

## ETHICS IN MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

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### ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on three of Islam's best-known philosophers: Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. It sets forth and compares their ethical teaching on the following basic issues: (1) the relation of philosophy to religion, (2) the communal basis of ethics and the concomitant role of statecraft, and (3) some specific characteristics of their ethical teaching. Throughout the essay the close connection of medieval Islamic with classical Greek philosophy is noted.

Though relatively short-lived, the philosophical tradition within Islam exercised an enormous influence on practical and theoretical thinking. According to the strictest reckoning, Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (died about 252 A.H./866 C.E.) must be cited as the instigator of this tradition and 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn (732 A.H./1332 C.E.-808 A.H./1406 C.E.) as bringing it to a close. After being neglected within the world of Islam for several centuries, it has now begun to come back into its own as a subject of serious academic study and also to attract the attention of the generally educated public. After several centuries of limited academic interest within the West, medieval Islamic philosophy has recently also begun to claim the attention of a wider audience here.

This wider interest in medieval Islamic philosophy is welcome, for a proper understanding of the history of Western philosophy depends upon an adequate awareness of that Islamic tradition and the way in which its proponents contributed to the preservation of classical Greek philosophy, especially the teaching of Plato and Aristotle but also that of Galen. A sign of the deep involvement between medieval Islamic philosophy and classical Greek philosophy is that whereas the Arabic word for wisdom (*ḥikmah*) is ordinarily used to render philosophy, the particular tradition referred to here is rendered, by a slight borrowing from the Greek, as *falsafah*, and those involved within the tradition refer to themselves, or are referred to, as *falāsifah* (singular, *faylasūf*). During the time in which the writings of Plato and Aristotle were largely unknown in Europe, they circulated widely within the world of Islam in Arabic translation and prompted a number of commentaries or parallel investigations. To be sure, not all of Plato's or Aristotle's writings were preserved in this fashion, but a sufficient number were passed on in translation

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and subsequently became the subject of philosophical inquiry. This inquiry first came to light in Muslim Spain by a tradition of revealed religion, investigated the possible harmony of philosophy and revealed religion, or to argue that they belonged to different philosophical traditions. Some philosophers urged that the ultimate goal of philosophy was identical and that it was the other.

In this respect, they participated in the *Republic* and nurtured by it, and the *Politics*. Though the far-reaching influence of Aristotle's teaching often escaped the notice of medieval philosophers like Bacon, Hobbes, and Spinoza, the philosophical tradition. From this perspective, the history of Western philosophy is a process of successful rejection of the classical Greek traditions, have persuaded us to neglect our own well-being. For Plato and Aristotle, the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition, happiness and not simply what is good was of fundamental importance. To discern true human happiness is the end or the goal of human life as well as the virtues within the grasp of the human universe and its parts to be ordered to an end or a goal, they attempted to discern the natural order and the order of the human world, largely because of the efforts of Spinoza, as well as, certainly, those of Kant, Nietzsche, Weber and Husserl. The history of a philosophical position is not a static one, but one that is constantly being rethought and rethought again about its merits.

As a step towards doing precisely this, the following sweeping generalizations in terms of medieval Islamic philosophy. In what follows to look closely at the writings of the medieval Islamic philosopher Muḥammad al-Fārābī (about 257 A.H./870 C.E., referred to as Farabi; Abū 'Alī al-Fārābī (about 257 A.H./870 C.E.), known in the West as Avicenna; and Ibn Rushd (520 A.H./1126 C.E.), known in the West as Averroes.

and subsequently became the subject of commentaries. The Scholastic movement took its first bearings from the Latin translations of those works which first came to light in Muslim Spain. Of special interest to us, formed as we are by a tradition of revealed religion, is the way in which these Muslim *falāsifah* investigated the possible harmonious links or the common interests between philosophy and revealed religion. Unwilling to subordinate one to the other or to argue that they belonged to separate spheres of human existence, these philosophers urged that the ultimate concerns of both philosophy and religion were identical and that it was therefore appropriate for each to assist the other.

