

## AL-FÂRÂBÎ ON HUMAN FREEDOM

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### Özet

#### Farabi'de İnsan Özgürlüğü

Bu makalede, Farabi'nin ontik ve epistemik bağlamda ele aldığı insan hürriyeti problemi üzerinde durulmuştur. İnsanın doğası, irade ve ihtiyarı gibi konular Farabi'nin eserlerine müracaatla temellendirilmiştir. Ayrıca Tanrı-insan, insan-Tanrı ilişkisi araştırma konusu yapılmış ve Tanrı'nın bilgisi ve insan davranışları arasındaki ilişki yorumlanmıştır.

**Anahtar Kavramlar:** Hürriyet, irade, kader, iyi, kötü, insanın doğası, Tanrı'nın bilgisi.

### Introduction

Fârâbî is a system philosopher. He provides answers to philosophical questions within his own philosophical system. While the divine aspect concerning the issue of human freedom is examined in the chapter on God, the issue of spheres in the chapter on the heavenly bodies, the part directly related to human beings is tackled in the chapter specific to that particular issue. In short, it is not possible to find in the works of Fârâbî one single passage that exhaustively explains human freedom at once. But this does not mean that Fârâbî eluded the problem of human freedom. Although reading Fârâbî as a whole, we find detailed materials in his writings, it nonetheless proves difficult to reconstruct all of these materials into a systematic explanation.

The problem of human freedom is basically a search for the answers to the questions of "why" and "how" human acts come about. According to Fârâbî, if there were no fear and hope stemming from the uncertainties of the future, no one would strive for the future and do any good deeds<sup>1</sup>. For Fârâbî fear and hope are the main dynamics of the actions of man. The state of fear and hope depends on the fortuitous of tomorrow and the

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<sup>1</sup> Fârâbî, *Ahkam al-Nujum*, (in *Islamic Philosophy*, Ed. Fuat Sezgin, vol: 12, Frankfurt 1999), p. 106.

inability to determine the causes of human acts and deeds. But accidental and adventitious nature of the acts is relative to us. It is not a matter of concern for God. The inability to know the causes of acts, according to Fârâbî, is the possible, unknown and remote cause for man.<sup>2</sup>

Fârâbî explains the remote cause and the indeterminate possibility, for which he was criticized, through the concept of wisdom. Wisdom for him is the uncovering of remote causes. These remote causes are the causes of the existence of the approximate existence.<sup>3</sup> Remote cause is that which occurs by accident and that the cause of which we do not know. The existence of the unknown possible is that which causes the existence of other things, but which it is difficult for us to discover and only possible to reach by contemplation. Starting from his definition of wisdom, and considering God's being the cause of all causes, it is indeed not possible for approximate causes to exist without remote causes. Remote cause means the active cause of the act's coming about. We believe that those who have criticized Fârâbî on this issue failed to comprehend his views in a holistic manner. For according to the systems of both Fârâbî and Ibn Sina, in the creation of something, the remotest of the causes is God and the approximate ones are the celestial intellects. However, God, who appears to be the remote cause is in fact the most approximate cause of all the celestial intellects, which themselves are the approximate causes of motion.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, these causes are remote and approximate only to our conception and as far as God is concerned, He is the efficient cause and the agent.

### Human Nature

Fârâbî's answer to the question of "What is the human nature?" is as follows: "the existence of a human being born with a disposition for some actions is impossible. If such a disposition is possible, then we must say that this person cannot bring about the opposite of such actions."<sup>5</sup> In other words, man does not have an innate disposition to do good or bad deeds; on the contrary, man's emerging as an existing being transpires only through employing his own will.

Fârâbî accepts the fact that human nature undergoes changes under some influences after his coming into existence. For him, the main factor that changes human nature is the Active Intellect, which affects it sometimes in sleep and sometimes when he is awake and which gives revelation to human beings. This state can last a short or a long time.<sup>6</sup>

There is no contradiction between the two different accounts. Because the first account concerns the disposition of human nature at the time of his

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Fârâbî, *Kitâb al-Milla*, Ed. Muhsin Mahdî, Beyrut 1968, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Fârâbî, *Fusul Muntaza`a*, Ed. Mitri Nejjar, 1971, p. 35-36.

<sup>5</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Da'awi al-Qalbiyye*, Dekkan 1349, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Madina al-Fadila*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1900, pp. 52-53.

creation and the other concerns his impact on the process of being an existent once he has been in existence. This should be understood as an effect.

