

BOOK REVIEW

Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (trans. by Richard Walzer) (1985). On the Perfect State (Mabadi' ara'ahl al-madinat al-fadilah). Oxford University Press, Oxford, Eng.

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Abstract:

This book review critically examines *On the Perfect State (Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinat al-fadilah)* by Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, translated by Richard Walzer, through the perspective of critical realism. The review explores Al-Farabi's metaphysical conception of the First Cause, the process of cosmological emanation, and the relationship between essence and materiality in the structure of existence. The analysis argues that although Al-Farabi presents a sophisticated ontological hierarchy integrating metaphysics and political philosophy, his framework reveals methodological and epistemological limitations, particularly regarding the relational meaning of Tawhid and the causal interconnection among existents. From a critical realist standpoint, the text insufficiently explains the generative mechanisms linking divine unity, ethical consciousness, and material reality. Nevertheless, the work remains a foundational contribution to Islamic philosophy and continues to stimulate contemporary debates on ontology, epistemology, and social reality.

Keywords: Critical Realism; Al-Farabi; Tawhid; Ontology; Islamic Philosophy.

Introduction

The intellectual legacy of Abu Nasr Al-Farabi occupies a central place in the history of Islamic philosophy, political theory, and metaphysics. Often referred to as the "Second Teacher" after Aristotle, Al-Farabi developed a comprehensive philosophical system that attempted to synthesize Greek metaphysics with Islamic intellectual traditions (Fakhry, 2002). His seminal work, *On the Perfect State (Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinat al-fadilah)*, translated by Richard Walzer, represents one of the most influential articulations

of classical Islamic political philosophy (Al-Farabi, 1985). The text explores the ontological relationship between the First Cause, cosmological emanation, and the ethical structure of the ideal society. In doing so, Al-Farabi sought to construct a philosophical model in which political order emerges from metaphysical harmony and intellectual perfection (Netton, 1992). The enduring significance of this work lies not only in its historical contribution but also in its continuing relevance to contemporary debates concerning religion, reason, governance, and epistemology. From the perspective of critical realism, the text raises important questions concerning the layered nature of reality, the relationship between ontology and knowledge, and the causal mechanisms underlying metaphysical and social order (Bhaskar, 1978).

Al-Farabi's metaphysical framework is fundamentally grounded in the concept of the First Cause, identified as Allah, from whom all existence emanates hierarchically (Al-Farabi, 1985). The reviewed text demonstrates how Al-Farabi conceptualizes existence through the dual categories of essence and materiality, thereby constructing a cosmological structure in which every created entity derives its being from the supreme source of unity. Nevertheless, the emanationist structure presented in the book also reveals tensions between philosophical abstraction and Qur'anic theological principles. The text suggests that Al-Farabi's understanding of divine unity relies substantially upon Neo-Platonic metaphysics rather than upon the epistemological foundations of Tawhid grounded in Islamic revelation (Fakhry, 2002). Consequently, the philosophical model appears to prioritize ontological gradation over relational unity embedded in divine law. From a critical realist perspective, this issue becomes particularly significant because it concerns the explanatory depth of causal reality and the distinction between empirical manifestation and underlying generative mechanisms (Archer et al., 1998). Al-Farabi's cosmology provides a sophisticated ontological hierarchy, yet it simultaneously leaves unresolved the epistemic relationship between divine intentionality, moral order, and the interconnectedness of created existence.

Another major issue emerging from the reviewed work concerns the methodological limitations of Al-Farabi's philosophical system. The translation illustrates that the concept of "oneness" is interpreted largely as individuated existence through which entities become distinguishable from one another (Al-Farabi, 1985). Such

an interpretation, however, appears narrower than the broader Qur'anic conception of Tawhid, which emphasizes relational unity, ethical interconnectedness, and the integration of consciousness within a unified epistemic order (Choudhury, 1998). In critical realist terms, this distinction reflects the difference between merely describing observable structures and identifying the deeper relational mechanisms that sustain reality (Bhaskar, 1978). Al-Farabi's framework successfully explains hierarchical emanation but provides limited explanation regarding how existential multiplicity remains substantively interconnected through divine unity. The absence of a fully articulated methodology linking essence, materiality, and ethical consciousness creates what may be identified as an epistemological gap within the philosophical architecture of the text. This limitation is particularly relevant for contemporary critical realist scholarship, which emphasizes the necessity of understanding reality as stratified, relational, and causally emergent rather than fragmented into isolated ontological units (Archer et al., 1998).

