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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rationality vis-à-vis Relativity: Accounted for Imagination and 'the Permanent' in Farabi's Philosophy

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Abstract: Rationality or relativity? In which one does Farabi believe? How does it relate to imagination and the permanent, if at all? For Farabi, people come to grasp rational truths mostly through the use of their imagination. Furthermore, the arousal of people's feelings and emotions often originates in their imagination via imagery forms. The ultimate utopian goal is to drive the public to achieve rational happiness. Since the public, based on their nature and general habits, in effect cannot perceive the rational truths, the path to rational happiness must be represented via their imagination. Moreover, their imaginary concepts and forms should be made the permanent. So bringing rational happiness to people's minds through their imagination, the media of each society should represent rational truths through the sensory and imagery forms familiar to that society. The Farabian theory of cognition shares aspects of relativity as well as rationality. To Farabi, rational truth and rational happiness is fixed and one, having only one denotation, while its connotations, say, images and imagery forms are various and sundry. That being the case, different communities can have different ways to perceive the same truth, working toward the same goal.

Keywords: Farabi; Rationality; Relativity; Relativism; Imagination; The Permanent.

Introduction

Do we have to choose one way out of two: rationality against relativity, or vice versa? Or there is not a great deal of difference between them? Put another way; is rationality-relativity a dilemma or a pseudo-dilemma? The problem is accounted for Farabi's thoughts. What we have seen in Muslim philosophers' discourse, even among contemporary readings, is just a dominant thought of rationality (Mahmudkelayeh, Akbarian, and Saeedimehr, 2017: 41-53).

Rationality, relativity, and relativism could be regarded the subject of continuing debates in social sciences and humanities.¹ Art and media, however, for the most part may well be considered a matter of relativism or relativity.²

It should be noted that some researchers try to draw a sharp distinction between relativity and relativism:

I acknowledge that relativity is indeed a fact of life. Not all meaning is transparent, nor are all ideological-practical positions shared by all cultures or by all individuals within a given culture—despite the strain of hegemonic structures to exact consensus. But such relativity, I hold, refers to the level of social life I call the *presented*. This level, however, does not exhaust all of social life, though it is its most conspicuous side. There is another level

¹ See, for instance:

Geertz, Clifford, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

Hollis Martin, Steven Lukes, *Rationality and Relativism*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1982.

Krausz, Michael, "Art and Its Mythologies: A Relativist View". In: Margolis J., Krausz M., Burian R.M. (eds) *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*. Studies of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium, vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht, 1986.

Margolis, Joseph, Krausz, A.S., Burian, R. (Eds.), *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*, Springer, Dordrecht, 1986.

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Simon, Lawrence H.. "Rationality and cultural relativism", 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-R024-1.

Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Taylor and Francis,

<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/rationality-and-cultural-relativism/v-1>.

² Krausz, Michael, (1986) "Art and Its Mythologies: A Relativist View". In: Margolis J., Krausz M., Burian R.M. (eds) *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*. Studies of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium, vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 189-208.

in social life which I call the *given*. [Muñoz, 1986, 209]³

While rationality clearly has a profound position in his philosophy, Farabi has obvious references to what at least could be called a kind of relativity, if not relativism. Is there any contradiction in Farabi's words? How can we succeed to find consistency between rationality and relativity in Farabi's philosophy?

The answer could be found in the Farabian theory of cognition, explaining of which requires developing the concept of imagination. Capitalizing on the powers of imagination, Farabi's theory of cognition serves to the consistency of relativity versus rationality, which in turn could be viewed as an efficient global language.

Working Out the Concept of Imagination

The concept of imagination catches the eyes of philosophers amongst other thinkers, even someone like Abu Hamed Mohammed Al-Ghazali, the Persian theologian, who shattered philosophy into pieces in his book *The*

Incoherence of the Philosophers, Tahafut al-Falasifa, in Arabic, his eleventh-century landmark work. [Mehr Mohammadi, Hosseini Khah A, 2011, pp. 19-35] Working out the concept of imagination plays a lead part in Farabian theory of cognition. Of course, Farabi does not point out its concept as a problem. He does not follow its essential or conceptual analysis as well. Such being the case, one can obtain the concept of imagination from his writings by an indirect approach. Therefore, we will address his opinion about different perceptions, i.e., sensory, imaginary, and rational perceptions, as well as self-rational faculties including the faculties of sensation, imagination, and rational as well as the permanent.