In this respect, they participated in a discussion begun by Plato's Socrates in the *Republic* and nurtured by Aristotle in both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. Though the far-reaching political implications of Plato's and Aristotle's teaching often escape us today, they were as apparent to Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, and Spinoza as to those within the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition. From this perspective as well, then, a correct appreciation of the history of Western philosophy presupposes an adequate awareness of medieval Islamic philosophy. Moreover, the moderns, by their successful rejection of the classical Greek and the medieval Latin or Scholastic traditions, have persuaded us to neglect a number of questions crucial to our own well-being. For Plato and Aristotle as well as for their interpreters within the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition, human happiness — true human happiness and not simply what is generally believed to be human happiness — was of fundamental importance. They further agreed insofar as they held that to discern true human happiness it is necessary to have a clear notion of the end or the goal of human life as well as of the various perfections, excellences, or virtues within the grasp of human beings. Moreover, positing the universe and its parts to be ordered in such a manner that everything had an end or a goal, they attempted to discover possible parallels between that natural order and the order of the human soul. This perspective has now been rejected, largely because of the efforts of Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, and Spinoza, as well as, certainly, those of Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Nietzsche, not to mention Weber and Heidegger. Yet precisely because a rejection of a philosophical position is not equivalent to its refutation, it behooves us to think again about its merits.

As a step towards doing precisely that, and towards recasting these rather sweeping generalizations in terms of more defensible arguments, I propose in what follows to look closely at the ethical teaching of the three greatest representatives of this medieval Islamic philosophical tradition: Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (about 257 A.H./870 C.E.—339 A.H./950 C.E.), hereafter referred to as Farabi; Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā (370 A.H./980 C.E.—428 A.H./1037 C.E.), known in the West as Avicenna; and Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rushd (520 A.H./1126 C.E.—595 A.H./1198 C.E.), better

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known as Averroes. These three, the best known of the *falāsifah*, were also the most prolific. Moreover, each stands for a specific geographical and linguistic aspect of medieval Islamic culture. Farabi, with his long residence in Baghdad and shorter stays in Aleppo and Damascus, represents the Arab East. Avicenna, who was raised in Bukhara (now in southern USSR) and resided there until circumstances forced him to move to other Persian royal cities such as Hamadhan and Isfahan and who wrote in Persian as well as in Arabic, can be taken as representative of the Arab and Persian East. And Averroes, chief judge in Cordoba and in Seville in Spain, as well as sometime advisor to the Almohade rulers in Marrakesh in Morocco, is a prime example of the Arab West.

Precisely because their writings are so numerous, it seems appropriate to order the following discussion by considering the way the ethical teaching of each sheds light on three issues: the relation of philosophy to religion, the communal basis of ethics and the concomitant role of statecraft, and some specific characteristics of their ethical teaching. Because such a procedure obviates the possibility of careful textual exegesis, something that is especially important with these authors given the novel manner in which they formulate their different arguments and given our general ignorance about their teaching, efforts will be made to indicate the broader context in which the positions elaborated here occur.

#### FARABI

Farabi's writings are quite charming, and often deceptively so. His language is remarkably simple, his sentences quite uncomplicated. Most frequently, Farabi sets forth something resembling a narrative, almost a story about the way things are—both natural and conventional things—that is simply unobjectionable. As the narrative unfolds, the reader slowly begins to realize that Farabi has accounted for political leadership, prophecy, moral virtue, civic order—in short, for the major subjects of political discourse—in a completely unprecedented manner. Usually the account explains the ultimate reasons for which human beings live in civic association, how this association can best be ordered to meet the highest human needs, the way in which most actual regimes differ from this best order, and the reasons for which philosophy and religion deem this order to be indeed best.

His *Book of Religion* (1968) and *Attainment of Happiness* (1969a) are especially apt examples. The first is a treatise of slightly more than thirty pages containing a comprehensive statement about the order of the universe and the way that order is reflected in the teachings of virtuous religion as well as in political science (which is part of philosophy). He employs in his *Book of Religion* an almost playful description of the universe to account for its

major features and for the way it makes its complexity and apparition of simplicity and harmony through a novel juxtaposition of this treatise (1968, secs. 1–10) what it comprises, while the section of political science and what is self-contained. There is no mention of religion until the very end of to religion in the discussion of politics (1968: sec. 27).

In the *Attainment of Happiness* for religion and political science the universe. Only through an investigation of the universe is it possible to become aware of what has come into being (1969a, sec. 1). This is a three-part work, and something that is self-contained. These are Farabi's *Philosophy of Aristotle* (1969c), the latter two of which he explains the parts and the whole and that of Aristotle, doing so in the same goal and intended to set forth the same goal (1969c: secs. 1 and 99, and 1969b). *Happiness* has an aura of resolution about these matters would come throughout, the discussion is self-contained, the parallels with what lies ahead, the reader gradually forgets the details.

