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THE RADICAL NATURE  
OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE  
IN THE HARMONY OF THE TWO OPINIONS  
OF THE TWO SAGES,  
PLATO THE DIVINE AND ARISTOTLE

A text that I have studied at length, *The Harmony of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle* (*Kitāb al-Jam' bayna ra'yay al-ḥakīmayn Aflātūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristūtālīs*) by al-Fārābī (d. 950) – of this authorship I remain convinced<sup>1</sup> –

<sup>1</sup> Despite the unanimity of the manuscript tradition, the mention of the work in an ancient biobibliographical list, and Avicenna's attribution of the work to al-Fārābī – that is, a near-contemporary source – its authenticity has been questioned on the basis of the argument that it contains doctrines unworthy of a philosopher of the al-Fārābī's character or that conflict with other doctrines that he supported in several of his works of undisputed authenticity. Among those who argued against the attribution of *The Harmony* to al-Fārābī, Lameer (LAMEER 1994) found several elements in the work to be incompatible with al-Fārābī's profound knowledge of the Aristotelian corpus: 1) the extension to all philosophy of the Aristotelian definition of First Philosophy as 'science of beings *qua* beings'; 2) the attribution to Aristotle of a treatise on hypothetical syllogisms; 3) the discussion of the criterion of substantiality in the *Categories*; and 4) the way in which the author of *The Harmony* presents the premises of the syllogism by committing logical mistakes. Furthermore, he considered incompatible with doctrines that al-Fārābī supports elsewhere: 1) the thesis of the agreement between Plato and Aristotle, while elsewhere al-Fārābī sees only a convergence of their aims; 2) the admission of the *ijmā'* as a criterion of certainty; 3) the use of the pseudo-*Theology of Aristotle* may be considered suspect, considering that elsewhere al-Fārābī does not list this treatise among the works of Aristotle. Rashed (RASHED 2008; ID. 2009) argued that it is impossible to identify al-Fārābī as the author of *The Harmony* on the basis of four arguments that are not in the logical sphere: 1) the idea that the author expresses about a providence that goes down to the particulars because 'not even the weight of a grain of mustard escapes the attention of the Creator', while elsewhere, al-Fārābī is considerably more cautious in dealing with the question of particulars; 2) the fact that according to *The Harmony*, 'the spiritual forms exist in the world of *rubūbiyya*' – that is, that the Platonic ideas are to be identified with the forms in the divine intellect, while elsewhere, al-Fārābī does not deviate from a radicalgnoseological monism;

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contains two particularly interesting passages from the perspective of the primacy of philosophical discourses over pagan

