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FARABI AND THREE DIFFERENT STRATEGIES OF INTERPRETATION

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There is no doubt that Farabi played a significant role in the history of world philosophy. What is not altogether clear, however, is the nature of Farabi's significance for philosophy as such, since it seems that opinions about the weight of his contribution vary dramatically. In other words, how are the contrasting modes of discourse on Farabi to be conceptualized? Is his importance of a merely archaeological nature? Is Farabi's significance of any historical value? Does he possess any contemporary meaning for post-secular social theorists of this day? In answering these questions, I have come up with a classificatory scheme which may be of use in conceptualizing contradictory trends in approaching Farabi's intellectual legacy.

Keywords: Farabi, Eurocentrism, house mentality, field mentality

Introduction

By way of introduction, let me enumerate three different but, no doubt, interconnected modes of discourse on Farabi which, despite each of them being important in its own right, must be differently ranked according to the criteria which I will develop with respect to Farabi along the guidelines proposed by contemporary Iranian philosopher Professor Reza Davari. In assessing the corpus of scholarship produced around the figure of Farabi, one can discern three positions adopted by authors of the respective studies: those who regard Farabi as Alfarabius; those who treat him as Al-Farabi and, finally, those who speak of Farabi with no recourse to any Latinized or Arabized name, staying by the simple Iranian form. This relationship I propose to designate as House Mentality versus Field Mentality. I would like to explain my viewpoint in some detail so that the reader can get a better understanding of where I am heading to. In my view, there are three different interpretative strategies applicable to Farabi's legacy which reside in either archaeological or historical discourse, or make up for an alternative to both of these.

Archaeological discourse on Alfarabius

By archeological discourse on Farabi, I refer to a particular interpretative strategy based on a linear approach to the history of ideas as starting back in Greece and ending in the Modern West. In other words, the importance of Farabi is here reduced to the role of a link in the long-standing chain of ideas united under an

accumulative frame of analysis stretching from Hellas to Paris and from Oxford to Chicago. Within this archaeological frame of interpretation, Farabi is considered a significant figure as far as his position in the great chain of Eurocentric historiography of philosophy is concerned. The fundamentals of archaeological discourse rest on the assumption that Western thought forms an unbroken line of progress which includes only a brief episode during which a non-Western element became responsible for the transmission of the ideas of rationalism. In other words, in the Eurocentric vision of the history of ideas, Farabi was solely essential in the "handing down" of Aristotle's thought to the Christian West during the Middle Ages. To put it otherwise, the importance of Farabi is measured against his alleged contribution to the Eurocentric realm of ideas. In this reading, Farabi is turned into a new medium symbolized by the Latinized form of his name, Alfarabius. It is therefore assumed that, in the world of ideas, Farabi has no significance of his own and deserves only to be considered in relation to another master-narrative in his *intermediary role*, i.e., as Alfarabius. To put it otherwise, this approach rests on the assumption that Farabi should not really be taken into account from any contemporary perspective, neither can the categories or concepts used by him be applied to any problems perceived as actual, all this due to the fact that the function fulfilled by Farabi goes exclusively with the wider panorama of the Western history of ideas. Such function can only be studied as one studies archaeological remains and artefacts of bygone cultures and civilizations. Or, on a more subtle line of argument, one needs to understand the function which Alfarabius had in the past as this would assist us in understanding where we stand today in the frame of modernist world of ideas, but it would be a mistake to replace archaeological significance of Alfarabius with epistemological importance of his ideas in terms of *contemporaneity*. This distinction is pivotal in terms of philosophical reflection as it has to do with the question of authenticity and unauthenticity, or the problem of possibility and impossibility.

Historical discourse on Al-Farabi

Beside this, another kind of discourse on Farabi is possible, the one which is centred on the historical aspects of Farabi and his writings. Though it is not so easy to distinguish between the historical and the archaeological perspective, both being primarily concerned with the past rather than with the present or the future, it would be wrong to see the two approaches as equivalent or even similar. Indeed, those guided by a predominantly historical interest in Farabi refuse to envisage this figure mainly or alone *in relation to the West*, as someone who would attain importance only in the role of an intermediary between cultures, handing down the wisdom from Hellas to Modern Europe. For the adepts of this reading, Farabi is Al-Farabi, a significant philosopher in his own right belonging to a particular civilization with all its distinctive features and in all its complexity that cannot be reduced or overlooked to fit a Eurocentric vision of history. In this paradigm, Al-Farabi is regarded as a political philosopher who teaches how to think anew about politics; his significance for contemporary thought, however, be it political, cultural, or social reflection, is more intellectual than practical. This means that though Farabi is given full consideration on his own terms, these *terms* in themselves, i.e., the entire conceptual framework of Farabi's thought, is of little relevance for the time and the world we live in – the world of late, or liquid, modernity which is ontologically insecure and generally disenchanting. The master narrative