A theme running throughout the religious leader (*imām*), virtuous Or, as he explains (1969a: sec. 1) and the same idea." Such an identity between virtuous religion and philosophy, that is to say, understanding of the universe as it constitutes his ultimate perfection. They differ only in that each explains, philosophy in terms of investigations reached therein and readily accessible to a greater constant attempt to move from that is, from the way it first perception of its being or to an account

major features and for the way its different parts interact, a description which makes its complexity and apparent disorder seem mere phantoms as a new vision of simplicity and harmony is brought to light. All of this is presented through a novel juxtaposition of religion and political science. The first part of this treatise (1968, secs. 1–10)<sup>1</sup> is devoted to an explanation of religion and what it comprises, while the second (1968, secs. 11–27) contains an explanation of political science and what it investigates or sets forth. Each account is self-contained. There is no mention of political science in the discussion of religion until the very end of that part (1968: sec. 10), nor any reference to religion in the discussion of political science until the very end of the treatise (1968: sec. 27).

In the *Attainment of Happiness* Farabi explains why it is so important for religion and political science to be based on a proper understanding of the universe. Only through an investigation of the things existing in the universe is it possible to become aware of the ultimate perfection for which man has come into being (1969a, secs. 17–18).<sup>2</sup> This treatise is the first part of a three-part work, and something like an extensive preface to the other two parts. These are Farabi's *Philosophy of Plato* (1969b) and his *Philosophy of Aristotle* (1969c), the latter two being separate essays of unequal length in which he explains the parts and the ranks of order in the philosophy of Plato and that of Aristotle, doing so for the purpose of showing that they had the same goal and intended to set forth one philosophy (1969a, sec. 63. But cf. 1969c: secs. 1 and 99, and 1969b: secs. 31–38). The style of the *Attainment of Happiness* has an aura of resoluteness, as though the most cursory reflections about these matters would corroborate the soundness of Farabi's account. Throughout, the discussion is so pellucid, the explanations so unobjectionable, the parallels with what lies behind actual practice so numerous that the reader gradually forgets the distance between this account and daily life.

A theme running throughout Farabi's writings is that the terms philosopher, religious leader (*imām*), virtuous ruler, and law-giver all have one meaning. Or, as he explains (1969a: sec. 58), "they all finally agree by signifying one and the same idea." Such an identity exists because of the fundamental harmony between virtuous religion and the political science which is subordinate to philosophy, that is to say, between religion and philosophy. The same understanding of the universe and of man's place in it as well as of what constitutes his ultimate perfection may be found in religion and in philosophy. They differ only in that each expresses this understanding in a different manner, philosophy in terms of investigations and inquiries as well as of the conclusions reached therein and religion in terms of images and examples more readily accessible to a greater number of people. In philosophy, there is a constant attempt to move from an immediate awareness of a phenomenon — that is, from the way it first presents itself to our cognition — to an explanation of its being or to an account of the way it is as well as of how and why

the *falāsifah*, were also geographical and linguistic. His long residence in the Arab East (in the USSR) and his residence in Persian royal cities such as Herat as well as in Arabic, Persian, and Arabic East. And Averroes, as a sometime advisor to the Sultan, is a prime example of the

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it came to be that way and eventually of what it is supposed to be or to become (1969a: secs. 4–6). Though philosophy does arrive at an understanding of what ultimate human happiness is, understanding alone does not suffice for bringing such happiness about. To achieve human happiness, a philosophically-minded individual must have recourse to deliberative and moral virtues as well as to certain practical arts (1969a: secs. 22–32). Now even though religion has the same understanding of man, the universe, and man's ultimate perfection as philosophy, religion is more concerned with explaining the opinions people should hold and the actions they should perform so that they might attain ultimate happiness than in investigating these questions as philosophy does.

Consequently, the founder of a religion first sets forth the theoretical and volitional opinions that people ought to hold if they are to function as responsible members of the religious community. By means of the theoretical opinions, the founder describes the characteristics of the deity, the universe and its parts as well as how it comes to be, human existence and the human soul, prophecy and revelation, and then life and death as well as the life to come with its attendant happiness or misery. The volitional opinions are presented so as to describe the virtuous prophets, kings, rulers, and imams who have existed in previous times and from whose conduct one can learn how to lead the proper kind of life (1968: sec. 2). Because belief is not enough, the founder also sets down actions the adherents of the religion must perform. These include speeches and deeds by which they praise and extol the deity as well as the virtuous prophets, kings, rulers, and imams, blame and vituperate the vicious ones, or learn to act justly with one another in the dealings they have as fellow citizens (1968: sec. 3).

