

# ALFĀRĀBI AND IBN RUSHD ON PHILOSOPHY

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For the history of ideas the encounter between two rich intellectual forces and the consequent attempt to either reconcile one with the other or repudiate one by the other is most significant. The great philosophical tradition in Islam results from, or at least cannot be understood without, the encounter of the Qoranic attitudes and the classical heritage of ancient philosophy. Shari'ah (and Sunnah) defines the community of Islam, the Ummah; whereas the claim made by philosophers is that the wisdom and the happiness provided by religion is not in opposition to philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

The social and intellectual context of Islamic philosophy must be understood from the appreciation of the central role of divine law, Shari'ah. Unlike the Christian community with its juridical separation into canon law and civil law the Muslim community, as well as the Jewish community, held no such separation. The Christian could more easily find philosophy a secular activity parallel to and serving the purposes (*ancilla*) of religion somewhat in the same way as civil law serves canon law. However, neither Islam nor Judaism had such a tradition for separation; in fact, both strongly tend to find it difficult to view anything outside the

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin A. Bertman, "Alfārābi and the Medieval Islamic Conception of Happiness," *The Islamic Quarterly*, Winter, 1970.

religious even hypothetically or for practical purposes. This made for the great need to understand the value of philosophy for the believer.

It is not also significant to note that neither in Islam nor in Judaism, for that matter, was there an ecclesiastical institution which had the authority to determine the correct interpretations of the prescriptions made by Law. Consequently, all questions of individual or community behavior had to be justified directly in terms of Law, where the lack of a decisive authority made variant interpretations possible. This in itself produced a climate of argumentation which may have both stimulated philosophical activity and also allowed for the attempt to harmonize philosophy and religion without some of the strictures of the more authoritarian Christian. With this in mind we will discuss Alfarabi and Ibn Rushd on Philosophy.

Abū Nasr Muhammad al-Fārābī, (ca. 870-950 AD) was born in Transoxia and studied in Khorāsān and Baghdad. He is one of the earliest and most respected Islamic philosophers. Ammonites, for instance, in the twelfth century, considered him the greatest of all Muslim philosophers, including Ibn Sinā.

Alfarabi finds truth and happiness to be intrinsically wedded; here he fully agrees with Plato and Aristotle. Also, this point is in concert with the religious tradition. Alfarabi stresses the harmony of philosophy and religion in terms of goal but makes a distinction between them in their methods:

In everything of which philosophy gives an account based on intellectual perception or conception, religion gives an account based on imagination. In everything demonstrated by philosophy, religion employs persuasion.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that though God can be known in many ways, Alfārābi understands that the contemplative mode of knowing is to be held in the highest regard since it is best to understand God. Alfārābi tells us that the investigation of the heretical principles of beings leads necessarily "to the ultimate cause of beings. This is the divine inquiry into them. For the first principle is the divinity, and the principles that come after it are the divide principles."<sup>3</sup>

Of course this emphasis on the contemplative mode elevates the philosopher to a preeminent position. Indeed, the "true philosopher" is the person capable of the greatest happiness. Since occupations may be ranked in terms of the objects that they seek, philosophy merits supreme position since it not only seeks knowledge of God but seeks that knowledge in a way that is qualitatively superior to other methods. The philosopher is consequently ranked superior.

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<sup>2</sup> Alfārābi, *The Attainment of Happiness*, in Lerner and Mandi, eds., *Medieval Political Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Man's specific perfection is called supreme happiness; and to each man, according to his rank in the order of humanity, belongs the specific happiness pertaining to this kind of man.<sup>4</sup>

Yet it would be false to give the impression that Alfarabi means by the philosopher someone isolated from political activity. Against the classical tradition which tended to isolate the philosopher from action, making him to be a mere contemplator, Alfarabi stresses the fulfillment of the philosophical role through action. Actually, this emphasis allows him to bring the philosopher closer to the religious tradition which elevates the prophet to political leadership. Compare;

When the theoretical sciences are isolated and their possessor does not have the faculty for exploiting them for the benefit of others, they are defective philosophy. To be a truly perfect philosopher one has to possess both the theoretical sciences, and the faculty for exploiting them for the benefits of others according to their capacity. Were one to consider the case of the true philosopher, he would find no difference between him and the supreme ruler.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the "true philosopher" needs the ability to persuade found in or through religion as well as the ability to demonstrate; he must concern himself with the imagination as well as the cognitive powers. Yet this seems to elevate philosophy above religion in the sense that to persuade is more vulgar than to