3) the denial in *The Harmony* of the infinity of time and the admission of *ibdā'*, the divine creation out of nothing all at once in no time; 4) the multiple mentions of the will of God in *The Harmony* while elsewhere any form of divine 'will' is absent. Genequand (GENEQUAND 2012) responded to these last four arguments and, in particular, to the Farabian conception of providence. Genequand argues that a Qur'anic allusion, such as that to God's knowledge of the weight of a mustard seed, cannot be read *ipso facto* as a philosophical thesis and that al-Fārābī uses the same terminology to present a similar perspective in *The Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Perfect City* (*Mabādi' āra' ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*), in which he documents the opinions of the inhabitants of the virtuous city. Regarding the 87th of the *Selected Aphorisms* (*Fuṣūlmuntaza'a*), in which al-Fārābī states that if God's providence encompasses even the finest details, God would be responsible for evil – a passage that Rashed draws on to show that al-Fārābī elsewhere expresses precisely the opposite view to that of *The Harmony* – Genequand argues that, despite the largely conjectural chronology of al-Fārābī's works, *The Harmony* appears to reflect the altered theological climate after 912 (the year of al-Ash'arī's rejection of Mu'tazilism), when Ash'arism became Sunni orthodoxy. Nonetheless, there are several topics with respect to which *The Harmony* has such specific links with other works by al-Fārābī to render the hypothesis of inauthenticity particularly unlikely: 'Un ipotetico autore de *L'armonia* diverso da al-Fārābī avrebbe infatti condiviso con lui la trattazione degli enunciati assertori e la terminologia tecnica, che rendono la sezione de *L'armonia* dedicata a questo argomento incomprensibile senza un costante riferimento al commento farabiano al *De Interpretatione*; avrebbe condiviso con al-Fārābī il modo di concepire la sillogistica in termini di inclusioni tra classi e il modo – peculiare per dottrina e terminologia – di distinguere tra proposizioni affermative indefinite e proposizioni negative; un tale autore avrebbe in comune con al-Fārābī la trattazione della contrarietà fra enunciati, e avrebbe attinto presumibilmente alla stessa fonte neoplatonica di cui si serve al-Fārābī nel suo commento sul *De Interpretatione* il tratto così specifico che consiste nel considerare il capitolo 14 come la "quinta Sezione" del trattato; avrebbe condiviso sino nei dettagli argomentativi il modo di affrontare la questione dell'eternità del cosmo secondo Aristotele, il tema della convenzionalità del linguaggio e quello, connesso e molto caratteristico, delle espressioni traslate (*alfāz manqūla*), avrebbe scritto un commento all'*Etica Nicomachea*, e ambedue i commenti sarebbero andati perduti; avrebbe condiviso il tratto, di per sé quasi insignificante e perciò tanto più rivelatore, di parlare a volte di *Analitici priori e posteriori* come di un'unica opera'; AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 29–30. Furthermore, such an author would have shared the idea of different types of arguments: persuasive (*muqni'a*) or demonstrative (*haqiqiyya*) for the different capacities and natures of men (cf. GENEQUAND 2012, 195–97). An author exhibiting these characteristics was surely very familiar with al-Fārābī's work, had access to his sources, shared his doctrines, emulated his technical language, and followed al-Fārābī in selecting works for commentary. In my view, this series of elements renders the hypothesis of a different author unlikely – so much so that those who have proposed a different author have conjec-

accounts and prophetic scriptures: the first on creation and the second on man's ability to conceive God. In both cases, the philosophical discourse is presented as highly radical with respect to pagan tales or the prophetic revelation contained in the Qur'an and other scriptures. Ibn Rushd (Averroes; d. 1198) himself will tacitly refer to both passages in his *Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of the Connection between Religion and Philosophy* (*Faṣl al-Maqāl fī mā bayna al-ḥikma wa-l-sharī'a min al-itṭiṣāl*) to advocate for philosophy's legitimacy. Following a brief introduction to the work, I shall examine the two passages and Ibn Rushd's reprise thereof.

### 1. Introduction

*The Kitāb al-Jam' bayna ra'yay al-ḥakīmayn Aflātūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristūṭālīs*, recorded in al-Qifṭī's *History of Learned Men* (*Ta'rikh al-hukamā'*) among al-Fārābī's works under the title *Kitāb al-Itṭifād ārā' Aristūṭālīs wa-Aflātūn*<sup>2</sup> and by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā; d. 1037) in his correspondence with al-Bīrūnī<sup>3</sup> (d. 1048) under the title by which it is most commonly known, was first

tured that it may have been his personal secretary, the Jacobite Christian Ibrāhīm ibn 'Adī. As D'Ancona (D'ANCONA 2006, 381, note 6) observed, pseudo-epigraphy is always possible and is difficult to deny; but it should be conceived as a sort of *extrema ratio*. Genequand and Janos (GENEQUAND 2012; JANOS 2012) have suggested an evolution of al-Fārābī's thought. Genequand tries to find elements from contemporary theological debate to explain the context and arguments of al-Fārābī and to derive some elements for the relative chronology of his works. Janos uses the hypothesis of evolution to explain the change in al-Fārābī's conception of celestial substance from a strictly Aristotelian doctrine to one in which al-Fārābī describes the heavens as a form (*ṣūra*) that insists on a substratum (*mawḍū'*) similar to matter but that can receive only one form: its soul. Cf. MARTINI BONADEO 2022a; MARTINI BONADEO 2022b. Moreover, regarding the Farabian position between creation and the world's eternity, Janos argues that if in *The Harmony*, an early work, al-Fārābī supports a creationist vision of the universe created out of nothing and in a timeless instant, his later treatises expound an eternalist doctrine in which the First Principle is the eternal cause of a timeless act of emanation of a single immaterial being – the first intellect. Farabian's exegetical approach is therefore neither static nor monolithic, as it undergoes several changes over its approximately forty years of activity. Also related to this debate: JANOS 2009; VALLAT 2011; GLEED 2012; GENEQUAND 2013; CHERNI 2015.

