

AL-FARABI ON REPRESENTATION, IMAGINATION, AND REVELATION

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Al-Farabi's epistemology is heavily influenced by the philosophy of Aristotle, its Middle Platonist and Neoplatonist interpretations and variations. Besides Aristotle, Al-Farabi seems to be influenced by Stoic philosophy, especially Stoic psychology. According to Al-Farabi, representation (*takhayyul*) is associated with appetite. In addition to the combination and division of sense-impressions, representation preserves them. According to Al-Farabi, the faculties of the soul are five and not three as Aristotle suggested: the nutritive, the faculty of sense perception, the faculty of representation, the faculty of reason and the appetitive faculty.¹ With the exception of the nutritive faculty, all the others are connected to a desire (*δύναμις όρεκτική*). Al-Farabi followed the general pattern of Alexander of Aphrodisias' psychology, which was heavily influenced by Stoic and Middle Platonist philosophy. While Aristotle never discussed the mimetic activity of imagination, Alexander and Al-Farabi turned their attention to mimesis.²

The faculty of sense depends on the five senses. According to Al-Farabi, the faculty which rules the senses resides in the heart.³ Al-Farabi's terminology, when he refers to the ruling faculty of sensation or to the common sense, is similar to that of Galen, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius.⁴ In addition, Al-Farabi reproduced common trends of ancient Greek philosophy when he mentioned a ruler and auxiliaries within the faculty of sense.⁵ Namely Plato, Galen, the Stoics, Plotinus and Themistius shared the same description.⁶ In the heart there is also the faculty of representation, which is not dependent on bodily organs. Nowhere in his works did Aristotle locate representation in the heart. Alexander of Aphrodisias, under the influence of the Stoics, established the existence of representation in the heart.⁷ Representation retains the sensibles, controls them and judges them. Moreover, the faculty of representation arranges the sensibles: it separates and combines them in various ways, even contrary to reality and the sensibles derived from it. The chief goal of representation is the formation of a totalized perception. Its main role is to bridge the gap between perception and reason. It is worth noticing that, while representation remains subordinate to intellect, it has its own independent status. The faculty of representation is associated, as all the other faculties besides appetite, with an appropriate desire, a *δύναμις όρεκτική*.⁸ The Stoics and Alexander of Aphrodisias held similar views.⁹

Al-Farabi held that representation acts in three major ways. First, it represents man's hopes and expectations, past facts, even wishes. Second, it uses and transforms sensibles according to inner motivations. Finally, it be activated by the rational faculty.¹⁰ It is obvious that representation presupposes sense perception, since all its manifestations are based on sensibles. Al-Farabi, contrary to Aristotle, clearly separates sensation (common sense) and representation. Instead, he preferred the views of the philosophical school of Alexandria. Representation receives forms from both common and particular sense perception, whereas common sense only from the particular sense.¹¹

Al-Farabi discussed representation because he associated it with divination and prophecy, which from their part are of critical importance for Al-Farabi's epistemology and politics. It was a common trend in Late Greek philosophy to discuss precognition. Besides Plato and Aristotle, where we can find certain indications concerning the possibility of divination, the Stoics would be Al-Farabi's chief source.¹² The faculty of representation lies between the faculty of sense and the rational faculty. In most cases, the

¹ Al-Farabi, *Mabadi*, IV.10.1; Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, 382.

² Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, 383; Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 21; Leaman, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 848.

³ Al-Farabi, *Mabadi*, IV.10.3.

⁴ Galen, *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, 8.8.5.1-8.9.19.8; Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima Liber cum mantissa*, 78. 6-21; Themistius, *In libros Aristotelis De anima paraphrasis*, 87.1-16.

⁵ Al-Farabi, *Mabadi*, IV.10.3.

⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, 70b; Galen, *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, 1.8.1.10-1.9.3.5; Chryssipus, *Fragmenta Logica et Physica*, fr.879.; Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.3.3-6; Themistius, *In libros Aristotelis De anima paraphrasis*, 87.4-16.

⁷ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima Liber cum mantissa*, 97,8-100.17.

⁸ Al-Farabi, *Mabadi*, IV.10.4

⁹ Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, 387.

