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# Al-Fārābī's Phenomenology of the Political Imagination

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## Abstract

Dimitri Gutas has decisively argued that al-Fārābī's philosophy is grounded in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, instead of proposing a coherent political philosophy oriented by rationalism, al-Fārābī introduces a conception of politics informed by Aristotle's own distinctive contributions to phenomenological naturalism. What implications does al-Fārābī's reception of the phenomenological naturalism of Aristotle have upon his understanding of political community? As I shall argue, al-Fārābī adopts from Aristotle's phenomenological naturalism a conception of political community that imaginatively engages the virtuous disposition of rulers and ruled. In what follows, I shall examine al-Fārābī's own phenomenological application of Aristotle's faculty of imagination to the cultivation of virtuous dispositions specifically in terms of a regimen of education to be followed if we are to arrive at a virtuous regime. My investigation shall incorporate al-Fārābī's phenomenological account of the imagination as the necessary condition enabling the constitution of political community. The faculty of the imagination retains a pivotal role throughout al-Fārābī's treatment of Aristotle's psychology and political science. Al-Fārābī's phenomenology of imagination performs a unique function specifically by reimagining our understanding of the origin, constitution, and fate of political communities.

**Keywords:** al-Fārābī, political community, phenomenology, democracy, cosmopolitanism.

## Introduction: al-Fārābī a Political Philosopher

The fate of al-Fārābī as a political philosopher is currently at stake. In the contemporary scholarship devoted to al-Fārābī, a debate has been waged for several decades between those scholars defending the legacy of Leo Strauss, namely Mushin Mahdi, Miriam Galston, and Charles Butterworth, who view al-Fārābī as a political philosopher *par excellence* by privileging his political texts as holding the esoteric key to deciphering his philosophy as a whole *and* scholars such as Dimitri Gutas and David Reisman who rebut Strauss by claiming that one cannot decisively distinguish between his political philosophy and other extant texts in his corpus.[1] Instead of rehearsing their positions here, I wish to offer a new path forward by turning to al-Fārābī's account of the imagination as a means to investigate the phenomenon of political community. This paper shall argue that al-Fārābī's exposition of political community is primarily informed by a phenomenological naturalism adopted from Aristotle that is primarily oriented by how the human soul encounters phenomena by engaging with the surrounding world via the faculty of the imagination. In what follows, I shall briefly sketch the role of the imagination in Aristotle's *De Anima* and *Rhetoric* before turning to al-Fārābī's own phenomenology of the imagination in his political treatises ranging from the *Attainment of Happiness* (*Taḥṣīl al-Sa'āda*) and *Selected Aphorisms* (*Fuṣūl al-Muntaza'a*) to the *Political Regime* (*Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*) and the *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City* (*Mabādi' Ārā' Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍila*).

Aristotle's phenomenological naturalism might be said to have its beginnings in his definition of the faculty of imagination (*phantasia*) as possessing both the power of discrimination (*to kritikos*) and the power of motion with respect to place (*to kinein ten kata topon kinesin*). [2] *De Anima* III.1 presents an analysis of the faculties of sense-perception and their common unity as illustrated by his account of the common sensibles. Aristotle's exposition of their common unity contains two arguments to demonstrate that the perception of motion, rest, shape, magnitude, and number are "common" to the faculties of sense-perception and therefore must be grasped by a unified faculty of sense-perception. The first argument demonstrates the comprehensiveness of the three faculties (touch, taste, and smell) and

the two distant faculties (seeing and hearing) (424b22-425a14). The second argument demonstrates that if these common objects of perception are perceived by only one faculty they are perceived merely incidentally (i.e. perceiving a sweet thing by sight) (425a15-425b5). Alluding to the existence of the imagination, Aristotle claims that there must be one unified or common source to which all the proper objects of sense-perception are directed, "of the common things, we have a direct common perception (*aisthesin koinen*), not a merely incidental one (*ou kata sumbebekos*)" (425a26-27).

*De Anima* III.2 continues Aristotle's exposition of the faculties of sense-perception by demonstrating how the perceptive soul is capable of self-awareness, "Whenever that which is capable of hearing is at work and that which is capable of sounding is sounding, then the hearing in its being at work (*energeian*) and the sounding in its being at work come into being simultaneously (*hama*)" (425b29-426a1). Although what it is to hear and what it is to sound are respectively different, their being-at-work or activity (*energeia*) is one and the same. The imagination effectively makes possible the simultaneity of hearing with what is heard by discerning their unity, "Now if harmony (*sumphonia*) is a sort of voice and there is a way in which voice and hearing exist as one, and harmony is a *logos*, then it is necessary that hearing also has to be a kind of *logos*" (426a27-28). *Logos* cannot and should not be isolated from the role of the imagination. Therefore, to speak of *logos* in a rational vacuum as merely a logical principle risks devaluating its semantic resonance in relation to the practical disciplines of ethics, political science, rhetoric, and poetics. The imagination resonates with *logos* in its capacity to discriminate between appearances, "in thinking (*noein*) there is the correct and the not correct…whereas the power of perception (*aisthesis*), when directed at its proper objects, is always true (*aei alethes*) and is present in all animals, but it is possible to think things through (*dianoesthei*) also falsely, and this is present in no animal in which there is not also *logos*" (427b8-14). Aristotle's appeal to this power of discrimination and hence judge appearances is quite telling. By drawing the comparison between thinking and perception, Aristotle also considers their relevant differences insofar as the imagination presents a supposition about what may or may not be the case, "For imagination (*phantasia*) is different from both perceiving and thinking things through, and it does not come about without any perceiving, and

without it there is no responsive supposition (*hupolepsis*) that something is the case" (427b14-16). By taking up a supposition, Aristotle provides the space for the imagination to exercise interpretation (*hermeneia*) insofar as one is first affected by an image and therefore must discern and judge that image according to a given disposition.