<sup>2</sup> IBN AL-QIFṬĪ 1903, 117.20.

<sup>3</sup> BĪRŪNĪ-IBN-I SĪNĀ 1974, 40.12–13.

edited by Dieterici.<sup>4</sup> Najjār published a new critical edition on a larger manuscript base that included the manuscript Diyarbakır İl Halq Kütüphanesi 1970, ff. 1v–23r, which – dated to the eleventh to twelfth centuries – is the earliest to preserve the work.<sup>5</sup> In 2008, I revised the editions of Dieterici and Najjār, accompanying the Arabic text with an Italian translation and commentary.<sup>6</sup>

The title, in its various forms, strongly recalls that of the lost treatise by Porphyry entitled *The Position of Plato and that of Aristotle Coincide* (Περὶ τοῦ μίαν εἶναι τὴν Πλάτωνος καὶ Ἀριστοτέλους ἀρρεσιν).<sup>7</sup> As early as 1869, Steinschneider, when he presented the first annotated list of the second master's works to Western scholars, indicated the titles under which the Farabian work had been circulated.<sup>8</sup> In his edition published twenty years later, Dieterici observed that the theme addressed by al-Fārābī was inspired by the Neoplatonic tradition of the unity of Greek philosophy and, above all, by Plato and Aristotle.<sup>9</sup> In 1939, Raymond Klibansky published the study *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition During the Middle Ages*, and in *Appendix I to the Arabic Tradition*, he positioned *The Harmony* in the context of the late antique Neoplatonic schools.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> DIETERICI 1890, 1–33.

<sup>5</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 1999. For the description of MS Diyarbakır İl Halq Kütüphanesi 1970, cf. al-Fārābī 1968, 29–32.

<sup>6</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008.

<sup>7</sup> *Suidae Lexicon* 2001, 178.21. Cf. ZAMBON 2002.

<sup>8</sup> STEINSCHNEIDER 1869, 133.

<sup>9</sup> DIETERICI 1890, XIII, xiii–xiv.

<sup>10</sup> KLIBANSKY 1939, 40. Cf. also WALZER 1965, 286, 288–89, according to whom al-Fārābī knew Porphyry and his lost writing: ‘The modern study of al-Fārābī’s works [...] has made it highly probable that he had some information about Porphyry’s *Concordance* and followed a similar trend of thought in his own philosophy’. Walzer drew attention to three passages: one from Augustine, one from Boethius and one from Simplicius, all three of which bear witness to the Porphyrian tradition in which he placed al-Fārābī’s *Harmony*: ‘The words of al-Fārābī just quoted agree with well-known similar statements in pre-Islamic authors. I just recall St Augustine *Contra Acad.* 3, 42: *non defuerunt acutissimi et solertissimi viri qui docerent disputationibus suis Aristotelem ac Platonem ita sibi concinere ut imperitis minusque attentis dissentire videantur, multis quidem saeculis multisque contentionibus, sed tamen eliquata est, ut opinor, una verissimae philosophiae disciplina*. In view of our earlier discussions, it seems superfluous to reiterate that Augustine here depends on Porphyry as well as Boethius in his commentary on Περὶ ἐρμηνείας

However, it was Pierre Hadot's study (1974) on the interpretation of the *Categories* that shed light on the role played by the doctrine of harmony between Plato and Aristotle in the philosophy of Late Antiquity.<sup>11</sup> It was a clear interpretative choice that, if it had partly characterised Platonism prior to Plotinus,<sup>12</sup> subsequently emerged after him, particularly in Porphyry, the first Platonist to comment on the works of Aristotle.<sup>13</sup> This practice of commentary became systematic between the fifth and sixth centuries, in the Neoplatonic school of Athens and, above all, in Alexandria. The Aristotelian *Corpus*, introduced by Porphyry's *Isagoge* and organised in a sequence that progressed from the *Organon* to the *Metaphysics*, was considered the necessary preparation for reading Plato's dialogues up to the *One of Parmenides*.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Fārābī openly claims a strong connection with the Alexandrian school. In particular, his short essay *On the Appear-*