¹⁰ Al-Farabi, *Mabadi*, IV.10.8.

¹¹ Ioannes Philoponus, *In Aristotelis De anima libros commentaria*, 507.16-508.25.

¹² Plato, *Timaeus*, 71d; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248d; Aristoteles, *De insomniis*, 460b28-461a8; Aristoteles, *De divinatione per somnum*, 463b25-463b31, 464a15; Dodds, "Supernatural Phenomena," 156-210.

faculty of representation deals with the sensibles brought by the senses or is kept busy by the rational faculty and the appetitive. When the rest of the faculties reach their first perfection, e.g. during sleep, the faculty of representation is relieved and turns to the imprints which are preserved in it, connecting or disconnecting them freely.¹³ Furthermore, it displays *mimesis*, reproductive imitation. In this case, the faculty of representation imitates the preserved sensibles, including desiderative forms. For example, when the body inclines towards sexual desire, the faculty of representation simulates the corresponding to the sexual act bodily humor. As a result, the sexual organs are stimulated not by a desire towards a real object. Instead, they are stimulated by an imaginary desire, without any reference to a real object.¹⁴ Similar views were expressed by Sextus Empiricus,¹⁵ Plutarch¹⁶ and Alexander of Aphrodisias.¹⁷ Proclus mentioned a passage from Porphyry, where the latter connects imagination with bodily reactions.¹⁸ Moreover, John Philoponus' description of the relation between sense perception, representation and imagination reminds us of Al-Farabi's description.¹⁹ Plutarch held similar views when he divided *φαντασία* into representation and imagination. Representation provides reason with material from sense perception, while at the same time the rational faculty provides material to imagination, which, in turn, translates into visible and sensible images.²⁰ The faculty of representation has to process sensibles and is obliged to transform the temperaments of the body and intelligibles. Moreover, the Active Intellect acts upon the faculty of representation, bridging representation with theoretical and practical reason. The Active Intellect provides the faculty of representation with intelligibles from the theoretical reason and with particulars in the form of sensibles from the practical reason. The particulars reach the faculty of representation without the mediation of deliberation. This is the reason true visions arise from the particulars through the intervention of the Active Intellect. On the other hand, divinations originate from the intelligibles.²¹ Visions and divinations concern very few people, especially when they occur in waking state. In addition, the majority of them, which occurs during sleep, stem from particulars and not intelligibles. According to Al-Farabi, the perfection of the faculty of representation enables it to control and process the sensibles. As a result, the faculty of representation is able to represent particulars or intelligibles by visible sensibles.²² The man who perfects his faculty of representation receives present and future particulars, and imitations of the intelligibles. This awareness of future events and of divine things is prophecy (*nubuwwa*).²³ Al-Farabi supported that, besides those who perfected their faculty of representation, there are others who see or receive all this fragmentarily and others who see or receive only parts of them. People differ in quality.²⁴ Al-Farabi's views are closer to Plutarch's philosophical explanation of prophecy than to Marinus', who described Proclus' intuitive insights in a purely theurgic mode.²⁵ Al-Farabi distances himself from Neoplatonist philosophy which accepts the mystical union and rejects any kind of union of the human mind and the Active Intellect.²⁶ Al-Farabi did not follow Al-Kindi (c.801–873) who thought of the prophet, the man who receives immediate and valid intuition, as superior to philosophers.²⁷ Al-Farabi concluded that the ability of prophesying is not always permanent. Some people lose it somehow. Furthermore, Al-Farabi illustrated that many who claim that they are prophets and they can see things divine, are insane and fraud.²⁸

The ruler of the state should have reached the perfection of his faculty of representation in order to receive from the Active Intellect the sensibles and the intelligibles. After the perfection of his Passive Intellect, the ruler acquires a superior actual Intellect, the Acquired Intellect (*νοῦς θύραθεν, νοῦς*

¹³ Al-Farabi, Mabadi, IV.14.1.

¹⁴ Al-Farabi, Mabadi, IV.14.2–5

¹⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VII.402-432.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Quaestiones conviviales*, 705C-705F.

¹⁷ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima Liber cum mantissa*, 76.18-77.23.