According to Fârâbî, man is created in a way in which he is equipped to do both good and evil. If man were created to do only good deeds, it would be meaningless to hold him responsible. Rather, it is quite natural to have double-directions from good to evil and from evil to good. But for Fârâbî, making this situation a way of life results in the corruption of human nature.<sup>7</sup> And for Fârâbî, man's doing good acts in turn varies in accordance with the inner world of man.

"There is a difference between the person who keeps his soul from evils and the person of virtue. The person who keeps his soul from evil, even though he performs virtuous acts by doing good deeds, he also likes evil deeds; so he fights against the evil desires of his soul and consequently this leads him to do the opposite of what his desire encourages him to do. This person is troubled while doing good things. As for the virtuous man, he follows what his state and desire encourage him to do, and he does good deeds advertently, voluntarily and delightfully, not feeling pains."<sup>8</sup>

Considering the statements above, it's quite normal and natural for man to take pleasure in what he does willingly and it is such acts that Fârâbî values. Actions performed merely because of responsibility, even if they are called good deeds, are like a battle field for the agent of those acts.

Actions performed in distress would not bring happiness to man. Actions would make human beings happy, only if:

"one has the knowledge of happiness theoretically, makes it his goal and deduces what he should do through the help of the faculties of imagination and sense-perception; and then actualizes those acts by means of volition, in which case all acts of man will be good and nice."<sup>9</sup>

What is understood here is that in order for human actions not to become torturous, it is necessary to obtain the intellectual verification of the actions. Then, what is the source of this intellection that makes man happy? Does man attain this state because of his own merit? Or is this state awarded to him due to the efforts man makes?

According to Fârâbî, "It is the knowledge coming from the Active Intellect to the passive intellect that enables man to be knowledgeable about how to define things and acts and how to use them for his own happiness. This flow coming from the Active Intellect to the passive intellect

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<sup>7</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Jam' Bayn Ra'yay al-Hakimayn*, (in *Islamic Philosophy*, Ed. Fuat Sezgin, vol: 12, Frankfurt 1999), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Farabi, *Fusul Muntaza'ah*, p.34.

<sup>9</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Madina al-Fadila*, p. 47.

through the acquired intellect is revelation. And the Active Intellect has come into existence due to the existence of First Cause."<sup>10</sup>

It is not due to the abilities that man possesses by birth that he may reach the Active Intellect; but rather, it requires a constant effort directing his abilities with his will until the acquired intellect. That is, obtaining the knowledge of good deeds through revelation is a result of voluntary activity. No divine aid would come without voluntary actions. This level is the field that only prophets and philosophers can reach. That is why all of their conducts are sincere and genuine.

### Will and Choice

Both will and choice are the main concepts pertaining to the issue of freedom. According to Fârâbî, the will

"first of all, is a desire that comes from sense. Desire (*shawq*) stems from the desiring faculty of the soul and the sense-perception from the sensual faculty. Then the imaginative faculty of the soul, and whence also the desire, develop; thus emerges the second will after the first one. This will is a desire that stems from imagination. After the formation of these two wills, knowledge that flows from the Active Intellect to the contemplative faculty of the soul makes it appearance. At this very moment is born a third kind of will, which is a desire stemming from contemplation and is called the choice (*ikhtiyar*). This choice is exclusive to human beings and is absent from other animals. Owing to this power man is capable of doing that which is praised and denounced, beautiful and ugly. Reward and punishment is dependent upon this."<sup>11</sup>

As we have seen, Fârâbî, while explaining the stages of how the will comes about, he also accounts for how man thinks. For him, "it is not possible for the will to come about without thinking. Man, through the emergence of the will that is defined in this activity, orients himself toward what he conceives of. If this orientation occurs in senses and the imagination, it is called will (*iradah*) and if by way of contemplation, then it is called choice (*ikhtiyar*)."<sup>12</sup> What is eye-catching here is that Fârâbî is making a distinction between imagination and thinking (*te'emmül*). In Fârâbî's conceptualization, the imagination represents what is more general, while thinking expresses what is particularized.

Fârâbî then explains the relationship between God and man as follows:

"A man who believes that he does what he desires and chooses what he wishes has first to explore his choice. Did human choice come into existence after it was non-existent? Or is his choice not contingent? If his choice is not contingent, then that means that his desire co-exists with

<sup>10</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, Haydarabad 1345, pp. 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Madina al-Fadila*, p. 46.

himself from the very beginning. He was created on this choice and is free from his own self. Thus the person's choice became necessary by someone else.<sup>13</sup>

Fârâbî, in continuation of his explications, states that if choice is contingent, and on the principle that 'every created thing needs a creator,' it therefore depends upon the Eternal Choice, that is God's, and concludes that it is for this reason that all things, good and evil, are contingent upon the causes that emerges from the eternal will.<sup>14</sup>

Here the question is: are the things which man chooses the result of his own knowledge and investigation? Or did God put those in front of man to choose from? It is understood from the explanation of Fârâbî that the will of man is a gift of God. But man, selects among all that was given and known by his intellect. This choice is not an obligatory one. Because, in Fârâbî's concept of ontology there is no place for such a thing.