In *De Anima* III.3, Aristotle defines the imagination (*phantasia*) as a certain function (*hexis*) of the soul, "according to which we say a certain appearance comes into being before us (*phantasma ti hemin gignesthai*)" (428a1-2). Aristotle first identifies the imagination with the faculty of sense-perception by its capacity to both move and be moved by an image before discerning the image to be either true or false:

Since it possible when one thing is being-moved for another thing to be moved by it, but imagination seems to be a certain motion (*kinesis tis dokei einai*) and not to come into being without the power of perceiving, but in beings that perceive and from the things of which there is no perception, and since it is possible for a motion to come about by the being-at-work (*energeias*) of the power of perceiving, and necessary for it to be similar to perceiving, then this motion would be neither possible without the power of perceiving nor present in beings that do not perceive, and that which has it may act and be acted upon (*poiein kai paschein*) in various ways and the motion may be either true or false (*alethe kai pseude*)" (428b10-19).

By retrieving an account of locomotion with regard to the imagination, namely the capacity to act and be acted upon (*poiein kai paschein*) in conjunction with sense-perception, Aristotle alludes to how the imagination through the appearance of images remains inseparable from our capacity to be affected by them. To address those specific affects or emotions that pertain directly to the imagination, we shall now turn to Aristotle's *Rhetoric.*

In the Arabic tradition, the *Rhetoric* is often paired with the *Poetics* as belonging alongside the *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics, Topics,* and *On Sophistical Refutations* of the *Organon*.[۳] However, the *Rhetoric* may also be read with *De Anima* as a contribution to the intersection between psychology and political science. Since *De Anima* provides an account of the constitution of the imagination by addressing the themes of perception, discrimination, and motion, the *Rhetoric* aims to investigate the relationship between images (*phantasmasin*) and speech (*lexis*) in order to highlight their

epideictic function for political discourse. At the beginning of *Rhetoric* III, Aristotle affirms the interconnection between images and speech, "but all these things are forms of the outward show (*phantasia*) and intended to affect the audience" (1404a6). Since the image brought forth by speech has an effect upon our emotions (*pathe*), the capacity of speech to inform the image is to be determined by the strength of its emotional appeal. The power of the imagination resides in its capacity to act and be acted upon (*poiein kai paschein)* insofar as the image remains inseparable from "emotion (*pathos*) which lies in our power whenever we choose" (427b19-20). The imagination thus serves as a source of emotions that may or may not lead to the formulation of a supposition (*hupolepsis*) or opinion (*doxa*), "when we form an opinion that something is threatening or frightening, we are immediately affected by it" (427b22-23). Although opinions may be understood to be separate from the imagination since they are often perceived as a product of the imagination, opinions are nevertheless dependent upon the imagination. Aristotle emphasizes how the speaker specifically appeals to an audience to activate the imagination and therefore generate an opinion by using lexical strategies to produce images that evoke certain emotions. For example, Aristotle writes, "Let fear (*phobos*) be defined as a sort of pain or agitation derived from the imagination (*phantasias*) of a future destructive or painful or evil" (1382a32). In a similar sense, "shame is an impression (*phantasia*) about a loss of reputation (1384a14), and "honor and reputation are among the most pleasant things, through each person imagining (*phantasian*) that he has the qualities of an important person" (1371a16). The speaker emotionally appeals to the audience in order to persuade them to arrive at an opinion. Aristotle's exposition of the intersection between images and speech is integral to formulating a rhetorical judgment. This method of provoking images that evoke emotional states is an epideictic discourse, a method of discourse commonly applied by the rhetorician for the sake of arriving at a desired political end.[4] In what follows, I shall illustrate how al-Fārābī's prophet-philosopher-ruler explicitly invokes the rhetorical strategies of epideictic discourse as a means to attain happiness in the political community.

## al-Fārābī's prophet-philosopher-ruler

The following section examines al-Fārābī's phenomenological application of the imagination to the political regimen of pedagogy

