enumeration of the difficult questions with respect to these meanings, an elucidation of a way through the difficulty in [the questions], and a setting forth of the opposing arguments concerning [the questions], in order to direct the [mind’s] discernment towards the method of searching,” *On the Aims of the Sage in Every Chapter of the Book Characterized by Letters* (*fī Aḡrād al-ḥakīm fī kull maqāla min al-kitāb al-mawsūm bi-l-ḥurūf*), my translation, 37.1-3.

educated by means of what is generally accepted in *their* time. Alfarabi begins the *PA* with the four things that man as such desires and pursues from the outset – that is, the most generally accepted opinions – in order to gently make Aristotle’s intention clear to the people of his time: philosophy is the highest – if not the only – truly *human* way of life. In so doing, Alfarabi remains fundamentally and authentically Aristotelian.

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SUMMARY

It has generally been assumed that Alfarabi's understanding of Aristotle was distorted by his reliance on Aristotle's transmitters. Owing to this, scholars regularly resort to seeking Alfarabi's sources rather than seriously asking whether he could have, nonetheless, accurately grasped Aristotle's teaching. This essay attempts, primarily through an analysis of the *Philosophy of Aristotle*, to reassess such assumptions. In particular, it argues that the *Philosophy of Aristotle* reveals a deep understanding of two aspects of Aristotle's teaching about philosophy: the way to philosophy and the way to reestablish it when it has become confused or extinct. Rather than merely dogmatically describing Aristotle's account of the origin, progress and perplexities of philosophy, as many scholars erroneously expect, Alfarabi enacts this account. Starting from the generally accepted opinions of his own time, Alfarabi dramatically portrays man's experience as man and thus compels his readers to begin philosophizing for themselves. In this way, Alfarabi truly follows Aristotle's deepest intention.

SOMMAIRE

Il est généralement admis que la compréhension qu'avait Alfarabi d'Aristote était déformée en raison de sa dépendance à l'égard des intermédiaires dans la transmission des travaux du philosophe. C'est pourquoi les érudits se lancent régulièrement dans une recherche des sources d'Alfarabi au lieu de se demander sérieusement s'il aurait pu néanmoins comprendre exactement l'enseignement d'Aristote. Cet essai tente, principalement à travers une analyse de *La philosophie d'Aristote*, de réévaluer de telles hypothèses. En particulier, il fait valoir que *La philosophie d'Aristote* révèle une profonde compréhension de deux aspects de l'enseignement d'Aristote sur la philosophie: le chemin vers la philosophie et le moyen de le rétablir s'il est devenu confus ou s'il s'est éteint. Plutôt que de simplement décrire de manière dogmatique l'exposé d'Aristote sur

l'origine, la progression et les difficultés de la philosophie, comme beaucoup d'érudits s'y attendent, Alfarabi donne vie à cet exposé. Partant des opinions généralement acceptées de son temps, il décrit de manière dramatique l'expérience de l'humain en tant qu'humain et oblige ainsi ses lecteurs à commencer à philosopher par eux-mêmes. De cette manière, Alfarabi suit véritablement l'intention la plus profonde d'Aristote.