The reviewed text also demonstrates the analytical strengths and weaknesses of Al-Farabi's philosophical approach in explaining the continuity between metaphysical abstraction and worldly existence. The cosmological structure outlined in the book portrays existence as a continuum extending from the First Cause to successive levels of created beings, each characterized by the interaction of essence and materiality (Al-Farabi, 1985). Yet the explanatory mechanism governing this interaction remains insufficiently formalized. The absence of a sustained theory explaining how unity is reproduced across differentiated levels of existence limits the coherence of the emanationist model. From a critical realist standpoint, this limitation reflects a failure to adequately theorize the emergent causal powers connecting metaphysical principles with social, ethical, and material realities (Bhaskar, 1978). While Al-Farabi provides an ambitious ontological system, the book review argues that his framework remains incomplete in accounting for the dynamic and regenerative character of relational existence. Thus, *On the Perfect State* remains both an intellectually profound contribution to Islamic philosophy and a philosophically contested text whose metaphysical assumptions continue to invite critical engagement within contemporary debates on ontology, epistemology, and the philosophy of social reality (Netton, 1992).

Discussion

Abu Nasr Al-Farabi is one of the great classical philosopher and scientists of the Islamic era. He lived during the period of the A.D. 870' born in Turkistan. His exact life span by date is not documented. Al-Farabi's full name was, Abu Nasr Muhammad b. Muhammad b.Tarkhan b.Awazalaugh. Al-Farabi was more strenuously trained under the Syriac Christian tradition in the study of philosophy and sciences. The book reviewed here covers the summary study of 11 chapters of the full work in nineteen chapters. The remaining chapters will be reviewed in subsequent reviews of the book in later issues of JOCRISE.

This book expounds Al-Farabi's conceptualization of the relationship of Allah, who he refers as the First Cause, and the emanation of details of creation in its physical form. In studying creation in such a mode, Al-Farabi integrates all physical forms in two categories, namely, essence and materiality. The exception to such an integrated folding is in regards to God as the First Cause of essence. By His uniqueness, Allah cannot be dichotomized, and He does not emanate from any other essential cause. All subsequent causes in creation is represented as simultaneous regeneration by emanation from each other. In this way, Al-Farabi avoided an essential study of God (Allah) as Creator who bestowed law, schema, form, and existence to corporeal bodies. Thereby, the epistemic foundation of the book remained silent in referring to the primal origin of Islamic methodological worldview concerning the purpose and structure of creation in its details. Although every physical body emanated consecutively in respect of essence and materiality, and Al-Farabi claimed they all regenerate from the First Cause, which is God (Allah), in doing so the non-Qur'anic implication of the divine law of Oneness of God without form and description, is invoked. Thereby, Al-Farabi's thought, presented in this book is of the non-Qur'anic nature, although incorrectly claimed to be an Islamic classical contribution.

There appears to be a further methodological flaw in Al-Farabi's conception of the emergent physical bodies. The translation reads (pp 69): "For one of the meanings of oneness is the particular existence by which each existent is distinguished from all others; on the strength of the meaning of oneness each existent is called 'one' inasmuch as it has its own particular existence. This meaning of the

term 'one' goes necessarily with 'existence'. Thus the First is one of this respect as well, and deserves more than any other one the name and the meaning (of 'the one')."

The wider and subtle meaning of 'oneness' in the Qur'an bears the widest implication of Tawhid as the law of unity of consciousness generating knowledge by interrelations between all the good existents. Contrary the meaning also bears on the rejection by way of disparateness and dichotomy of the rejected existents according to Tawhid as law. Such existents are detached existents of each other. Thus, even though all existents are distinct from each other in the material forms, they are essentially relational in the widest creative sense. The substantive meaning of 'oneness' in respect of Tawhid as law is thus conveyed. Such a derivation of the meaning and application of the Tawhidi law of oneness has the universal meaning and purpose of the relational law of unity of knowledge. The law of 'oneness' thereby emerges from consciousness of the abstraction and episteme of Tawhid as the universal law.