¹⁸ Proclus, *In Timaeum*, I, 395.22-29.

¹⁹ Ioannes Philoponus, *In Aristotelis De anima libros commentaria*, 507. 16-509.3.

²⁰ Ioannes Philoponus, *In Aristotelis De anima libros commentaria*, 515.12-515.29 ; Walzer, "Theory of Prophecy," 211.

²¹ Al-Farabi, Mabadi, IV.14.7.

²² Al-Farabi, Mabadi, IV.14.8.

²³ Al-Farabi, Mabadi, IV.14.9.

²⁴ Al-Farabi, Mabadi, IV.14.10.

²⁵ Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, 421–2.

²⁶ Walzer, "Theory of Prophecy," 210.

²⁷ Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, 523.

²⁸ Al-Farabi, Mabadi, IV.14.11.

ἐπίκτητος).²⁹ The Passive Intellect is the substratum for the Acquired Intellect, while the latter is the substratum for the Active Intellect. With the proper collaboration of these Intellects, a man could become wise, a philosopher and visionary prophet. This man is most perfect and the ideal ruler.³⁰ Furthermore, Al-Farabi discerned prophecy from revelation (*wahy*), while, at the same time, he connected the latter with philosophy and not religion. Revelation is the union of perfected philosophical knowledge with authentic prophecy.³¹ Only the authentic philosopher could attain it. As Rahman states: “The Stoics distinguished the prophecy by divine possession or inspiration which comes without learning on the one hand, and divination by means of rational interpretation of signs³² accepted only prophecy by inspiration.”³³

Besides this upper class of prophets, there are several others who perceive the aforementioned things partially or in a fable and corrupted state. Al-Farabi separates the mentally-ill who visualize things that do not exist. It is obvious that the Arab philosopher holds that the highest stage of human perfection is attainable through imagination and not reason, which deals with the universals. This evaluation of prophecy approaches Plato’s stance as expressed in *Timaeus* (72a), *Phaedrus* (248d) and the *Republic* (IX 571C f.). According to Walzer, “Al-Farabi represents in this respect, as elsewhere, what is ultimately a Hellenistic or Middle Platonic tradition which may have been drawn upon by Porphyry . . . But the details in his theory presuppose not only Alexander of Aphrodisias’ *De anima*, but also the Neoplatonist metaphysics of emanation.”³⁴

Al-Farabi was heavily influenced by the Alexandrian school of neo-Aristotelianism. He promulgated neo-Aristotelianism as the one true philosophical doctrine. His understanding of the identity of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle is not dogmatic, as it is in Porphyry, but nuanced in favor of Aristotle, as espoused by the school of Ammonius. He created a philosophical system of his own on the basis of principles which he inherited from neo-Aristotelianism and by using the entire array of Greek philosophical thought as his material. Particularly, on the issue of *φαντασία*, he blended Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Neoplatonism. Al-Farabi did not challenge the primacy of philosophy, although he accepted prophecy and revelation. The latter is subordinated to reason, since Al-Farabi confined them to imagination. In other words, he attempted the rationalization of a key element of the major religious traditions at his times. Ancient philosophers, like Cicero, Plutarch, Pseudo-Plutarch, Iamblichus and several others discussed prophecy and divination thoroughly.³⁵ Al-Farabi attempts to rationalize and integrate prophecy in an epistemological and metaphysical tree, despite the fact that he accepts the possibility of foreknowledge. In addition, Al-Farabi connects prophecy with an innate faculty of the soul and does not describe it as a state of possession by supernatural powers. Prophecy permits Al-Farabi to explain rationally the way humans attain high knowledge. His epistemology does not need any kind of mystical union.

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²⁹ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima Liber cum mantissa*, 82.1, 90.19, 108.22-109.4, 110.4-25.

³⁰ Al-Farabi, Mabadi, V.15.8–11.

³¹ Walzer, “Theory of Prophecy,” 207.

³² Cicero, *De divinatione*, I 18.1-19 ; Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 10.3–4.

³³ Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 66.

³⁴ Walzer, “Theory of Prophecy,” 207.

³⁵ Walzer, “Theory of Prophecy,” 217.

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