Farabi conceptualizes rational faculties from both theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom whereas sages after him paid attention only to rational faculties through theoretical wisdom like Avicenna and Suhrawardi.

Farabi mentions the faculty doing imaginative activities as *motekhayelah* and

³ Muñoz B. (1986) "On Relativity, Relativism, and Social Theory". In: Margolis J., Krausz M., Burian R.M. (eds) *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*.

Studies of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium, vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 209-222.

sometimes as *khyial* (Farabi, 1992: 51-58). Not expressing the nature of perception, Farabi points to the kinds of perceptions in his discussions. For example, in his talking about the first lover, he speaks of feeling or imagination or rational knowledge (Farabi, 2003: 85; 1997: 71). He also says in his analysis of psychical faculties that the science could be figured out by rational faculties, imagination, or sensory faculties (Farabi, 2003:156).

For Farabi, rational faculty is at the helm of rational perception, imagination faculty at the helm of imaginary perception, and appearance senses that of the sensory perception. Avicennian term of illusion does not appear in Farabi's works. Farabi has defined illusion just as a delusion of something does not exist (Farabi, 1987: 162).

Farabi explains soul faculties according to their existing order and expresses their activities (Farabi, 2004: 10; 2003: 151-155). Among these faculties is sensitive faculty including touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell. There is a dominant sense overall appearance senses that the other senses act like its spies and each is responsible for a special case from information and a special area of the body

estate whereas the imagination faculty does not have several servants and agents in the body, working by itself (Farabi, 2003: 153-154).

Imagination faculty stores the tangible images that are stamped in the self and also it combines some images with others or divides an image to some parts and therefore creates a new image. After imagination faculty, rational faculty will be created that the human can think by it.

Farabi has emphasized conceptualization of perception faculties from practical wisdom in various situations (Farabi, 2003: 152; 2004: 11; 1997: 33). He knows rational faculty as a faculty that human can differ between beautiful and ugly ethics and acts through it and thinks that which action should be left or continued and in addition finds that beneficial and harmful and enjoyable and ornery, whereas imagination can only perceive the beneficial and harmful and enjoyable and ornery, and sensitive can perceive just pleasure and pain (Farabi, 1997: 33).

One type of definitions obtained through collection of an object's definitions and works that is called *compound particular*. Therefore, regarding the activities of imagination faculty,

important thing is to reach its definition. Farabi has defined three important activities for imagination. First, it preserves sensory perceptions after cutting sensory relation. Second, it combines or decomposes them. These combinations and decompositions are various and imagination faculty governs them desirably. The results are sometimes relevant and sometimes irrelevant (Farabi, 2003: 154). For example, it will combine bird wings with a cow body. The third activity is imagery. Only imagination faculty can represent things and ideas through the sensible and rational. Imagination so much as represents the rational in the ultimate perfection like the first principle and the non-materials. Of course, it is illustrated by the most complete and highest objects such as beautiful objects and in contrast, it imitate incomplete rational by incomplete and posts and ugly sensible.

For example, the Iranian poet has created one of the best metaphors for analogizing the rational and the sensible: "Adam's sons are body limbs, to say; for they're created of the same clay. Should one organ be troubled by pain, Others would suffer severe strain. Thou, careless of people's suffering, Deserve not the

name *human being*" (Sadi, 2009: 15). In this poem, Sadi simplifies many rational concepts such as sympathy, compassion, and sacrifice. He makes them accessible to the imaginary faculty by embodying human beings as organs of one body.

Before Farabi, Aristotle spoke about the nature of the imagination in his discussions of the self. However, it is held that, he did not consider the third feature mentioned above (Aristotle, 1995, 427 a 18- 429 a 4, 432 a 9). This fact has been demonstrated by researchers (Black, 1996, 185).

Since Farabi does not analyze what imagination is, we focus on his other views like of human faculties, Utopia ranks, stage of universe and body members.

He begins description of this similarity with the stages of universe. Creatures are continued from the most completed one to the most incomplete one. The last stage is that the creature's doings are just for service and other things are not realized after him and never does actions as headship. The first creature that is superior never performs service and the middle creatures perform headship rather than their lower creatures to serve the first creature.