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<sup>4</sup> Alfarabi, *The Political Regime*, in *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Alfarabi, *The Attainment of Happiness*, in *ibid.*, p. 76.

convince through reason. Notwithstanding this implication, Alfārābi seems to reject such a favoritism for philosophy. Religion is the ultimate educator and guide for men, all men, within whose boundaries there is a genuine place for those capable of philosophy. This is the only conclusion that is to be had from his enumeration of the "vain philosopher," and the "counterfeit philosopher" as species of thinkers who are without the guidance, marked by a concern for the community, which religion provides. It is from this point of view that we can understand his pious comment:

Not everyone who wishes to legislate is a true legislator, but only one whom God creates and equips for this purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Ibn Rushd or Averroes, as he was known to the Latin West (Abū al-Walid Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Rushd, ca. 1126.1198), was born in Cordova to an eminent family of jurists. He himself was at judge in Seville and Cordova and a favourite of the Almohad princes. His reputation as an Aristotelean is unprecedented in the Medieval period; as Thomas Aquinas called Aristotle "the philosopher" and called Ibn Rushd "the Commentator."

Ibn Rushd is among the most aggressive of Muslim philosophers in presenting the superiority of philosophy. He finds the Qoranic texts, with their injunction for the believer to know God, a basis of legitimating Philosophy within religion. He says:

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<sup>6</sup> Aifarabi, Plato's Laws, in *Ibid.*, p. 8

Since it has now been established that the Law renders obligatory the study of beings by the intellect, and reflection on them, and since reflection is nothing more than inference drawing out of the unknown from the known, and since this is reasoning or at any rate done by reasoning, therefore we are under an obligation to carry on our study of beings by the intellectual reasoning. It is further evident that this manner of study, to which the Law summons and urges, is the most perfect kind of reasoning, and this is the kind called demonstration. The Law, then, has urged us to have demonstrative knowledge of God, the Exalted, and all the beings of His creation.<sup>7</sup>

In dealing with the 'relationship between religion and philosophy Ibn Rushd proceeds on the principle that the truth of the one does not oppose the truth of the other; "truth does not oppose truth 1 accords with it and bears witness to it." Upon this principle he under the obligation of showing how the seemingly figurative, popular and contradictory elements of the religious texts relate in their truth to the truth of demonstrative or philosophical knowledge.

His method of harmonization is not too different from Alfarabi's approach. He also finds that since religion attends to needs of all men that it must speak to each on his own terms Ibn Rushd finds that there are essentially three types of men which are convinced by the three types of approaches in the religious texts; these three types of men may be called the imaginative, the legalistic, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibn Rushd, *The Decisive Treatise*, in *ibid.*, p. 165.

philosophical. They are brought to assent, to Islam, through three corresponding types of arguments: the rhetorical, the dialectical, and the demonstrative; the apparent confusions in the religious texts reconciled once it is realized that it carries the burden of the three approaches; the Qoran is ■written for all men. Ibn Rushd says:

Since we, in the Muslim community, hold that this divine Law of ours is true, and that it is this Law that incites and summons us to the happiness that consists in the knowledge of God, Mighty and Majestic, and of his creation, that end is appoint for every Muslim by the method of the assent that his temperament and nature require. For the nature of men are on different levels with the respect to their paths to assent. One of them comes to assent through demonstration; another comes to assent through dialectical arguments, just as firmly as the demonstrative man through demonstration, since his nature does not contain any greater capacity; while another (comes to assent through rhetorical arguments, again just as firmly as the demonstrative man through demonstrative arguments.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Ibn Rushd sees that religion is practically indispensable to the fundamental moral objective, assent for all men. Yet philosopher is superior in the quality of his knowledge. In fact, suggests that the philosopher alone might be capable of an appropriate relationship to God without religion. This is a muted suggestion but one of which his opponents often accused him.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

In both *Alfārābi* and *Ibn Rushd* we find an attempt to harmonize religion with philosophy and in both, to a different degree, a defence of the superiority of philosophy. Further, we find that both felt the strong obligation to use philosophy for the well-being of others and as such, subsume it under the moral and religious imperative of assent for the *Dar al-Islam*.