With respect to the attention paid to actions, the founding of a religious community is highly similar to the founding of a city. In the latter instance (according to political science, which is subordinate to philosophy), special care is taken so that the citizens acquire the kinds of dispositions and character traits which will allow them to function well as citizens of a virtuous political regime (1968: sec. 14a). Little or no attention is paid to furnishing the citizens of this regime with opinions, but the ruler and the law-giver thoroughly investigate all the subjects comprised by philosophy in order to ascertain that this regime is indeed such as to afford its citizens ultimate human happiness. In the account Farabi provides of this investigation, it becomes clear that the practical wisdom or prudence which they thereby acquire and which guides their ruling art is identical to the revelation which guides the founder of a virtuous religious community (1968: secs. 14d, 18, 19–22, 24–26, and 27).

Thus whether the issue is the sense in which the terms philosopher, imam, virtuous ruler, and law-giver all signify the same idea, or whether it is the way in which the founder of a religious community (by means of revelation) and the founder of a political regime (by means of prudence) aim at the same

goals and stress the same kind of a close link between philosophy and religion.

Integral to the implication of this is that Farabi is somewhat vague about what moral virtues are to be inculcated in the citizenry. He emphasizes that the moral virtues to be inculcated are to emphasize the overwhelming moral virtue of justice. Moral virtue is subservient to the goal of justice. It requires. The moral virtues, like the practical arts, are used to reach the human perfection or by means of revelation. The official presentation of these practical arts has a significance other than as inculcated. It is to act in accordance with the law. Farabi, with this general neglect of moral habits (*akhlāq*) and practical arts. One encounters at most a few practical arts. One acquires the moral dispositions and character traits virtuous ends aimed at in the founding of a city.

By placing so much emphasis on the practical arts, it so that ultimate human happiness is made moral virtue, or the ethical life, the goal of its acquisition, a communal characteristic of Farabi's ethical teaching is that the citizenry is docile or their recalcitrant characteristics are to be corrected, and ways of life (that are to be theirs) or are compelled to act in accordance with them (1969a: secs. 39–43). Another implication is that Farabi constantly stresses that ultimate happiness is to be achieved only within a political regime. Farabi on this subject and in his discussion of the moral virtues can be described as an ambiguous and complex figure. It can reasonably be translated "religion is the most preferable primarily because of its practical arts" (4) that *millah* is synonymous with practical arts. To characterize religion, that is, creed (*nah*)—it being implicitly understood that the practical arts and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad are the practical arts and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. The sentence of the treatise, it is evident that the practical arts are tones for Farabi. "Millah," he states, "is determined and restricted by its first ruler" (1968: sec. 1). Thus, no one should turn away from the practical arts, but a different path to ultimate happiness is not possible. Finally, Farabi's insistence on

goals and stress the same kind of development within the citizens, there is a close link between philosophy and religion in Farabi's teaching.

Integral to the implications of this teaching is that in the *Book of Religion* he is somewhat vague about the opinions, dispositions, and character traits to be inculcated in the citizens. This is because his primary intention is to emphasize the overwhelming importance of the ends of the regime. For Farabi, moral virtue is subservient to the theoretical understanding the ruler first acquires. The moral virtues, like the deliberative virtues and the practical arts, are used to reach the human perfection revealed either in theoretical investigation or by means of revelation. Consequently, he never goes beyond a superficial presentation of these phenomena nor ever suggests that they have any significance other than as instruments by which the ruler brings the citizens to act in accordance with the laws and regulations of the community. In keeping with this general neglect of moral virtue, little is said about ethics per se, that is, moral habits (*akhlāq*) and character traits (*'ādāt*), in any of Farabi's writings. One encounters at most an oblique reference to the need for people to acquire the moral dispositions, habits, and ways of life consonant with the virtuous ends aimed at in the community.