So there will be an order and relationship and cooperation and community among stage of universal and the stage of society are the same. The status of the first header is like God in the universal system. The same relation can be found in body members and also in soul faculties (Farabi, 1991: 63-66). This similarity means imagination faculty is under the service of rational faculty and sensitive faculty is under the service of imagination faculty. In terms of stage and headship and design, the rational faculty is the first and imagination and sensation are next in status of headship.

Imagination Serving Rational Happiness

To Farabi, final happiness is the state in which a human being successfully perceives the rationales, and achieves the nearest possible status to the Active Intellect (Farabi, 1984: 31). For him, people who cannot understand the rational nonetheless have full use of their imagination (Farabi, 1992: 129-130). So the rational truths—and thus, happiness—should be somehow transferred to the imagination of such people. This task should be undertaken first by the Prophet, who has himself been linked to the Active Intellect, and has thus

received all facts in their rational and imaginary forms.

According to Farabi, there are two ways to achieve understanding: one can perceive the essence of a thing and imagine it in its existing form, or one can imagine an idea, and all the things similar to it (Farabi, 1997: 225). It is not possible to speak of or bring into action the particular details of that which is non-sensible – such as the soul, the ten heavenly intellects, the hyle, and all abstract beings. It is not possible, that is, unless they are formed in the imagination. Although such things cannot be felt, we can imagine them through analogy, parallelism, or allegory (Farabi, 1375: 43).

This relates to those concepts and beings that one cannot explain or describe through the use of reason alone. However, it is important to note that the majority of people do not have the reasoning power, due to their nature or habitude, to comprehend rationally even those things that can be described in this way (Farabi, 1997: 225). In other words, they are not used to reasoning about the rational. In most people, the soul is attracted to the imagination, and the imagination controls the self. Bodily forces prevent the soul from being

solely concerned with its essence and rational perceptions. So the self finds a confidence in the sensible to the extent that it denies the existence of the rational truths, and considers them to be baseless delusions (Farabi, 1992: 129-130). Thus, the proper method for educating the public on such affairs is through transferring images and resemblances into their minds through the imagination (Farabi, 1997: 225).

Elsewhere, Farabi reiterates that the public is not to follow the rationals. Human actions are often guided by the imagination, even though the imagination may be in conflict with one's knowledge, or be subject to one's suspicions (Farabi, 1987: 502). In some cases, one's beliefs are actually contrary to what one imagines. One may be quite sure that reality is different from what one imagines. For instance, when a person merely imagines something frightening, he or she feels a sense of horror as if the idea were real (Farabi, 2004: 52-53). And most people would be afraid to sleep next to a corpse, even though we know that dead bodies are harmless.

Ultimately, in order to make people experience happiness, it is necessary to transfer

facts and rational happiness through the use of images and embodied forms.

The Permanent for Farabi

Another main analysis that sounds necessary to provide an account for imagination's role is the permanent in Farabi's thought. Because imagination will serve its function when it acts as the permanent. The permanent in the soul (*malakah*) and a transitory mental state are configurations in the soul or psychic configurations that some of them comes from will and addiction, which are the same as sciences, arts, ethics, etc., and some of them are constitutional. When these characteristics become permanent in the soul, in such a way that it is constant, they are called the permanent (Farabi, 1987: 51). Some characteristics indicate habit and temperament and some of them indicate beliefs. Psychic configurations are created as a result of continuous actions in the soul. If these actions are good, the resulting psychic configurations will also be good and the pleasure one gets from that configurations will be more (Farabi, 1997: 91). By doing good actions, a good and virtuous characteristic is created in the soul and by doing ignorant actions; a psychic

configuration opposite to the good and virtuous configurations is created. These characteristics sometimes create the basis for understanding, and when a person does not have the appropriate configuration to perceive something, his mind will not understand that issue, whether that configuration is present in the soul due to habit or naturally, in any case, presence or absence of that psychic configurations provides the basis for understanding or not (Farabi, 2003: 114).

Embodying the Rational, Making It *the Permanent*

Media and art serve a special function in distributing imageries as well as making the permanent. That is, the public by themselves, as Farabi holds, cannot follow the rational truth and rational happiness, neither as to their personal good nor as to common good.⁴ So they fundamentally need media and art.