and persuasion established by the prophet-philosopher-ruler. Al-Fārābī's conception of political community is crucially informed by Aristotle's own account of the imagination in *De Anima* and the *Rhetoric*. Such a conception of political community critically depends upon the role of the imagination of the prophet-philosopher-ruler to effectively communicate with those who are ruled for the sake of establishing a virtuous political community. Al-Fārābī's account of the political imagination begins with the prophet-philosopher-ruler to utilize images for the sake of pedagogy and persuasion. By relying on the imagination of the prophet-philosopher-ruler, al-Fārābī brings to light the material substratum of the political community. By privileging the powers of discrimination and locomotion contingent upon sensory experience and the power of *logos* to bring images together into a coherent whole, al-Fārābī affirms the material presence of the imagination insofar as the science of politics focusing on relative truths is united with metaphysics focusing on necessary truths. Al-Fārābī's *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City* remains his most comprehensive example of their correspondence. The majority of the text is explicitly concerned with addressing the Neoplatonic intersection between metaphysics, namely natural theology, and psychology. Al-Fārābī's extensive treatment of this intersection only further concretizes their apparent inseparability with political science.[5] After presenting a survey of the different types of knowledge and how they are to be ranked according to the science of metaphysics, al-Fārābī returns to *De Anima* and the faculties of the soul beginning with nutrition as the foundation for the other faculties, namely sense-perception, imagination, appetite, and reason.[6] Although sense-perception and appetite are more complex by virtue of their designated functions, the nutritive faculty determines how the inherent nature of the soul is constituted and sustained. Therefore, both sense-perception and appetite may be viewed as extensions of nutrition by their capacity to relate to their surrounding environment. The complex perceptual and appetitive apparatus of the animal soul conditioned by receiving sensibles through sense organs and ultimately pursuing or avoiding them according to pleasure and pain accentuate the supreme importance of nutrition for sustaining life. Al-Fārābī's phenomenology of the imagination thus finds its foundation in how the senses respond to both positive and negative stimuli by identifying these stimuli with perceptions that one may either pursue

or avoid, desire or hate. The imagination fulfills a phenomenological role by effectively placing those stimuli in relation to one another in order to influence a specific course of action. Since the imagination finds itself situated between sense-perception and appetite, the imagination remains the bridge that retains the stimuli by virtue of the strength of their impressions before they come to be judged to be either true or false by reason. Al-Fārābī describes the genetic emergence of the imagination from nutrition, sense-perception, and appetite as branches stemming from the same tree:

> And with the senses and after sense-perception, another faculty emerges in him and that memorizes (*yuhafz*) what has been impressed on the soul by the senses when the sensible faculty is divorced from its witness of sensible things. This is the faculty of imagination (*quwwa al-mutakhayyilah*). By this faculty, he links (*yurakkab*) some of the sensibles with each other and disconnects [*yufassal*] others according to different structure and details, some being false (*k'adhibah*) and some being trustworthy [*s'adiqah*] (al-Fārābī 1985, 164-165).

Al-Fārābī's account of the imagination shares important similarities and differences with Aristotle. Both situate the imagination as an intermediary between sense-perception and reason. However, in contrast to Aristotle, al-Fārābī specifically privileges the absence of the sensibles as enabling the work of the imagination. The imagination effectively organizes the sensibles through the activity of recollection. The imagination functions as a prototype for reason in its capacity to imitate, recollect, organize, and relate the sensibles to one another. We might even surmise that just as sense-perception and appetite genetically develop from nutrition so does the rational faculty (*quwwa n'atiqaah*) genetically develop from the imagination. The phenomenological role of the imagination becomes apparent by its capacity to discriminate between sensibles. Although Aristotle remains reluctant to identify the imagination with reason, al-Fārābī's decision to associate imagination with discrimination and judgment privileges the material basis of imagination extending beyond the realm of recollection to include communication through pedagogy and persuasion:

> The faculty of imagination (*quwwa al-mutakhayyilah*) retains the sensibles when they are no longer presented to sense-perception, and by its very nature controls the sensibles and exercises judgments over them (*mutaha'kimah 'lyha*): for it isolates (*tufrad*) them from each

other and links (*turakkab*) them with each other in various ways, so that it happens that some of the things imagined agree with what is perceived (*yattafaq…an takwn mw'fqah*) and some differ [*mukhalifah*] from what can be felt (al-Fārābī 1985, 168-169).

Al-Fārābī refers to the faculties of imagination and reason as sharing such proximity or affinity among one another that one might designate them as relative intimates (*s'adiqah*). Since images can be judged to be either true (*s'adiqah*) or false (*k'adhibah*), reason works with the imagination to make possible the knowledge of good (*jamyl*) and evil (*qabyh*) (al-Fārābī 1985, 164-165). The material basis of the relationship between imagination and reason is to be identified with the nature of belief and how beliefs are composed by the retention, recollection and organization of various sensibles, both absent and present. In addition to recollecting absent sensibles, the imagination also possesses the power to engage in the imitation and reproduction (*mimēsis*) of images:

But in addition to the preservation of the pictures of the sensibles and the association of the sensibles with one another, it displays a third activity, namely *mimēsis* (*muhaku*). This activity is different from the other faculties of the soul, being capable of 'imitating' [*qadr 'ala muhaka*] the sensibles that have remained preserved [*mahfooz*] in it (al-Fārābī 1985, 210-211).

The activity of imitation remains pivotal to the political function of the imagination. Once a judgement is rendered upon those beliefs, the possibility remains that those beliefs may be conveyed as opinions to a wider population either by pedagogy or persuasion. If we are to assume that reason or the intellect is to be identified with the ruler as Plato decisively claims in his *Republic*, al-Fārābī's *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City* brings the hierarchical classification of the faculties of the soul into question by privileging the royal role of the imagination, particularly the mysterious power of its imitative and reproductive capacity. [7]

the imagination:its ability to imitate and reproduce images.