"Al-hayvan an-natiq' rational animal," namely man, above whom there is no higher category of being, never yields to anything higher. Man's superiority over other contingent beings is due to his capacity of thinking and intellection. And this is tantamount to his not being a means for any other thing. As a rational being, man's helping another contingent being other than himself is not because of his nature but because of his thinking and willing."<sup>15</sup>

All other contingent beings in the sublunary world, by their nature, must be in the service of this particular contingent being who is superior to them.

Some thinkers of Islamic thought believe that the human will is restricted by God. One would wonder with whose mediation such a limitation comes about. As it is clear in the text, it is not possible for the existing contingent beings to limit human beings of necessity. In this case, there is nothing in the world of existence that can limit and force human beings in the name of God. Whether or not man would restricts himself vis-à-vis other created beings in the name of God entirely depends upon his own thinking and willing. We are of the opinion that God's influence on the human will is a confessional matter, which is dependent on man's choice.

### **What is Agent?**

All actions and deeds are performed by an agent. For Fârâbî, the agent of a thing is that because of which the act is necessary. The agent consists of every thing that causes something by itself.<sup>16</sup>

According to him, agent can be in three states:

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<sup>13</sup> Fârâbî, *Fusûs al-Hikam*, p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Fârâbî, *Fusûs al-Hikam*, ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Farabi, *Fusul Muntaza'a*, pp.88-89.

1. An agent should know whether his action is good or bad. If he does not know this, he cannot be responsible, nor can he gain anything out of it.

2. If the agent knows which action to do and he has the power to do it, he must do it under any circumstances. No excuse will be accepted of him.

3. If the agent knows which action to do, but he knows that performing that action is beyond his power, then he is excused. But if he perfects himself to the extent that he can perform it, the agent has to do it with no delay.<sup>17</sup>

In short, for Fârâbî, inaction and ignorance are no excuses for not doing something good or bad. All doors leading to inaction are blocked. For anything that is moral is actualized by human actions. Referring to this fact, Fârâbî says that any thing whose change and transitivity is impossible is not moral. This notion is the most important evidence that change on morality is possible and that man is a dynamic being. After all, if there were no behavioral change in ethics, then human existence would be meaningless.

### **The Status of Human Beings Among Higher Beings**

Here we will deal with the status of man at the juncture of necessary and contingent beings from the perspective of necessary existents. At the highest point of humankind lie the prophet and the philosopher. Above them are, in terms of affecting them:

1. The Active Intellect
2. Celestial bodies, and
3. God.

These levels of existence have direct or indirect influence on man in his will's becoming functional. The Active Intellect is the most important means between God and man in terms of communicating divine knowledge and injunctions. Man can reach perfection through what the Active Intellect bestows him and by means of this perfection he can reach the highest level of bliss (*al-sa'adah al-quswa*) in the hereafter. Then how is the relationship between this instrumental intellect and human beings? According to Fârâbî, "the functional relationship between man and the Active Intellect resembles the relationship between the eye and the sun as the source of light. Just as man without this light is only a potential seer, with it he becomes an actual seer, and his thinking becomes a divine being [through the Active Intellect] after being material. This [activity] is that of the Active Intellect."<sup>18</sup> Virtuous man is needed in order for the Active Intellect to be beneficial to all humanity. For man's conjunction with the Active Intellect is only possible if he possesses certain innate dispositions and orients these dispositions toward what is good.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Farabi, *Fusul Muntaza'a*, p.87.

<sup>18</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, p. 7.