By placing so much emphasis on the end of the community, in ordering it so that ultimate human happiness may be attained by the citizens, Farabi makes moral virtue, or the ethical habits and moral dispositions leading to its acquisition, a communal concern. One indication of this communal basis of Farabi's ethical teaching is that the citizens, depending upon either their docile or their recalcitrant character, are either instructed in the habits, dispositions, and ways of life (that is, in the opinions and actions which ought to be theirs) or are compelled to act according to prescriptions which embody them (1969a: secs. 39–43). Another indication of this communal basis of ethics is that Farabi constantly speaks of virtuous religion as though it could be achieved only within a political community. Both in the title of his treatise on this subject and in his discussion of that theme, he uses what can best be described as an ambiguous term—*millah*. It is a term which can just as reasonably be translated “religious community” as “religion.” The latter seems preferable primarily because of his explicit insistence at one point (1968: sec. 4) that *millah* is synonymous with all of the other terms usually taken to characterize religion, that is, creed (*dīn*), divine law (*sharī'ah*), and tradition (*sunnah*)—it being implicitly understood that “tradition” signifies the speeches and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. Nonetheless, from the very opening sentence of the treatise, it is evident that *millah* has very distinct political overtones for Farabi. “*Millah*,” he observes, “consists of opinions and actions which are determined and restricted by the conditions prescribed for a community by its first ruler” (1968: sec. 1). As long as the community is properly ordered, no one should turn away from these opinions and actions in order to pursue a different path to ultimate happiness.

Finally, Farabi's insistence on the identity of meaning between the terms



blurs that distinction. Though he does admit that morals and politics belong to practical science, he elaborates upon them only in the course of his theoretical discussions, that is, either in his *On the Soul* (1975) or the *Shifā* (a treatise which takes up the theme and many of the discussions of Aristotle's *De Anima*) or in his *Metaphysics* (1960), also a part of the *Shifā*.

It is in Book Ten of his *Metaphysics* that Avicenna provides his fullest account of moral virtue. He begins by explaining the superiority of the prophet to all other men, indicating thereby that both philosophy and politics are subordinate to religion. The prophet is the best of men because he has acquired the practical moral habits by which he can manage his own affairs as well as provide for those of the people for whom he sets down laws and establishes justice, and because he has developed his soul to the point that it has become a free intellect (1960: X, 435:13–15). Such an explanation tacitly suggests that the prophet completes the partial lives of the philosopher and the virtuous ruler—the philosopher having a fully developed intellect, but not the practical moral virtues whose mastery would allow him to rule people well, and the virtuous ruler having the latter but not the former.

Whereas the opinions and actions Farabi's virtuous first ruler set before the people were clearly such as to help them acquire the moral habits and dispositions which would allow them to live together harmoniously, and in such living to move towards ultimate happiness, Avicenna's prophet dwells more on beliefs which have no such immediate political relevance. Some even have an anti-political or ascetic bent, as though the highest goal towards which thoughtful humans should strive were to weaken the ties between their soul and their body in order to achieve separation from the body (1960: X, 442: 2–443: 12 and 445: 14–446: 4; see also 1960: IX, 429: 16–431: 11). In this sense, ultimate happiness is not acquired through political association, but through a turning away from political life and all other bodily concerns. Running throughout Avicenna's writings, this tension between the demands of political life and the demands of complete spiritual life derives from the subordination of philosophy and politics to religion, from the claim that the highest human achievement is the pure intellectual or spiritual perception proper to a disembodied soul which has gone beyond the concerns of the practical intellect (1975: 186: 2–8; see also 1908a: 60: 4–61: 3 and 63: 11–70: 1; 1954, 42: 18–19; and 1892: 198: 9–13). Unfortunately, Avicenna never explains what prompts the prophet to turn aside from this all-important goal of untrammelled spiritual perception in order to legislate for a political community. Nor, in spite of his repeated insistence on the need to do away with or go beyond the practical intellect in order to develop fully the theoretical or spiritual intellect, does he ever make clear why the prophet's mastery of the practical moral virtues should constitute his superiority over the philosopher.

This tension or unclarity notwithstanding, Avicenna's prophet does set down laws for a political community, laws which provide for its administration and

survival as well as for the moral and physical well-being of its citizens. Avicenna pictures human beings as first coming together in order to survive. Initially no more than a basic response to nature's inattentiveness, it leads, under the best of circumstances, to their spiritual betterment as well. Their immediate need for someone who will set down laws and thereby establish justice so that they might live together harmoniously points beyond mere physical concerns because justice, properly conceived, provides for all human good (1960: 441: 3–442: 2 and 455: 1–12; see also 1975: 181: 5–19 and 183: 4–17). Avicenna's reasoning is that justice is a balance or mean acquired by means of moral habits and character traits and sought either to break the hold of the passions so that the soul may be purified and liberated from the body or to use the passions with respect to the concerns of this world.