There remains a hidden enigma to the imagination, namely its ability to imitate and thereby reproduce images. Such an ability is in fact identified with the divine activity of the prophet-philosopher-ruler. In the *Political Regime*, al-Fārābī claims that his account of prophetic vision follows what is stated in *De Anima.* [8] Although Aristotle claims that prophetic dreaming occurs among the ordinary

rather than the best and the wisest (426b22-24), al-Fārābī retrieves the crucial role of prophetic dreaming for establishing the connection between the prophet and the ruler as one person within the political community. Al-Fārābī's account of prophet-ruler should be placed within the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation whereby the "First Cause, First Intellect, or First Living" effectively produces the prophetic vision by way of emanation through the Active Intellect. Given al-Fārābī's synthesis of Aristotle with Neoplatonism, the Active Intellect is to be identified with Unmoved Mover or God as the principle of intelligibility and the primary cause of human intellection. Since the Active Intellect exists as the "light" for all rational beings to be enlightened, the intellect of the prophet occupies the material status of the passive intellect as intelligence is transmitted from the Active Intellect to the acquired intellect of the prophet:

> Then, there emanates from the active intellect to the passive intellect the faculty by which he is able to seize on the definition of things and actions and direct them toward happiness. This emanation proceeding from the active intellect to the passive intellect by the intermediary of the acquired intellect is a revelation. Because the active intellect is an emanation from the existence of the first cause, the first cause is what brings revelation to this human being by the intermediary of the active intellect (al-Fārābī 2015, 69).

Following Aristotle's account of causation, the passive intellect of the prophet becomes the material of the Active Intellect as the formal cause. If the Active Intellect is responsible for the transmission of intelligence, the passive intellect of the prophet which becomes activated by the Active Intellect requires the assistance of the imagination. Al-Fārābī privileges the imagination as occupying this intermediary role in the transmission of intelligence:

> For when the faculty of imagination (*quwwa al-mutakhayyilah*) is extremely powerful in a man and developed to perfection, and when the sensibles which reach it from the outside do not overpower it so as to absorb it completely and do not make it work in the service of the rational faculty (*quwwa n'atiqaah*), and when there is, on the contrary, in it, a considerable surplus enabling it to perform its specific activities, then its state in the waking life while being kept busy by these two activities is like its state during sleep when it is relieved of them (al-Fārābī 1985, 222-223).

In al-Fārābī's admission of the role of imagination as an intermediary between the faculties of sense-perception and reason, the power of the imagination is privileged to such a degree that the imagination itself becomes perfected. Although al-Fārābī initially observes that the imagination "is the matter for the rational faculty" (al-Fārābī 1985, 174-175), imagination should not be deemed as merely static and passive. Rather, the materiality of the imagination retains its own dynamism to enrich and expand itself as it receives intelligence from the Active Intellect and transmits that intelligence to the Passive Intellect. Since Aristotle abides by the principle that for every thought there is a corresponding image, the imagination performs an essential role by imitating and reproducing images for the sake of common sense and the acquired intellect. Such images are required for the prophet to effectively deliberate upon various courses of action and to choose the action that is most beneficial to the political community:

Now the faculty of imagination imagines many of the things supplied by the Active Intellect (by means of visible sensibles) which imitate them. These objects of imagination are in turn impressed on the faculty of common sense, once their impressions are present in the faculty of common sense, the faculty of sight is affected by those impressions, and they are impressed on it. From such impressions within the faculty of sight arises impressions of them in the shining air which connects the sight which proceeds from the eye with the ray of vision. Once these impressions have appeared in the air, the image of the air is in turn again impressed on the faculty of sight which resides in the eye, and that impression is reflected back to common sense and to the faculty of imagination. And since all these states are continuous, the objects of that kind which the Active Intellect has supplied become visible to man (al-Fārābī 1985, 222-223).

The imagination thus not only works intimately with the Active Intellect but impresses those images upon the faculty of common sense. The common sense as an internal sense, in turn, corresponds with the faculty of sight as an external sense enabling those images to be transmitted from the imagination of the prophet to the eyes of the ruled.[9] In his *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*, al-Fārābī identifies the internal senses corresponding to the five external senses and delineates their function under the faculty of sense-perception:

The latter are the five senses known to everyone, and they are located in the eyes, the ears, and the rest. Each of the five senses perceives the sensible that is proper to it. The main power is the one in which all the perceptions of the five senses are gathered together, the five senses being like its reporters. It is as if the five senses were all its advisers, each responsible for a different kind of information from one of the regions of the kingdom. The main power is like the king at whose court the advisers gather the news from all regions of the kingdom (al-Fārābī 1985, 167-169).

Following the Platonic analogy of the soul, al-Fārābī describes how each of the five senses corresponding to particular sensibles report to the prophet-philosopher-ruler, in this case, the king, to communicate the news gathered from each region of the kingdom. Al-Fārābī conspicuously places the king not in the faculty of the intellect, but rather in the faculty of sense-perception identified with common sense. In contrast to the Platonic model of the philosopher-ruler who occupies the role of reason or the intellect, the king as the faculty of common sense who effectively brings the other senses together is responsible for securing their power insofar as the respective senses emanate from him. Although the precise relationship between the imagination and common sense remains unclear, the common sense clearly demonstrates an intimacy with the imagination to such a degree that we might surmise that the imagination might assume the same privileged rank and thus establish a new material paradigm for political rule. Al-Fārābī may be said to be responsible for inaugurating this decisive turn away from the transcendent power of the Active Intellect and toward the concrete immanence of political rule associated with the power of imagination. This shift towards a new material paradigm of political rule is perhaps most concretely exemplified by the prophetic transmission of knowledge to the political community.