for his reading is modernity, where by modernity one must understand the Eurocentric vision of the world; it follows by extension that it would be a mistake to think of multiple forms of modernities seeing as the European vision of reality has transcultural value, if not universal significance. Hence it would be a grave mistake to use, for modern thinking, the categories of Al-Farabi who belongs to a pre-modern world. But why then should one take trouble to engage with Al-Farabi at all? The answer is that, for all the indisputable intellectual brilliance of the Western civilizations, there is a limit, always to be kept in mind, since any brilliance has an expiry date, failing to realize which one risks to fall into romantic traps of the so-called discontents of the Euro-Atlantic World Order. The architects of historical interpretative strategy are interested in Al-Farabi primarily in the same manner as one may be interested in a brilliant novel such as *The Brothers Karamazov*. From this perspective, it would be a mistake to expect from a novel to give an account of reality comparable to that provided by a work of science, which is supposed to reflect on its subject in all its complexity. Although these distinctions have become quite redundant in the context of the “postmodern turn” in philosophy, the current approaches toward non-Western categories, non-Western concepts, or non-Eurocentric systems of thinking have not yet internalized the postmodern paradigm, and it will be bizarre, therefore, to turn to Al-Farabi for practical directions or to study his work for any practical solutions to serious political problems of the modern or postmodern world.

The alternative discourse on Farabi

I have chosen three different styles in describing the contribution to thinking brought about by Farabi; in the first mode, I have employed the term Alfarabius in order to define a particular strategy of reading Farabi as an intermediary in a linear historiography of philosophy; in the second mode, I chose the Arabic form of Farabi's name, Al-Farabi, to denote the approach which recognizes the intellectual significance of Farabi while denying him any practical importance in contemporary context. These two prevailing strategies of interpretation have their own merit, but they do not exhaust the potential of the intellectual frame of reference provided by Farabi's work. What is of interest to me is contemporary significance of Farabi as a source of concept-formation in overcoming the Eurocentric pitfalls of modernity, for which the key is the ability to craft new forms of post-Eurocentric possibilities of being in the world. For this end, I have chosen the Persian form of Farabi's name, i.e. Farabi without any reference to its Arabic or Latin styles of writing which have been used respectively in the archaeological and the historical model of inquiry on Farabi's philosophical legacy. In order to expand the alternative mode of understanding Farabi, I would like to introduce the two concepts which are ‘House Mentality’ and ‘Field Mentality’. These notions were coined by Malcolm X in describing two models of subjectivity, i.e., submissive mentality and emancipative mentality. He argues that a ‘house human being’ is an alienated person, i.e. someone who has lost his/her own sense of subjectivity and incessantly attempts to identify him/herself with the master, master-narrative or dominating mode of being. On the other hand, a ‘field person’ is someone who musters up all her/his powers to distance from the master narrative and who knows that he or she is not similar to the master, and as long as he or she agrees to define her/himself in terms of the master-narrative s/he will remain enchained. In other words, a field person is conscious of her/his own subjectivity, and this sense of distance will provide her/him with a possibility to emancipate her/himself from tutelage. Assuming

this line of reflection is sound, I would like to argue that the first two interpretative strategies would make us to settle with a ‘house approach’, while the alternative approach would be a case of ‘field mentality’, namely a strategy enhancing field subjectivity¹. It is in this context that I think Davari’s contribution to the study of Farabi will prove most useful, for he approaches Farabi neither in an archaeological nor in a historical fashion. One of the most important questions in social theory and philosophy is the relation between ‘religion’ and ‘philosophy’, or the place of religion in relation to modernity. The dominant view can be described as an affirmation of secularism that either does not recognize any substantial significance of religion as an intellectual category or reserves for it a peripheral position as a category both in terms of philosophy and society. This is not the way Davari explains the philosophical legacy of Farabi. He argues that “...one of the pivotal aspects of Farabi’s philosophy is what he has to say on the relation between religion and philosophy. In my view, Farabi has contemplated seriously on this relation and one may be able to assume that by doing so he has occupied a very important place in the history of ideas. When philosophy, which, in Farabi’s view, is a task for the elites, could be compatible with the religious act, then it should be realized that philosophy is not only about abstract questions... because, in Farabi’s view, the question of Polis is intertwined with revelation...”².

In other words, Farabi’s concern with philosophy and religion is not only of intellectual significance, but it has practical importance as well, which is why I think neither the archaeological nor the historical approach could do justice to Farabi’s legacy. It appears that Davari’s engagement with Farabi has a contemporary dimension which he summarizes in the following fashion: “...the Eurocentric vision of reality and the twilight of sacred thought and the exile of humanity are approaching their ends and a new dawn is heralding upon us”³.

Davari wrote these lines around the beginning of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 which promised a new interpretative strategy toward religion both as an intellectual category and a political question. Farabi’s philosophy thus became important for the reconfiguration of a republic which is premised upon the ‘religious’ rather than the ‘secular’. Under this assumption, reappropriation of Farabi’s legacy cannot have intellectual significance alone. More than that, whoever is determined to overcome the Eurocentric vision of reality should turn to Farabi or other non-Eurocentric philosophers for empowering the paradigms of ‘field subjectivity’ and multiple forms of modernity which are free from any dependency in Eurocentrism. In the age of ‘re-publicity’ of religion in the public square and in the context of a religious republic, Farabi could be deeply instrumental in reconfiguration of the Polis in a critical fashion, since “...Farabi was of the opinion that the head of the polis should be a philosopher... who obtains his knowledge from the source of revelation... as a matter of fact, the head of Farabi’s Good City is a prophet, and this means that authentic religion is what philosophy truly is”⁴.