Fârâbî explains the effect of God on the universe, which goes from God to the first ruler and from him to others as follows: "Political science explains how revelation comes from God gradually to the first ruler; how the first ruler governs the city, the ummah or ummahs with the knowledge coming from God and likewise how this governance is orderly transmitted from the first ruler to the remotest parts of the city."<sup>20</sup>

Is it not God's direct interference through His eternal knowledge with the ummah's will that He reveals to the first ruler concerning the governance of the ummah and that the first ruler governs the ummah in accordance with this revelation? To say yes or no to this question, since it concerns the nature of God's knowledge, seems difficult. In addition to this question, whose answer is open to speculations, Fârâbî also claims that first rulers of different times who attained conjunction with the Active Intellect would govern cities by doing the same kind of things or making the same changes.<sup>21</sup> What is it that would lead people to do the same thing at different times? Why is it that their souls are like one soul? The most reasonable answer could be that these different individuals converge on common sense by having the same experience. However; their ultimate common experience is not only their individual experience but also the knowledge that they have in common by virtue of directing their wills toward doing the common good. And this is revelation, which is the divine knowledge that overflows from God onto their intellects. Those who have certain innate capacities, when they transform these into actuality with the purpose of doing what is good to the extent possible, converge with their likes on the same level, on the same knowledge and the same action. This means that the wills of those who undergo certain processes in doing what is good are being guided after attaining certain levels.

Accepting the idea that the heavenly bodies affect human will, Fârâbî says: "Human imagination of celestial bodies and the imagination by the celestial bodies causes some imaginations to come about in our souls and leads us to do certain actions."<sup>22</sup>

That is, since the celestial bodies have influence on our behaviors, they are in a position of an agent having power over us. Moreover, knowledge of things to happen are engraved on the heavenly intellects and this knowledge is an essential aspect of God's essence. According to Fârâbî, had this not been the case, events and the universe would not come about.<sup>23</sup> In his system, the celestial bodies contribute to other beings' attaining perfection. The Active Intellect gives perfections to none other

<sup>20</sup> Fârâbî, *Kitâb al-Milla*, p. 44. Research and Presentation by: Muhsin Mahdi, Beirut 1968, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>22</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Ta'liqat*, p.18; *Uyûn al-Masâ'il fi al-Mantîk*, (in *Mebâdi al-Falsafa al-Qadîma*, Kahire 1910), p.8.

<sup>23</sup> Fârâbî, *et-Ta'liqat*, p. 17.

than humans.<sup>24</sup> With all these possible influences, action takes place in human beings; however, this act cannot possibly exist in and of itself.

"An act can only take place with [the combination of] two things. One of them is for the agent to be disposed to cause the effect and the other is for the passive object to admit that effect. Unless the two come together, neither the act nor its effect can actualize."<sup>25</sup>

The ascription of the action to the agent must be within his knowledge and the intent of the agent so that the individual can be held accountable for what he does.<sup>26</sup> Being responsible and subject to reward and punishment because of this responsibility does not easily obtain. Unless man activates all the abilities that he has and unless he reaches the highest intellectual point that is imaginable by human mind, he can hardly attain happiness.

Being a Muslim philosopher, Fârâbî never neglected religious concepts and propositions when explaining the issue of freedom. In addition, he tried to be cautious when using religious concepts and expressing beliefs; and he also tried to forestall any possible misunderstandings, especially in two points, about which he is being very careful:

1. The source of good and evil
2. God's knowledge concerning human predestination

### **1. Source of Good and Evil**

Fârâbî says that

"whatever happens happens through God's decree and determination. All evil things are also due to His determination. The evil that exists in things are related to the lowly realm. And these have accidental benefits. For if there were no evil, the good would not be constant. If the greater good is given up just to avoid lesser evil, this would increase evil."<sup>27</sup>

In other words, it could be said that 'since evil can be an instrument for the good, it is also good.' Without knowing evil, it is not possible to know the good, or at least to call the good good. For 'good' is a general concept and it is known only as the opposite of evil. Moreover, in Fârâbî's system, there is no essential evil. Evil is accidental and present in the ordinary world of change.

All the aspect of human life that is pertinent to divine decree and determination not only does not enter the scope of human knowledge, but also makes it difficult to determine where and when anything is having relation with anybody. For this reason, the problem of predestination is entirely theoretical; and so it is susceptible of speculations, if one takes into account the fundamental creed.

<sup>24</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Fârâbî, *Ahkam al--Nujum*, p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> Fârâbî, *al-Madina al-Fadila*, p. 68-69.

<sup>27</sup> Fârâbî, *Uyûn al-Masâ'il*, p. 126.

According to Fârâbî, "man cannot initiate any action without depending on external causes and on what is outside his volition. All these causes rest on a plan, the plan on predetermination, and the predetermination on the decree. The decree (*qada*) originates from the plan. All things are predetermined."<sup>28</sup> As a result, whatever there is, good or bad, all are contingent upon causes stemming from the Eternal Will.<sup>29</sup>

There are two main principles in the realization of an act. One of them is human and the other is that which is determined for man beyond his power. The thing that is determined is orderly and systematic. Plans and orders have causes; causes are cast by God into the universe of *amr* (divine command) and from there to the sublunary universe due to the preparedness of the sublunary world for those commands.