Both Aristotle and al-Fārābī agree that the prophet-philosopher-ruler must be in an awakened state of vigilance to most effectively discern the prophecy transmitted to him. After receiving the prophecy, the prophet-philosopher-ruler then must properly discern how the prophecy is to be concretely enacted. Following Aristotle, al-Fārābī discusses the role of both theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom in the contemplation and deliberation of the prophecy. Since the prophecy is received by the prophet-philosopher-ruler as an involuntary

intelligible and is therefore concerned with eternal and universal truth as an object of theoretical wisdom, the task of the prophet-philosopher-ruler remains to transmit such intelligence to a historically contingent political community. The faculty of practical wisdom must effectively deliberate about how to apply the intelligible to a concrete political situation by working in tandem with the image received and reproduced by the imagination. With regard to the practical deliberations of the one prophet-ruler-philosopher, al-Fārābī retrieves the power of imagination to imaginatively evoke the desired political end by assisting practical wisdom with determining the persuasive efficacy of the image:

And among them is for there to be two whose goal is one in itself. One of the two is more complete in imaginatively evoking that goal, more perfectly virtuous, possessing practical wisdom by which he infers everything for the sake of arriving at that goal, and finely prepared so as to use someone else to attain the goal. The one is a ruler over the second who imagines the goal by himself (al-Fārābī 2001, 39).

To produce such an evocation of a desired political end requires that the imagination accurately imitate or reproduce the intelligible and apply the intelligible to the appropriate sensible. The imagination performs a triple function in the reception of the intelligible, the imitation of the intelligible, and the application of the intelligible. Just as Kant speaks of the mysterious power of the imagination to perform this function, al-Fārābī's account of the imagination fulfills a lacuna for understanding its active power.[10]

## the active power of the imagination

In a departure from those intelligibles that cannot be directly translated into political action, al-Fārābī appears to privilege the active power of the imagination to imitate and reproduce images. This gesture only further highlights the intersection between the imagination and practical wisdom. Their intersection entails both the production and deliberation of opinions (*doxa*) presented through images communicated by the prophet-philosopher-ruler. Since political science is concerned with practical wisdom and metaphysics is concerned with theoretical wisdom, al-Fārābī develops an account of imagination in relation to the truth of any given cognition, "To form a concept of them is to have their essences sketched in the

human soul as they exist in truth. To imagine them is to have their images, their likenesses, and the objects representing them sketched in the human soul" (al-Fārābī 2015, 74). Although the imagination gives us only indirect access to those intelligibles via imitation, images enable an interpretation of the truth that can be directed to the practical efficacy of persuasion. In his *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*, al-Fārābī valorizes the role of the image for the production of political symbols, "Now, these things are reproduced by imitation for each nation and for the people of each city through those symbols which are best known to them. But what is best known often varies among nations, either most of it or part of it. Hence these things are expressed for each nation in symbols other than those used for another nation" (al-Fārābī 1985, 280-281). If we are starting to with images rather than essences, al-Fārābī's account of the imitative and reproductive power of the imagination may be said to affirm both pluralism and relativism in its application to specific political communities and different nations. Since al-Fārābī believes that religion follows from philosophy and that religion is in fact an imitative substitute for philosophy, religion must proceed through persuasive images. Although the imagination of the prophet-philosopher-ruler must reproduce an image that fundamentally relates to the essence or truth of the intelligible, "the things by which they are represented are many and different. Some are closer to what is represented and others more distant" (al-Fārābī 2015, 74). The communication of the image by the prophet-philosopher-ruler, therefore, remains only a relative truth. As long as the citizens within the political community can affirm the relative truth of images and abide by them, then the prophet-philosopher-ruler has performed his or her own essential function. Insofar as this is the case, both religion and rhetoric inhabit the same domain in their movement away from the first principles of logical demonstration to contingent and inductive principles derived from images and symbols:

> But when they are known through symbols which reproduce them by imitation, grounds for objection may be found in these symbols, in some less, in others more, and grounds for objection will be more easily seen in some and less in others. It is not impossible that among those who know these things through such symbols, there is someone who puts his finger on the grounds for objection to those symbols and holds that they are inadequate and false (al-Fārābī 1985, 280-281).

Al-Fārābī's phenomenological turn to pluralism and relativism relies on the fundamental ambiguity that images present for interpretation.[11] The referential function of the image as a symbol implies that images have a claim to another kind of truth that transcends mere logical demonstration. The prophet-philosopher-ruler must effectively discern the intelligible received from the Active Intellect and by the imagination transform the intelligible into an image or symbol that may be applied in the most persuasive manner to the political community. Although al-Fārābī does not develop a strict logical criterion for distinguishing images from one another according to their veracity, the imagination of the prophet-philosopher-ruler must optimally fulfill a twofold function by reproducing the intelligible as closely as possible as an image and persuasively communicating that image. The prophet-philosopher-ruler thus serves as a teacher by representing the right image at the right time to the right citizens:

> Since it is difficult for the public to understand these things in themselves and the way they exist, instructing them about these things is sought by other ways-and those are ways of representation. So these things are represented to each group or nation by things of which they are more cognizant. And it may be possible that what one of them is more cognizant of is not what another is more cognizant of (al-Fārābī 2015, 75).

Here we are presented with the possibility of different kinds of citizens receiving different kinds of truth. The image may be transformed into different modes of symbolic expression that most accurately correspond to the geographical place and historical time of the political community. The image bears within itself its own geographical and temporal meaning and hence serves as an expression of human historicity.