In the context of a religious republic, Farabi’s concerns can be treated in neither an archaeological nor a historical fashion, because the question of governmentality is a *contemporary* problem, the one which requires a practical solution. Needless to argue that any feasible praxis should be premised upon a clear theoretical vision of the order of things, be it an ethical, a political, a social or a religious theory. These realms of thinking are differentiated in modern philosophy

¹ See: Miri, S.J. *Reimagining Malcolm X: Street Thinker versus Homo Academicus*. Lanham, 2015.

² Davari, R.A. *Farabi: The Founder of Islamic Philosophy*. Tehran, 1982, p. 5.

³ Ibid, p. 21.

⁴ Ibid, p. 5.

only because the Great Chain of Being have been relegated to the periphery; but Farabi conceptualizes them in a hierarchical fashion, by means of which he points to a different after-morrow rather than to a bygone yester-day.

Final Remarks

The present essay is a result of the work first presented as a paper to a group of Russian philosophers and intellectuals in Moscow, at the Academy of Sciences, in November 2014. After my talk, two questions were raised which I believe to be of importance, so I feel I owe my readers a clarification to avoid potential misunderstanding. The first question is related to the different styles of using Farabi's name. It may appear that by adopting the Persian name format "Farabi" rather than the respective Arabic or Latin forms, I endorse a certain Persian-centered worldview. I insist, however, that my choice of usage is of a purely symbolic nature, and it would be a grave mistake to assume that by employing the Persian format of Farabi's name I might intend any ideologically tinged reading of the philosophical tradition. What I mean by choosing between the three lexical variants used to designate Farabi's legacy has nothing to do with any ethnocentric vision of the world in general or of the history of philosophy in the Muslim World. On the contrary, what I want to present is a contemporary vision of philosophy which ultimately stems from Farabi and is indebted to him; one should not, therefore, regard him as a thinker whose relevance is restricted to the past. In other words, I believe that in a post-secular world such as the one we are living in, Farabi is going to enjoy increasing attention from philosophers and social theorists who feel the need to get back to the thinker representing a valid post-secular alternative for anyone with an authentic interest in overcoming Eurocentrism in all fields of human reality. The other question relates to the concept of 'multiple modernities' which is of great importance for 'field intellectuals'. When speaking of authenticity in relation to Farabi, I do not support the literalist interpretation of 'intellectual legacy' in Iran (or the Muslim world, in general), being fully aware that today we are faced with two forms of fundamentalism which bring the world on the edge of destruction. The first form of fundamentalism belongs to militant secularism based on an exclusivist interpretation of *modernitability* (i.e. an ability to change while keeping in touch with tradition), whereas the second form belongs to militant religionism premised on a literalist vision of religion which conceptualizes any form of innovation as *heresy*. When we talk about multiple forms of modernity we are, as a matter of fact, endorsing the human ability to change and create novel forms of existence without being at war with the spirit of revelation which is nothing but a pure form of gnosis and intellection clad in the form of imagination. In other words, the appeal for multiple forms of modernity is not a call to westernization or occidentalization of the human *Leben* but rather a call to self-actualization based on realities of human life fraught with transformations and *staseis*. This is to argue that one should not choose any interpretative strategy which leads one to deny modernitability: we are not, so to say, in favor of going back to the cave. This is what I said in response to my colleague Professor A.V. Smirnov who asked me the second question regarding the problem of using the concept of 'multiple modernities': in his view, to employ such a concept means falling back to the Eurocentric vision of the other. I disagree with him because it is not true that the aspiration to find a balance between change and stasis is a Eurocentric project. On the contrary, it is a human aspiration which predates the Western model of progress, and what-

ever is human is surely irrepressible. Western nations may aspire for change, but their models of change should not be imposed from outside or be based on 'house subjectivities'. Reading Farabi in an alternative or primordial fashion will no doubt assist us in crafting concepts and forms of engagement capable of opening the new paths for field intellectuals in search of new horizons.

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Фараби и три стратегии его интерпретации

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Никто не станет подвергать сомнению ту важную роль в истории философии, которая признается за Аль-Фараби. В то же время совершенно неясным остается значение Фараби для философии как таковой: мнения о характере и природе этого значения расходятся весьма резко. В каких концептуальных формах возможно осмыслить взаимно противоречащие способы рассуждения о Фараби? Представляет ли его историко-философское наследие чисто археологический интерес или же оно обладает подлинной исторической ценностью? Сохраняет ли его мысль актуальное значение для современной нам постсекулярной общественной теории? Для ответа на эти вопросы я предлагаю классификационный подход, призванный обеспечить теоретическое осмысление противоположных тенденций в оценке интеллектуального наследия Фараби.

Ключевые слова: Фараби, исламская философия, европоцентризм, всемирная философия