[...] II, pp. 80, 1: *hic peractis non equidem contempserim Aristotelis Platonisque sententias in unam quodam modo revocare concordiam eosque non ut plerique dissentire in omnibus sed in plerisque et his in philosophia maximis consentire demonstrarem*. Simplicius insists (*De caelo* 640, 28) ὅπερ δὲ πολλακίς εἶωθα καὶ νῦν εἰπεῖν καιρὸς ὅτι οὐ πραγματικὴ τις ἐστὶν τῶν φιλοσόφων ἢ διαφωνία'. In quoting the passage from Augustine, Walzer inexplicably omits the term *eliquata* ('purified'). Augustine's passage is significant because, as in the Farabian text, one encounters the idea that the dissent between Aristotle and Plato is a product of the polemics of duller, more inexperienced followers, who would have sought to highlight everything that divided the two great philosophers; however, thanks to the teachings of other philosophers *acutissimi et solertissimi* (very sharp and clever) as much as the others were *imperiti* (inexperienced) and *minus attentī* (less attentive), the profound harmony between Plato and Aristotle would have been brought to light, and that *philosophiae disciplina* would have finally been distilled to only *una* (one). This resemblance is too specific to be accidental and suggests that Augustine's source of inspiration – perhaps Porphyry's lost treatise itself – somehow continued to inspire other works too, lost to us but still accessible to al-Fārābī, such as those that he presumably used in commenting on the Aristotelian *Corpus*. On Boethius, see ZAMBON 2003. Cf. AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 3–5.

<sup>11</sup> HADOT 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. DILLON 1977.

<sup>13</sup> EVANGELIOU 1988; KARAMANOLIS 2004–2005; KARAMANOLIS 2006.

<sup>14</sup> On the concatenation of the Aristotelian and Platonic corpus in late antique Greek schools, cf. HADOT 1987a; HADOT 1987b; HADOT 1991; HADOT 1992. On the reading order of Plato's dialogues in late Neoplatonism, culminating in the *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, cf. FESTUGIÈRE 1969; *Prologomènes à la Philosophie de Platon* 1990, 39.16–26.

ance of Philosophy (*Fī zuhūr al-falsafa*), preserved in the *Sources of Information on the Classes of Physicians* (*Uyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ*), the bio-bibliographic work of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa (d. 1270),<sup>15</sup> and incorporated by the historian al-Masʿūdī (d. 956) with many variations and without reporting its source in the *Book of Notification and Verification* (*Kitāb al-Tanbīhwa-l-ishrāf*),<sup>16</sup> has long been considered a reliable testimony of the almost-continuous link between the last School of Alexandria – identified as the seat of philosophical teaching occupied by Aristotle at the end of his life – and the Arabic philosophical tradition in Baghdad through the mediation of Harrān, where, according to Tardieu (although his reconstruction has been criticised), Simplicius would have composed his own commentaries on Aristotle.<sup>17</sup> Philippe Vallat has studied this link with the School of Alexandria in detail.<sup>18</sup>

Gerhard Endress, however, has indicated that the question of harmony receives a new interpretation in al-Fārābī that overturns the primacy attributed to Plato in the late antique Neoplatonic schools. Endress states, ‘L’harmonie entre Platon et Aristote [...] acquiert une nouvelle fonction. Fārābī insiste sur ce fait autant que l’ont fait ses prédécesseurs: “La vraie philosophie nous parvint des Grecs de la part de Platon et d’Aristote seulement. Tous les deux nous donnèrent une exposition de la philosophie, non sans nous montrer les chemins aboutissant à elle, et la manière de la renouveler lorsqu’elle serait corrompue ou éteinte”; ainsi, ils’ ensuit d’un examen détaillé de la doctrine de ces deux maîtres “que le but des deux philosophies était le même et qu’ils envisageaient d’exposer une seule et même philosophie” [...] Fārābī [...] assigne à Platon la place d’un précurseur honorable, mais inférieur et restreint dans sa portée, alors qu’Aristote est l’accomplisseur universel. Sa phi-

<sup>15</sup> *A literary history of medicine* 2020, 1151.4–52.11.