Al-Fārābī's phenomenology of the imagination may not only be comprehended in its political valence but ultimately has roots in his conception of human history. Since there is no one universal history, history begins with the "first natural cause for the difference in nations" (al-Fārābī 2015, 61). Hence, al-Fārābī affirms a geographical and historical specificity to political communities and different nations. These wide-ranging differences from region to region and nation to nation result from the given climate according to the plants and animals located in a specific geographical zone. If history is

primarily determined by geography and hence fluctuations in climate, then language may also be said to be primarily derived from the same set of natural conditions that arise with the development of specific political communities and nations. Language remains the primary means by which images are to be communicated. The specific language of a given region will shape immensely how the image is to be communicated as a tool of persuasion. Therefore, the prophet-philosopher-ruler must effectively deliberate about those kinds of images that best convey the specific geographical and historical circumstances of the political community. In doing so, the prophet-philosopher-ruler must be properly educated to discern between the various kinds of images and their relative power of persuasion. Following the educational plan set forth in Plato's *Republic*, al-Fārābī addresses how belief and opinion captured by images precede knowledge and truth in the education of the prophet-philosopher-ruler, "Until they acquire the theoretical virtues, they ought to be instructed in things theoretical by means of persuasive methods. They should comprehend many theoretical things by way of imagining them" (al-Fārābī 1969, 35-36). Just as Plato's philosopher-ruler is to be educated in such a way that they are properly able to discern between the truth and falsity of images, al-Fārābī's prophet-philosopher-ruler must similarly identify the truth that resides in the image through the cultivation of the power of intellect and their reliance upon logical demonstration.[xii] Once the prophet-philosopher-ruler has been effectively educated, their duty remains to transmit this education to the citizens beginning with those images that are most pedagogically and persuasively suitable to a particular community or nation.

The phenomenological power of the image extends from the prophet-philosopher-ruler to every citizen. Even those citizens who appear to be ineducable, often derisively referred to as "weeds," are at least to be exposed to persuasive images for their own pedagogical value.[13] In contrast to Plato who distinguishes between gold, silver, bronze, and iron souls in his ideal city in speech, al-Fārābī's political pedagogy does not establish a clear hierarchical rank between those who are capable and incapable of education.[14] Even the "weeds" retain the possibility of becoming prophet-philosopher-rulers by virtue of their education beginning with persuasion by images and concluding with the truth of logical demonstration and hence knowledge of essences:

Whoever is like this has his level of imagination elevated to things that the arguments he brings forth do not show to be false. If he is persuaded in thus being elevated, he is left there. But if he is not persuaded by that either and falls upon topics he can contend against, he is elevated to another level. It goes on like this until he is persuaded by one of these levels. But if he does not chance to be persuaded by one of the levels of imagination, he is elevated to the ranking of truth and made to understand those things as they are. At that point, his opinion becomes settled (al-Fārābī 2015, 91).

Al-Fārābī's political pedagogy thus affords the possibility that relative equality may be established among citizens. Education is to be commonly shared and determined according to the level of one's imagination. Such equality promotes the general happiness of all citizens within the political community. Although Plato portrays the democratic city as an imperfect city, al-Fārābī concludes that democracy nevertheless remains the best of the imperfect cities, "this is the most admirable and happy city (*al-madīnah al-mu'jabah wal-madīnah al-sa'īdah*)" (al-Fārābī 1964, 70.11). Despite its apparent imperfections, virtue and happiness are inextricably conjoined in the democratic city.

Since the function of education is to provide equality among the citizens by virtue of the power of the image to teach and persuade, the variety of images that can be utilized for such a purpose reflect the constitution of a democracy composed of virtuous men (*al-afāḍil*) of many kinds. It should be noted that the relative diversity of the democratic city serves as a microcosm for the diversity of the entire inhabited world (*oikoumenē*), "the countless similar and dissimilar groups (*ṭawā'if*)" (al-Fārābī 1964, 69.11-12). By the power of the prophet-philosopher-ruler in each political community to impart such persuasive images, al-Fārābī privileges the possibility that the democratic city "develops into many cities, distinct yet intertwined (*dākhilah ba'ḍuha fī ba'ḍ*) with the parts of each scattered throughout the parts of the others" (al-Fārābī 1964, 70.16-18). Just as religions might be said to be historically situated in a given geographical region, the democratic city is identified by its multiculturalism. The ethnic and religious diversity of the democratic city clearly warrants al-Fārābī's attention, "the nations emigrate to it and reside there, and it grows beyond measure. People of every race multiply in it…" (al-Fārābī 1964, 70.14-15). If we are to establish two virtues that remain

paramount to the constitution of the democratic city, especially its unique cosmopolitan character, those virtues may include both hospitality and toleration. Indeed, the hospitality of the virtuous city remains pervasive, "Strangers cannot be distinguished from the residents." (al-Fārābī 1964, 70.18). Despite Plato's prohibition against intermarriage, al-Fārābī privileges intermarriage between diverse ethnic groups for the sake of strengthening the bonds of the cooperative association.[15] The plurality of images that constitute a flourishing democracy is aimed at effectively promoting the general happiness, "Everybody loves it and loves to reside in it because there is no human wish or desire that this city does not satisfy (*kull insān lahu hawā aw shahwah fī shay'in mā qadara 'alā naylihā min hādhihi al-madīnah*)" (al-Fārābī 1964, 70.13-14). In contrast to Plato's account of the democratic city, al-Fārābī's democratic city composed of philosophers, rhetoricians, and poets retains the possibility of becoming a virtuous paradigm for more defective cities to emulate and follow. Such a community of free individuals mutually cooperating in the pursuit of happiness may therefore be imagined even on a global scale.

