

DISCUSSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHICS AND POLITICS WITHIN FARABI'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi, one of the famous Muslim philosophers, thinkers and mystics of the 9th century who was born in Farab of Turkestan and died in Damascus in Syria gave birth to many new ideas and philosophical notions in addition to contributing and commentating on the previous works of philosophy that of the Greeks. The topic in which will be expounded will be discussing the relationship between ethics and politics within Farabi's political philosophy. As the combination and merging of the two disciplines of ethics, politics all stemming from philosophy come together it is referred to practical philosophy as it moves from theory of ideals to practicality of philosophising.

Hence, what will be focused rather will be the practical philosophy of Farabi with regards to the dynamics between ethics pertaining to the Greek for *ethikos* and *ethos* meaning right conduct or behaviour and politics that is the Greek for *polis* or relating to citizens. Hence I will be looking into whether the ideal state, society and utopia or 'madina fadila' which is championed by Farabi has any hints to the ideal conduct for a human being reaching their intended limited perfection.

Farabi's school of Practical philosophy, the merging of Ethics and Politics

When studying the philosophical school of Farabi it is crucial to bear in mind the role that classical Greek philosophy has played in the development of Farabi's ideas and the flourishing of Islamic philosophy from the development of early *Peripatetic*, *Illuminative* and slightly more contemporary, the *Transcendental* schools of Islamic philosophy. Hence we can see that the influence of Aristotelian philosophy and the Platonic notion of the 'Philosopher King' in his *The Republic* can be said to be some of the points of reference and thought in his lifetime. The role that the Greek schools of philosophy had played on Farabi is also a valid question to ask; interestingly enough this is championed by Corbin (1993) as he states his idea of the 'madina al fadilah' is mirrored to that of Plato's ideal state

(Corbin 1993:162). Perhaps one other aspect that ought to be considered is that as the Muslim philosopher has lent his ideas from the classical Greek philosophers, it can be a point of merging of an ancient culture and civilisation in with a new religion and it's readiness to accept and transform ideas into something new.

The essential principle of the role of ethics is to question how should one act and ultimately be in order to reach ultimate happiness in this world and that politics is with regards to the means of administration of the society in order for citizens to develop and flourish morally and intellectually. The notion of the 'madina fadila' can be said to be one of the major theories that propounded the combination of ethics and politics in order to combine the role of the intellect and the soul of the individual for reaching happiness with the presence of a prophet. McGreal (1995) clearly explores the idea of linking theoretical and practical philosophy together in the light of the Farabian school of thought, demonstrating this with his thought as his idea of the merging is possible with the presence of a prophet as a philosopher and as a statesman.

This means that given a human has the intellectual capability to understand what is morally right and wrong, has been divinely chosen by God because of his qualities, has spiritually cultivated himself then he is able to make decisions in the interest of the people by acting according to his divinely guided wisdom that is the active intellect and higher than that has tapped into the faculty of the realm of imaginative intellect. It is important to note that justice also plays a role in the relationship of politics and ethics as both according to Farabi ought to seek to put actions and people in the right place so they can flourish to reach their true potential. Aminrazavi (1995) in his article on Farabian thought champions the idea that a human 'attains happiness only within the state' and in the 'context of a society' (McGreal 1995:447-448).

This can be seen to be as one of the contributing factors that interplay between politics and ethics, as ethical conduct and virtues and merits would have no value if not cultivated within and with society so it's benefit reaches the rest of the citizens. It is also plausible that Farabian notion of combining the theoretical and practical entails that the society's statesmen must have an essential link with the sacred or divine, in that morality and knowledge stems from God to creation

with the interlink of Angels and Prophets including revelation. Perhaps, Farabi may have wanted to allude to the notion that knowledge, goodness and justice is from Allah as they are his attributes and hence manifested in individuals who cultivate those attributes to the maximum capacity.

Moreover, it seems that Farabi's school of practical philosophy revolved around the pivotal role of revelation and the Prophet as Professor Nasr believes he sought to 'harmonize' the philosopher King of Plato to the sacred understanding of the prophet within traditional monotheism namely, the Abrahamic religions (Nasr 2006:138). This relates to ethics and politics as the Prophet is not just an individual who connects the mundane to the sacred, rather one who can be a resemblance, reminder and a sign of the presence of knowledge, wisdom and traits of virtue in order that the state can imitate and grow with his presence. Perhaps Farabi's school of thought that was postulated in his lifetime was a result of the social conditions and internal intellectual developments hence it may have well been valid for his own zeitgeist.

Parel and Keith (2003) confer that philosophy is a process in which happiness is sought through the development of the human intellect, but within the ideal society there needs to be the perfect ruler, whom is the combination of the King, the Philosopher and the Prophet whom when are in harmony bring about setting the foundations for the implementation of justice, peace and 'reproducing the good in the city' (Parel and Keith 2003:204). This can be thought as the practicality of philosophy where it can distinguish between right and wrong, that which is harmonious and that which is incongruent and ultimately be able to help society perfect itself.

Yet it is fair to ask as to where a perfect individual whom possesses the qualities of a Prophet, King and Philosopher may come from? It is also fair to question as to what happens to the rest of the virtuous philosophers who are either awaiting the appearance of such an individual and what is their duty in his presence? This is clear that such notions owe to the lack of objectivity and by the nature of the change in society and development in science and technology, the definition of such Kings and Philosophers may change as so will their aims. Another point to bear in mind is that the ambiguity of the searching for knowledge, the flourishing

of society, the actual meaning of 'good' are also subject to ethical relativism, in light of the established social and religious norms within a society and or state.

Bevir (2010) also touches on this ambiguity and difficulty of the role of the intellect as prerequisites for the perfect ruler. It is also worth mentioning that the role of a religious ruler with a virtuous religion is necessary. This is because the religion ought to be carefully crafted in order to be able to express the philosophical truths for the persuasion of the citizens. This is very important as 'rhetoric'; 'dialectic' and 'demonstration' are the three Aristotelian methods to be employed by the ideal ruler (Bevir 2010:14). What is also interesting is that Farabi being a Muslim suggests a Prophet or Philosopher is necessary who has been able to make a relationship with his own human intellect with the active intellect. Perhaps, it is pointing to the fact that wisdom is a necessary trait, which comes about after this relationship has been made. Hence a virtuous individual ought to possess wisdom in order to be able to discern with right and wrong, moral and immoral in order to realise what type of human should they aspire to become.

Conclusion

In conclusion one can realize that the relationship of politics and ethics have to be understood for themselves in their own merit prior to being studied in the light of the relationship. Ultimately one can appreciate to the role the prophet has to play as the philosopher king, whom seeks to make decisions and guide the society to happiness through his justice, however; it is still incumbent to for the citizens to be within that society to reach the relative perfection and happiness. Moreover there still needs to be more research done, with thorough investigation perhaps in other areas of Farabi's practical philosophy in order to understand it better for his own social conditions.

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