One way men should make use of the passions for what pertains to this world is to take pleasure in their natural appetites for things like food, clothing, and sex in order to preserve their bodies and to have children. Avicenna also suggests another way, namely, giving vent to those passions like anger, hate, and pride in order to be courageous enough to preserve the city. With respect to this proper use of the appetitive passions (or temperance) and of the irascible passions (or courage), Avicenna speaks of the need to observe a mean between vices of excess and deficiency. Though he does no more than hint at the consequences, he must have in mind that men can harm one another by pursuing the bodily pleasures to excess or by being rash and foolhardy; on the other hand, if they are so insensitive to pleasure that they do not eat adequately and fail to engage in sexual intercourse or shy away from protecting what is their own as do those who are overly fearful, the city will be harmed.

Avicenna says little here, or in the treatise which discusses these same issues—*On the Science of Moral Habits* (1908b)—about practical wisdom. We are told that it is to be used for administrative affairs and is opposed to the vices of discernment, nothing more (1960: 455: 12–13; 1908b: 152: 10–14 with 152: 14–156: 9).

These three moral habits and character traits (temperance, courage, and practical wisdom—also referred to by Avicenna as moral virtues), by means of which justice is acquired, are for the well-being of human beings in this world. They can be pursued adequately without theoretical wisdom, even though it is superior to them. At the end of his account, Avicenna presents theoretical wisdom as being so important that one can attain happiness only by acquiring it as well as these three virtues, all of which add up to justice. Clearly, one cannot be happy—however virtuous one is—without having theoretical wisdom, but Avicenna says nothing about the converse. Instead he indicates that the only thing to be desired more than justice plus theoretical wisdom is “to win, in addition, the prophetic qualities” (1960: X, 455: 14–16).

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 and thus to live harmoniously in this world. If the citizens also embrace the  
 beliefs about God and the life to come as set down by the prophet (the non-  
 political beliefs alluded to above), they can aspire to happiness in the here-  
 after. Those able to acquire theoretical wisdom as well as justice may aspire  
 to happiness in this life, but to a happiness inferior to that of the prophet —  
 presumably because the prophet alone is able to purify his soul so that it  
 becomes liberated from the body and thus achieves intellectual or spiritual  
 perception.

Unlike Farabi, Avicenna does not define virtue in terms of the end of the  
 regime. In fact, he says very little about its end, perhaps because he is per-  
 suaded that the kind of laws laid down by the prophet guarantees its recti-  
 tude. Nor does he dwell very much on the content of these moral virtues.  
 Apart from indicating the general usefulness of courage, temperance, and  
 practical wisdom, or the basic issues to which they can be applied, and from  
 suggesting that there are other moral habits and character traits useful for  
 purifying the soul as well as for helping it become liberated from the body,  
 Avicenna usually maintains a guarded silence about these matters. On the  
 few occasions when he does go beyond such indications and suggestions, his  
 concern for exhaustive enumerations of the various virtues and moral habits  
 or for precise divisions of the various parts and powers of the soul keeps him  
 from providing a substantive account of them. For these reasons, Avicenna's  
 several explanations of moral virtue and moral habits or ethics leave many  
 questions still to be answered.

#### AVERROES

This is no harsher a judgment on Avicenna than that which Averroes or,  
 for that matter, al-Ghazali (450 A.H./1058 C.E.-505 A.H./1111 C.E.), makes of  
 him. Averroes especially blames Avicenna for discussing complex questions  
 in a confusing and frequently misleading manner, as well as for setting forth  
 explanations about issues like the eternity of the world which misrepresent  
 the traditional philosophical treatment and even weaken the religious account.  
 Yet when compared with Averroes' devastating examination of al-Ghazali's  
 attacks upon philosophy and the philosophers, his criticisms of Avicenna seem  
 mild indeed.

Though in no way as charming or uncomplicated as Farabi's, Averroes'  
 style also has a special allure. He writes in a direct and engaging manner,  
 always taking care to be consistent in his terminology and to alert the reader  
 to new or less well-known terms. Similarly, on the not infrequent occasions  
 when he sets forth a long hypothetical argument, he very precisely indicates



conscientious about alerting the  
when that is appropriate.