If democracy is to be established within specific geographical regions and extended throughout the entire globe by the proliferation of images meant to teach and persuade its citizens, religion remains the foundation for the human species to recognize and realize the universal values of equality, freedom, hospitality, and toleration. Anticipating Hegel's definition of religion as image-thinking, al-Fārābī conceives the role of religion positively as beset with the latent potential to promote democracy.[16] For the majority who are guided by images of religion, the prophet-philosopher-ruler must communicate these images effectively to attain happiness in the political community:

> The king in truth is the one whose purpose and intention concerning the art by which he governs cities are to provide himself and the rest of the inhabitants of the city true happiness. This is the goal and purpose of the kingly craft. It necessarily follows that the king of the virtuous city be the most perfect among the inhabitants of the city in happiness since he is the reason for their being happy (al-Fārābī 2001, 27).

The prophet-philosopher-ruler must establish a practical means for the attainment of happiness. Philosophy and religion are to be conjoined for the sake of promoting happiness. As al-Fārābī states in the *Virtuous City*, "Therefore it is possible that excellent nations and

excellent cities exist whose religions differ, although they all have as their goal one and the same happiness and the very same aims" (al-Fārābī 1985, 280-281). Since images can take myriad forms, multiple kinds of political communities may be entertained according to the religion in question. The plurality of virtuous religions 0is conditioned by the plurality of images that constitute each religion. Religion is composed of opinions and action as a product of the human imagination and is therefore grounded in geographical and historical contingencies relative to different communities and nations (al-Fārābī, 2001, 93). Although religion expresses those contingent truths warranted by their geographical and historical diversity, philosophy demonstrates those unchanging universal truths that reflect our essential nature as rational beings. Al-Fārābī's decision to bring philosophy and religion together for the sake of preserving these truths gestures toward the possibility of a global political community whereby many different nations and different religions are in unison with one another, "the excellent universal state will arise only when all the nations in it cooperate for the purpose of reaching happiness" (al-Fārābī 1985, 230-231). By introducing the possibility of a global political community or universal state (*cosmopolis*), al-Fārābī resolves a problem endemic to his own historical period posed by the relationship between philosophy and revealed religion. His identification of the images of revealed religion with imitative truth ensures the preservation of religion within the political community and guarantees the possibility that religion has a claim to truth. Religion thereby remains the imaginary ground for sustaining happiness within the political community.[17]

Following Aristotle, al-Fārābī's decision to privilege the truth of the image might be said to inaugurate the medieval Islamic turn to phenomenology. Although al-Fārābī's phenomenological turn has often been elided by scholars who rather narrowly identify his political philosophy with some variant of either Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism, his account of the political imagination remains a unique contribution to the history of phenomenology.[18] If we are to retrieve the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl's notion of the "life-world," we cannot help but begin with those images that reflect our own geographical and historical specificity. By heeding our attention to the power of the image to teach and persuade, we at once become aware of the things themselves that constitute the starting point of

philosophy. [19] Indeed, the history of philosophy beginning with Aristotle's empirical turn might suggest a series of critical moments whereby the role of the image is to be recognized for its enduring phenomenological value. In a time where the legitimacy of truth is being openly contested by particular images that are incompatible with the essential democratic values of life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness, it may be time that we retrieve al-Fārābī's phenomenology of the imagination to recognize how both perfection and happiness within the political community may be attained by affirming diversity within unity and unity within diversity (*e pluribus unum*). In homage to his predecessor and teacher, Plato, who highlights the dialectic between the one and the many, al-Fārābī preserves a necessary equilibrium between universality and difference as a cornerstone of his political philosophy. [20] Perhaps al-Fārābī's phenomenology of the political imagination serves as our last best hope for realizing that any claim to universal truth is always inevitably circumscribed by our own historicity. As al-Fārābī reminds us, the origin and fate of political community can only ever be resolved by returning to where we find ourselves always already immersed in the lived experience of our being-with one another, "Furthermore, it will become evident to him in this science that each man achieves only a portion of that perfection, and what he achieves of this portion varies in its extent, for an isolated individual cannot achieve all the perfections by himself and without the aid of many other individuals" (al-Fārābī 1969, 23).

## Notes

[1] See Strauss 1945, Mahdi 2010, Galston 1990, Butterworth 1988, Gutas 2004, Reisman 2005, and Harvey 2019.

[2] See Aristotle 1831-1870, 432a15-18. Since the faculty of imagination falls between both thinking and perceiving as a middle-voiced phenomenon simultaneously both active and passive, the imagination performs a rather ambivalent role in Aristotle's explanatory model of animal and human behavior.

[3] Black 1990 presents their inclusion in Aristotle's *Organon* to support her "context theory" which enabled al-Fārābī and Ibn Rushd to present an epistemological interpretation of the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.

[4] "We might mitigate the historical and generic trouble that Aristotle's account presents if we note the fluidity of his conception of epideictic and understand his account as describing a particular *function* of discourse, the phantasmatic function" (Gorman 2005, 27).