A diagrammatic summary of the book in respect of the relationship between existents corresponding to the First Cause is given below. The First Cause (F) is uniquely separate and complete in essence (F(E)). The emanation of every other existent from the epistemic premise of (F(E)) is shown by the regenerative evolutionary existents that remain individuated from each other. These are shown by the recurrence of existents $X(\cdot)$ qualified by the integration of Essence and Materiality (E,M), i.e. $X(E,M)$. Further strata of existents, all experiencing its individual emanation in the domains of (E,M) is denoted by $\{ZX(E,M)\}$. All such aforementioned domains of emanations, originating from the epistemic primacy of F, is described in the (E,F) continuum along which is embedded the totality of $\{ZX(E,M)\}$. This property of the entire universe according to Al-Farabi is explained by the expression,

$$C(\{ZX(E,M)\}) = (d/dE.dM)\{ZX(E,M)\} > 0.$$

$\{ZX(E,M)\}$ thereby, denotes emanating groups of topological functions in the continuum,

Al-Farabi did not formalize an analytical methodology in the central features of this book. Particularly there was no explanation

concerning the epistemic derivation of all the evolutionary yet disaggregate heavenly bodies and the creational substrata from the First Cause. Also, the coterminous relationship between Essence and Materiality in the existents as derived from the supreme attribute of Essence of oneness of the First Cause. The essential function of oneness of the First Cause, conveyed to the coexistent interrelation signifying the inextricable attribute signifying oneness between existents explaining the oneness of the First Cause, remained absent in Al-Farabi's thought. This formal interactive, integrative, and sustained regenerative occurrence in the span of conscious continuum that induces the Tawhidi law of unity of knowledge into the world-system, remains unexplained. The following is the analytical expression that explains this functional unison between essence (moral value) and materiality in Al-Farabi's analytical gap.

$$(d/dE.dM)[\cup^{INT} \cap^{INTEG} \{ZX(E,M)\}][(E,M) \leftarrow \text{Tawhidi Law of Unity of Knowle}]$$

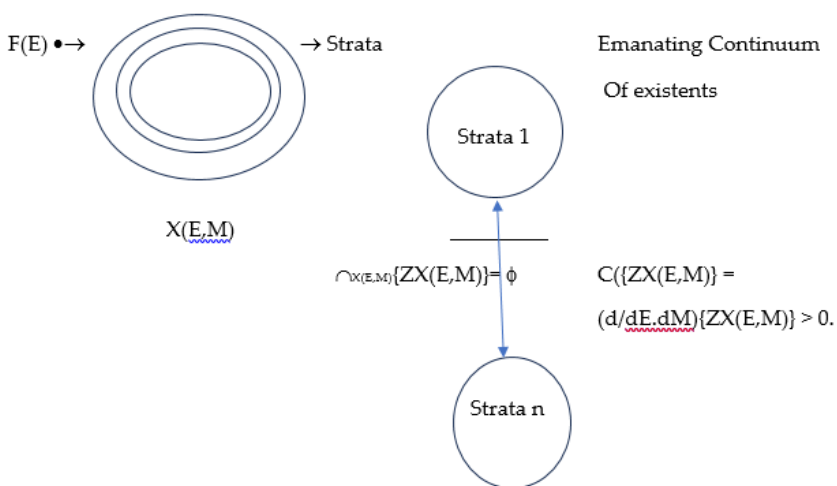


Figure 1: Al-Farabi's Derivation of the Universe of Existents from the First Cause in Terms of Essence and Materiality and Individuality of Their Emanation

Conclusion

In conclusion, *On the Perfect State* by Abu Nasr Al-Farabi remains a monumental contribution to the development of Islamic philosophy, particularly in the fields of metaphysics, political thought, and cosmology. The work demonstrates Al-Farabi's ambitious attempt to integrate philosophical rationalism with the ethical foundations of social order through the concept of the First Cause and the hierarchical emanation of existence (Al-Farabi, 1985). Nevertheless, from a critical realist perspective, the text reveals significant epistemological and methodological limitations, especially regarding the absence of a clear explanatory mechanism connecting divine unity, moral consciousness, and relational existence. While Al-Farabi successfully constructs a sophisticated ontological framework, his emanationist model appears insufficient in explaining the dynamic interdependence between essence and materiality within a unified Tawhidi worldview. Consequently, the book remains both philosophically influential and critically contested, inviting continued scholarly reflection on the relationship between metaphysical abstraction, ontology, and the deeper causal structures shaping human and social reality.

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