Nevertheless, Fârâbî strives to prevent the possible exploitation of this interpretation. For what bothers him is the people who look for excuses for not doing anything by believing in predestination and thinking God's eternal knowledge about them obliges them to act in the way He knows they will act. According to Fârâbî, those who hold this view draw on the ugly and hateful acts, from which stem the wrong ideas that are the causes of evil actions.<sup>30</sup> With this view, Fârâbî refers to the falseness of the fatalist position. If a man does not do anything, his existence will be meaningless. However, for Fârâbî, man is the most meaningful being among the created. Besides, the human nature is not suitable for doing nothing. When we look at this issue by taking into consideration both human situation and the external causes, the problem could easily be understood. The effect of the causes external to man on human act lessens human responsibility. Why would not this be the meaning of God's mercy suppressing His wrath?

## 2. Divine Knowledge

The issue of whether God's knowledge affects human acts has been hotly debated among scholars. Here we will mention two problems on which Fârâbî dwells and the solutions he offers to those problems:

1. According to Fârâbî, God's not having knowledge of something before it happens is a deficiency and this is an objectionable belief. All religions are in agreement on this point.

2. If God knows something before it happens makes its happening necessary, then does human will not make nonsensical his being rewarded or punished in this world and in the world to come? According to Farabi, religions do not accept this. Then what is the solution?

According to Fârâbî, the necessity of something does not entail the necessity of something that is related to it. However, the particularity of a

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<sup>28</sup> Fârâbî, *Fusûs al-Hikam*, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Fârâbî, *Fusûs al-Hikam*, p. 214 (Trans.).

<sup>30</sup> Fârâbî, *Fusûl al-Madani*, p. 91

contingent thing that is directly related to God becomes necessary indirectly because of God's involvement.

In order to make his statements understandable, Fârâbî gives an example:

"It is going to rain tomorrow and Zayd will go on a journey." The truth (*sidq*) of this sentence necessitates its raining tomorrow and Zayd's journey. But that does not mean that journey is going to be against Zayd's will and in such a way to obliterate his power. There is also the possibility of Zayd's staying at home, not going on a journey. The necessity of Zayd's journey is a kind of necessity that necessitates Zayd's travel in accordance with the truth of a true preposition, that is, the part that correspond to God's words.

When we say that "Zayd has the power to stay at home and to go on journey," these two choices are two different situations equal to each other in terms of possibility. When we say that true speech makes Zayd's journey tomorrow necessary, from this true proposition emerges the necessity of Zayd's journey. But this does not remove possibility of Zayd's not going. According to Fârâbî, since this does not remove the possibility of journey, his journey does not become necessary in itself.<sup>31</sup>

The above-mentioned example and the solution, in a conceptual sense, are necessary and possible. Fârâbî solves this problem within the conceptual sense with respect to God and human beings. But the question about the validity of this solution is always open to objections.

Another example given by Fârâbî is also significant:

"It is possible for God to do wrong. But He has never done any wrong and will never do, nor is He doing wrong now. God has never done wrong in the eternal past and will never do wrong in the eternal future, but it is possible. This is something whose existence is possible but which will never exit, and it is possible in another respect."<sup>32</sup>

In this theory, Fârâbî says that

"God certainly knows that Zayd is going to go on a journey and Zayd will go on a journey. This does not remove the power of Zayd not to going on a journey, even if this journey actualizes ... God's foreknowing that he will realize this act does not remove Zayd's power not to do it. But this necessity resulting from God's knowledge, in regard to the actuality of the act, does not mean that Zayd's act is a necessary one that obliterates his will."<sup>33</sup>

As we see, the problem once more comes down to the dispute of the proofs. As Fârâbî himself accepts, this conceptual analysis is not clear in

<sup>31</sup> Fârâbî, *Sharh al-Fârâbî li Kitâbî Aristutalis fi al-İbâra*, (Edited with an Introduction by: Wilhelm Kutsch, and Stanley Marrow, S.J., Beyrouth 1986), p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

that it cannot be understood easily and it does not correspond to actuality. In conclusion, Fârâbî says:

"If someone says that the necessity of Zayd's going on a journey results from truth of God's words and in this manner his act itself and relation to its subject becomes necessary, [then we say in reply], that whether or not this is the case is not clear."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 100.