[5] Chapters 15-19 of *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City* include a hierarchical classification of ideal and less than ideal cities. Following Plato, who presents those cities that depart from the ideal city in speech, al-Fārābī ranks each city according to the knowledge of the prophet-philosopher-ruler to effectively rule by aiming toward happiness and the relative character of the citizens who are ruled.

[6] As Giorgio Agamben remarks in "Absolute Immanence," the nutritive faculty remains the first principle (*archē*) for constituting and determining the life of the soul, "In the history of western philosophy, bare life as such is identified at a decisive moment. It is the moment in which Aristotle, in *De anima*, isolates the most general and separable meaning of "living being" (*zōon*) among the ways in which the term is said" (Agamben 1999, 230).

[7] "Unless…philosophers become kings in the cities or those whom we now call kings and rulers philosophize truly and adequately and there is a conjunction of political power and philosophy… there can be no cessation of evils…for cities nor, I think, for the human race" (473c11-d6).

[8] (al-Fārābī 2015, 69). However, as Craig Streetman has argued, Aristotle remains rather skeptical if not indifferent to the authenticity of prophetic vision given his own critique of prophetic dreams (Streetman 2008, 212). While the imagination figures prominently in

both Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia* and *De Anima*, scant attention has been devoted to the role of the imagination in *On Prophecy in Sleep*.

[9] As Daniel Heller-Roazen claims in *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*, "the classical Arabic thinkers, al-Fārābī among them, are the first to identify the 'internal senses' (*hawās bātina hushim panimim*)" (Heller-Roazen 2007, 145).

[10] "Synthesis in general, as we shall hereafter see, is the mere result of the power of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious" (Kant 1965, A78/B103, 112).

[11]Al-Fārābī consistently alludes to a political unit that exceeds the boundaries of the nation to incorporate all nations. As Katherine Loevy notes, "There is no universal nation, because geography, religion, and imagination are not universal, but there can be a more universal political entity composed of several nations, and this would be more perfect than the nation because it would reflect more clearly the universality of the human essence" (Loevy 2016, 76).

[12] "Surely, as I said just now, this would be most correctly called true falsehood— ignorance in the soul of someone who has been told a falsehood. Falsehood in words is a kind of imitation (*mimesis*) of that affection in the soul, an image that comes into being after it and is not a pure falsehood. Isn't that so?" (382a4-c3).

[13] "Another sort has already imagined the things we have mentioned, except that they are not persuaded by what they have imagined. So, for themselves and for others, they show those things to be false by arguments. In doing so, they are not contending against the virtuous city. Rather, they are asking for guidance and seeking truth" (al-Fārābī, 2015).

[14] "While all of you in the city are brothers, we will say in our tale, yet God in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious— but in the helpers silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen" (415a1-4).

[15] "And as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire and that the rest would in like manner be born of one another. So that the first and chief injunction that the god lays upon

the rulers is that of nothing else are they to be such careful guardians and so intently observant as of the intermixture of these metals in the souls of their offspring, and if sons are born to them with an infusion of brass or iron they shall by no means give way to pity in their treatment of them, but shall assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers. And again, if from these there is born a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition they shall honor such and bid them go up higher, some to the office of guardian, some to the assistantship, alleging that there is an oracle that the state shall then be overthrown when the man of iron or brass is its guardian. Do you see any way of getting them to believe this tale?" "No, not these themselves," he said, "but I do, their sons and successors and the rest of mankind who come after." "Well," said I, "even that would have a good effect making them more inclined to care for the state and one another. For I think I apprehend your meaning" (415a4-415d4).

[16] "So far as Spirit in religion pictures itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and guise of its image-thinking (*Vorstellung*)" (Hegel 1977, 412).

[17] Al-Fārābī's insistence upon the necessary unity of philosophy and religion for the sake of preserving his conception of a global political community also remains relevant to his successors. For example, the Platonic and Aristotelian commentaries of Ibn Rushd (1974) are instrumental for extending al-Fārābī's cosmopolitanism to medieval Judaism and Latin Christendom. Indeed, Ibn Rushd (2011) clearly endorses al-Fārābī's claim that all philosophical truths can and indeed should be known with certainty. In contrast to al-Ghazālī (1997) who condemns al-Fārābī and his followers as unbelievers, al-Fārābī valorizes the truth-seeking role of the philosopher by retrieving the cosmopolitan claims proposed by his predecessor, al-Kindī (1974).

[18] Joshua Hall attributes to al-Fārābī some sort of phenomenological materialism that most importantly precedes Avicenna and Ibn Rushd by arguing that his *Opinions of the Virtuous City* "offers a materialist critique that prefigures critical theory and post-structuralism and thereby provides guidelines for how to more effectively engage monotheistic communities in the pursuit of social justice-including along the axes of race, gender, and sexual orientation" (Hall 2015, 175).

[19] Edmund Husserl's most extensive treatment of the phenomenological meaning of the "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) remains *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*

(*Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendentale Phänomenologie*) (1936, trans. 1970).

[20] Echoing his engagement with the Pre-Socratics, Plato's *Parmenides* is *sans pareil* for engaging the dialectic of the one and the many, "If one is, we are saying aren't we, that we must agree on the consequences for it, whatever they happen to be" (142b).

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