1 Aristotle, Averroes himself di-  
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*rence of the Incoherence* (1930)<sup>3</sup>  
17–18; 1947: 2: 2–3: 7; 1930: 358:  
1: 3–5 and 105: 26–28.) Averroes  
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ntary along with the text com-  
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sement of Farabi as in his criti-  
had to defend from attack the  
ce, Averroes follows a path dis-  
public writings, above all in the  
tive of the divine law (*shari'ah*).  
than as a similitude of philoso-  
of philosophy (see 1959: 1: 10–14,  
t is based on his claim that just  
with vision" (59: 2), and similar  
out by the jurist (i.e., the *shari'ah*  
soning and legal judgments, so  
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59: 3: 1–13 with 2: 1). Able even-  
sophy have the same goal, which  
Averroes can then point to the  
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In all of his scientific or demonstrative writings except one, Averroes explicitly strives to recover the philosophic discipline as it was set forth by Aristotle. Making the most he could of inadequate translations and confusing commentaries, Averroes wrote two and sometimes three commentaries on almost every one of Aristotle's treatises. Even in the course of that single exception—his commentary on Plato's *Republic* (1974)—Averroes was sufficiently confident about his understanding of Aristotle's metaphysical teaching to substitute it for Plato's. Moreover, taking some liberties as a commentator, Averroes seeks in this treatise to carry his reflections on the harmony between philosophy and the divine law somewhat further. He does so by pointing frequently to the folly or perniciousness of the arguments made by certain theologians, the point being that in a well-ordered political community great care will be taken to ensure that the citizens embrace no harmful doctrines.

Though eager to start from the perspective of the divine law's soundness in his popular writings, Averroes has no compunctions about showing how misleading are the interpretations of it set forth by some of its staunchest defenders. Nor does he hesitate to ask for the student of philosophy the same consideration normally accorded the student of jurisprudence. Both need time and assistance to arrive at a comprehension of their art. Although the student of philosophy may sometimes need to turn to the works of learned men from former times and even from other nations, there is nothing wrong with seeking such assistance. It may be the only means of coming to the truth, and truth is the same for philosophy as for religion (1959: 5: 1–18). Precisely because philosophy helps us to know the Creator and His creations, that is, because it helps us to understand religion better, there is a fundamental harmony between the two. And as long as there is such a harmony between philosophy and religion, there should be no tension between the practitioners of either.

According to Averroes' commentary on Plato's *Republic* (1974: 22: 3–6), a book he commented on because Aristotle's *Politics* had not yet come into his hands, human beings live together because no one human being can acquire all the virtues. It is only by mutual assistance that they can hope to develop more than one, much less all. Recognizing that their happiness depends on such a development, they live together. It is in this sense alone that human beings are political by nature according to Averroes, even though it is also true that by living together in harmony they are able to provide more easily for their subsistence. Acknowledging that these observations belong more properly to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a work he considers to provide the general rules for the practical art of politics, Averroes sets them forth as a kind of preface to his commentary on Plato's *Republic* (1974: 22: 9–23: 12). At the same time, he insists that these virtues admit of a hierarchy and that theoretical knowledge occupies the most important place.

As Averroes pursues the argument of Plato's *Republic*, this primacy of theoretical knowledge becomes more and more pronounced until it eventually becomes evident that no one can lay claim to any of the other virtues unless reason rules in his soul (1974: 51:9–52:11). More importantly, for that hierarchy of the virtues to be established and the citizens to be raised so as to develop them, political rule must be in the hands of a philosopher (1974: 61:18–21). Here, then, Averroes follows the argument of Plato's *Republic* in order to set forth an argument very similar to that of Farabi's in the *Attainment of Happiness* and the *Book of Religion*. Though he says little about prophecy in general, he does note that the goal of the divine law and of the city sketched out here are the same. He pursues neither the larger issue of prophecy nor pauses for a more detailed account of each virtue because he is more intent upon praising the merits of this city. At several junctures he reminds the reader of times when different Muslim regimes resembled the regime spoken of here.

It is also worth noting that Averroes endorses Plato's account of the different classes of citizens and has no compunctions about the methods Plato uses to favor the likelihood of like begetting like. Just as he points to a natural hierarchy among the citizens in his popular works (see 1959: 19:10–20:1 and 21:3–22:7), so here he distinguishes between guardians and lesser classes. The hierarchy among the classes of the citizens is reinforced by the education each receives so that the communal basis of moral habits and character traits serves here to foster inequality. The inequality is not, however, inequitable. The citizens are trained according to their capacities and moved from one class to another solely on the basis of merit.

