BOOK REVIEW


Dr. Muhsin Mahdi, Professor of Oriental Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, is well known for his publications, 'Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History', and 'Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle'. He is also a co-editor with Ralph Lerner of the Source book of Medieval Political Philosophy published by the Free Press in the Agora Editions, New York. He has also published the first edition of the Arabic text of 'Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Aristotle'.

Al-Farabi (ca. 870-950), the great Arab philosopher and founder of the Islamic philosophic tradition was equally admired by Muslim, Jewish and Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages. His commentaries on Aristotle's works established his reputation as one of the greatest exponents of philosophy. His acquaintance with the works of Plato and his approach to politics enabled him to bridge the gulf between reason and revelation—a theme that was further discussed in the writings of Avicenna, Avempace, Averroes and other philosophers in the subsequent period. Many of Al-Farabi's more than one hundred works perished, and others are preserved either in Hebrew character or in medieval Latin translation.

The present volume consists of the following five fragments of the writings of Al-Farabi:

1. Kitâb al-Millât, the Book of Religion.
2. Fi al-Iltm Al-Madání wa 'Ilm al-Fiqh wa 'Ilm al-Kalâm, on Political Science, Jurisprudence, and Dialectical Theology.
3. Fuṣûl Mâbâdi' 'Ārâ' Aḥl al-Madinât al-Fâdîlah, Chapters of the Principles of the Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City.

In his introduction the learned Editor elaborately discusses the whereabouts of these fragments, their importance and the method of editing. The book ends in a Bibliography, three lists (of Openings of Paragraphs, Koranic verses, Parallel Passages in the Book of Religion and the Enumeration of the Sciences), and two indices of book titles and proper names.

Al-Farabi's Book of Religion (كتاب الْمَلِلَة) is important for the study of his Virtuous City (السياسة المدنية) and Political Regime (المدينة الفاضلة). It presents a comprehensive account of political science and is more informative than the fifth chapter of
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The Arabic Text has been for the first time edited on the basis of its full text contained in the Leiden manuscript (Cod. Or. 1002, fols. 51v-60v) and the paraphrase contained in the Taquriyyah collection in the Egyptian National Library in Cairo (Akhlāq 290, pp. 288-300, 346-47).

The editor has traced some textual parallels in the Book and Religion and the fifth chapter of the Enumeration of the Sciences which urged him to reappraise the text on the basis of the second edition by Osman Amine (Cairo, 1949), the second edition by A. Gonzalez Palencia (Madrid, 1953), the manuscript in the Köprütu Library in Istanbul (Mehmet, 1604, fols. 33v-38r) and the Princeton manuscript (Yahuda, 308, fols. 86v-88v). This new edition of a section of the book, in fact, necessitates that a new edition of the whole book (احصاء العلوم) should be prepared on the basis of the erstwhile mentioned manuscripts.

The third fragment entitled “Chapters of the Principles of the Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City” was traced by Dr. Muhsin Mahdi in a manuscript in the Süleymanic Library in Istanbul (Kilic Ali Paşa 674, fols. 1v-6r). It gives a summary of the Virtuous City (المدينة الفاضلة) in six chapters. In these chapters the term “religion” (الدين) has often been substituted for the term “city” (المدينة) (Leiden, 1895).

The fourth tractate supplies the text of “A Magnificent Invocation” (دعاء عظيم) and provides the reader with a good example of what Al-Fārābī means by “speeches” (الأفواه) as a subdivision of religious acts (the other being الأرائ). This Invocation has an ornate style, and indicates his complete mastery over the Arabic language. It also contains seven lines of verses in two separate prayers obviously belonging to one and the same Ode composed in the praise of Allah. This text consists of fifteen prayers some of which end in extracts from the Quranic verses. This text also presents a fine example of rhymed prose. The themes are obviously derived from the Qur’ān and the Sunnah.

Finally, this volume comprises a text under the title: من الأسلاقة والاجوبة الجامعه - Brilliant Questions and Comprehensive Answers. It forms part of the Ayasofiya manuscript No. 4855, which contains a large number of small treatises including Al-Fārābī’s Waṣṣaṣ, published by Louis Cheikho in his جوامع السياسة, رسالة في السياسة and Masa’il Mutafarriqah published by Friedrich Dieterici in his الثمرة المرضية. The treatise (Ayasofiya No. 4855, fols. 64r-71v) has been clearly attributed to Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī and begins with the following expression:

The word ملتق (an extract) makes it clear that the contents have been collected from various books, or have been taken from an anthology of questions answered by al-Fārābī. Certain questions and answers are written in Persian, their Arabic version has been given by the learned editor in the footnote. As Fārāb produced two scholars bearing the nicknames Abū Naṣr—Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī and Abū Naṣr Ismā’īl Ḥammād al-Jawhari (of the 4th century H.), the editor expresses his doubt concerning its ascription to al-Fārābī, the Philosopher. But it is beyond doubt that Abū Naṣr al-Jawhari, author
of the famous lexicon, al-Ṣiḥāḥ, is usually referred to as “al-Jawhari”. It may, therefore, be said with all certainty that the text in hand is one of the 'extracts' (المقتطيات) prepared by al-Fārābī as stated by his biographers, especially as there is no evidence to prove otherwise. But the editor seems to be too cautious. He, therefore, declares, “It is possible that the work is part of the mass of notes collected by Al-Fārābī in preparation for projected compositions, and that it was dictated to a student who posed certain questions to him.”

Now, the treatise consists of ninety-five passages which mostly explain meanings of certain Quranic expressions and describe the deeds of prophets from Adam to the last Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon them). Thus, this text enables the reader to understand the first text that discusses "الإسلام" religion, as it throws considerable light on the prophets and people mentioned in the Holy Qur‘ān. The learned editor has compared the historical accounts of the treatise with parallel accounts recorded by al-Muqaddisi, al-Mas‘ūdi, al-Ṭabarî and al-Tha‘ālibi.

The English preface added to the book has increased the value of the book in so far as it gives a summary of his Arabic Introduction for the English reader.

The editor and the publishers deserve our sincere congratulations for making these writings of al-Fārābī available to us for the first time.

M. S. H. M‘ASUMÎ.