The point is that Farabi's utopia includes five parts. The first part is composed of the sages, as well as those who are clear-sighted in important affairs (Farabi, 2004: 55). The ultimate leader of the utopia, however, is none

other than the prophet. His government is blessed by divine revelation, and all his actions and views are based on heavenly inspiration (Farabi, 1991: 44). In second place, there are the "religion-conveyers" including orators, missionaries, poets, singers, writers and the like (Farabi, 2004: 55). Farabi places these parts, all of whom referred to as media and artists, immediately after the prophet and prophetic government. Imagination and the comprehension of the rational are most useful elements in explaining the role of utopian media and artists. Farabi believes that the most exalted media and arts are those kinds that use imaginary forms to lead the people to imagine divine thoughts and actions. Moreover, desirable arts, by nourishing the imagination, work to moderate extremes of emotions.

Upon Farabi's theory of imagination, there is a relation between the imagination and the rational faculty: specifically, the imaginary faculties are able to access the rational through imaginary and sensory forms. The ultimate goal of the utopian rulers is to provide the public with rational happiness. The prophet,

⁴ "Common good refers to those material, cultural, or institutional facilities in which members of a given

community share public interest." [Rezai, Imani, 2022: 85]

through revelation, perceives all the truths, both in his rational faculty and in his imagination. He has the ability to perceive the essence of truths; in addition, he knows the metaphors and analogies through which to describe these truths.

But since rational perception of true happiness is not possible for the public, metaphors are provided that will appeal to the peoples' imaginary faculties.

Utopian media and artists produce rational truths and happiness through creating sensory and imaginary forms. So they perform an activity similar to that of the prophet and prophetic government.

Conclusion

Having some sides of relativity, rationality grasps some main functions from imagination by help of the permanent. It will serve to illustrate an important point. For Farabi, people come to grasp rational truths, mostly using their imagination. Furthermore, the arousal of people's feelings and emotions often originates in their imagination via imagery

forms. The public should hold these imaginary forms as the permanent to be used as the source of their actions and emotions, as well as their thoughts to reach the ultimate happiness. The ultimate utopian goal is to drive the public to achieve rational happiness. Given that the public, based on their nature and general habits, in most part are not unable to perceive rational truths, the path to rational happiness must be illustrated via their imagination. So, bringing rational happiness to people's minds through their imagination, the media and arts of each society should represent rational truths through the sensory and imagery forms familiar to that society.

As could be discernible, Farabian theory of cognition shares aspects of relativity, as well as rationality. To Farabi, rational truth and rational happiness is fixed and one, having only one meaning, while its images and imagery forms are various and sundry. That being the case, different communities have different ways to perceive the same truth and work toward the same goal, representing of which is the task of media, as well as artists.

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نسبت عقلانیت و نسبیّت: تبیینی براساس خیال و ملکات در فلسفه فارابی



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چکیده

عقلانیت یا نسبیّت؟ فارابی به کدام باور دارد؟ ارتباط این مسئله با خیال و ملکات مد نظر پژوهش حاضر است. از نگاه فارابی عامه مردم حقایق معقول را بیشتر از طریق خیال خویش درمی یابند. به علاوه، احساسات و عواطف آنان نیز غالباً ریشه در خیال و صور خیالی دارد. از آنجاکه عموم انسانها براساس طبیعت و عادات خویش قادر به ادراک حقایق معقول نیستند، سعادت معقول باید در قوای خیالی آنها تجلی یابد. همچنین صور و مفاهیم خیالی باید در آنان به صورت ملکه درآید. به این ترتیب در راستای تجلی سعادت معقول در اندیشه مردم از مجرای خیال، رسانه هر جامعه‌ای موظف است که با صور حسی و خیالی مانوس با آن جامعه، به معرفی حقایق معقول پردازد. می توان گفت آموزه شناخت فارابی، وجوهی از عقلانیت را همراه با نسبیّت دربردارد. زیرا از نگاه فارابی حقیقت و سعادت معقول ثابت و یگانه است، اما صور و تصاویر متعدد و متنوعی از این یگانه محاکات می کند. اصناف و اجتماعات مختلف می توانند از طرق مختلف به سوی هدف مشترک و سعادت معقول ثابت واحد حرکت کنند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: فارابی، عقلانیت، نسبیّت، نسبی گرای، خیال، ملکات.