Throughout the commentary on Plato's *Republic*, Averroes emphasizes virtue—the theoretical virtues, the deliberative or cognitive virtues, and the moral virtues. The only extended discussion of moral habits and character traits to be found in his writings occurs in his *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (1562). There he stays very close to Aristotle's text, especially in his enumeration and explanation of the moral virtues. According to this explanation, ethics are simply moral habits and character traits, that is, the kind of actions we train ourselves in or are trained in according to the doctrine of the mean until they become habitual and which concern the passions of the soul susceptible of being controlled by reason. The other virtues—cognitive or deliberative and theoretical—are concerned with the intellect and have nothing to do with the mean. No such distinction occurs in the commentary on Plato's *Republic*, for there Averroes emphasizes the end to which the different kinds of virtues point—namely, the rule of theoretical virtue. Except in his *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, then, Averroes joins Farabi in taking Plato as a guide and paying little attention to the content of the virtues, especially the moral virtues, or the means to them, so that more attention might be paid to their end or purpose.

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## CONCLUSION

It should be evident from the preceding discussion that each of these authors has an ethical teaching which differs fundamentally from the current understanding of ethics. Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes view ethics as a minor aspect of moral conduct, as something which relates to the habits and character traits which ought to be developed so that an individual can act according to the dictates of right reason. In this sense, ethics is part of a larger whole. Most immediately, moral virtue constitutes that larger whole. Yet even moral virtue is linked to a still larger whole, namely, theoretical knowledge. Because they all view the human soul as rational and the end of human life as theoretical excellence—even though Avicenna's formulation of this end seems to suggest that theoretical excellence can be attained only when the soul is liberated from the body—all of the other virtues or excellences are ordered so as to contribute to that end.

The same reasoning accounts for the explanation that Farabi and Averroes give of political life and for their attempts to emphasize the harmony between philosophy and religion as well as philosophy and politics. As was noted above, the tension or unclarity in Avicenna's thinking between the demands of practical life and those of a more ascetic life keep him from agreeing with Farabi on this issue. He can understand the basic needs that are satisfied by political association and can even point to some of the unexpected benefits deriving from it. But because he thinks ultimate human perfection requires the liberation of the soul from the body, he refuses to endorse the notion that philosophy and religion (or religion and politics) are in ultimate agreement.

Today, however, virtue and ethics, not to mention philosophy and religion, are viewed differently. Virtue is usually considered a part of ethics—often a quite minor part—and the emphasis within ethics is placed on rights and duties (jointly comprising what is known as obligation theory). Our attention is no longer centered on the ordering of human life according to a comprehensive and overriding end conceived as the good for man qua rational being. Rather we occupy ourselves with the so-called intuition of moral principles, with our willingness to universalize the maxim of our action, or with the maximization by our actions of preferred outcomes. Thereby we no longer address the problem of what end or ends are worth living for.

How we have come to our current position is a phenomenon worthy of investigation. One thing should be clear now, however. The medieval Islamic philosophical tradition presents an important alternative to that position, one which was brought forth from Plato and Aristotle and carried on for some time during the Latin and Christian Middle Ages by Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and numerous others. Had it not been for the efforts of thinkers such as Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, the history of philosophy would have

been greatly altered. Though the Greek texts of Plato and Aristotle were eventually recovered, they were not recovered in time for such seminal thinkers as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas — not to mention Roger Bacon, Giles of Rome, and Marsilius of Padua — to benefit from them. These individuals learned more about Plato and Aristotle through the teaching of medieval Muslim philosophers, as well as through translations of Plato's and Aristotle's works that gave rise to the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition, than they could have from their own tradition. Were we now more familiar with that fascinating tradition, we would surely be able to decide whether the moderns refuted or merely rejected the teaching of the ancients, and then to judge more soundly about opinions we now take for granted.

## NOTES

1. The references to the *Book of Religion* are to the numbered divisions of Muhsin Mahdi's Arabic edition, *Kitāb al-Millah wa Nuṣūṣ Ukhrā*. (See Farabi, 1968.)
2. The references to the *Attainment of Happiness* are to the numbered divisions of Muhsin Mahdi's translation of the text. (See Farabi, 1969a.)
3. The Arabic title of this work is *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*. The work is a response to Al-Ghazali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahāfut al-Falāsifah)*.

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