<sup>16</sup> AL-MASʿŪDĪ 1894, 121.3–4, 121.19–22.14.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MEYERHOF 1930; TARDIEU 1986; TARDIEU 1987; TARDIEU 1990. This reconstruction was criticized by LUNA 2001, 482–504, and by LAMEER 1997. In PTOLÉMÉE AL-GHARĪB 2021, cccxiii–ccclxi, Rashed argues that the information in the Farabian text dates back to the introduction of Andronicus’s *Pinakes*, which Porphyry demonstrates knowledge of in his *Vita Plotini* (§ 24).

<sup>18</sup> VALLAT 2004.

losophie est fondée sur la science de la démonstration; donc “il n’y a pas d’étreau monde où la philosophie n’ait accès, qu’elle ne prenne pour but et ne connaisse suivant la capacité humaine”.<sup>19</sup>

Vallat downplays the primacy that al-Fārābī confers on Aristotle over Plato. This primacy would have been invoked, above all, in the *Attainment of Happiness* (*Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-sa‘āda*), a work in which al-Fārābī would have pursued a pedagogical intention not to attribute to Plato other than the theses reconsidered later also by Aristotle. In fact, had he acted differently, he would have found himself faced with the need to comment extensively on Plato’s works, to which he had no access. Al-Fārābī would have reserved the theoretical sphere for Aristotle and the political sphere of philosophy for Plato, and since political philosophy, the human reflection of the informing action of the Agent Intellect, occupies the highest position for al-Fārābī, it would result from this established *ipso facto* the primacy of Plato over Aristotle.<sup>20</sup>

In my opinion, as *The Harmony* clearly reveals, al-Fārābī attributes to Plato the role of forerunner, while it is Aristotle who fully acknowledged and gave demonstrative rigour to philosophical science. This is not to suggest that Plato’s greatness is diminished or downgraded: in fact, the model followed is not that of the *Metaphysics Alpha Meizon*, wherein the precursor is imperfect and wholly surpassed by its successor. Rather, it is a considerably more powerful model: a speech delivered in the first person by ‘Aristotle’ himself, in which he presents himself as Plato’s disciple, explaining and commenting on his master’s teachings.<sup>21</sup> This discourse is found in the first chapter of the pseudo-*Theology of Aristotle*, the Arabic version of *Enneads IV–VI* produced in the ninth-century circle of al-Kindī (d. ca. 873), which al-Fārābī quotes in *The Harmony*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ENDRESS 1991, 249–50.

<sup>20</sup> VALLAT 2004, 44–45.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. PLOTINO 2003, 237.7–38.8; AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 63.16–64.6.

<sup>22</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 62.16–64.6. D’ANCONA 2006, 396, 399, maintains, ‘What we have in front of us is a powerful re-creation of the topic of the “harmony between Plato and Aristotle”. In an unprecedented way, “Aristotle” praises Plato for having corrected the shortcomings of the first philosophers, who

At the height of the tenth century, the substantial increase in knowledge of the Aristotelian *Corpus* in Baghdad decisively altered the reasons for Aristotle's primacy in al-Fārābī's view. As Endress observes, the model of demonstrative science of the *Posterior Analytics*, translated into Arabic by the Nestorian Christian Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus (d. 940), a figure to whom al-Fārābī is close, is instrumental in securing Aristotle's primacy according to al-Fārābī, as this latter philosophy is the highest and most universal science that includes and justifies the forms of knowledge peculiar to a given community, such as the Arab-Muslim one. Precisely for this reason, if philosophy is science and knows the truth, Plato and Aristotle cannot have supported mutually incompatible doctrines on all issues. This position is made explicit right from the *Incipit* of *The Harmony*:

إني لما رأيت أكثر أهل زماننا قد خاضوا وتنازعوا في حدوث العالم وقدمه وأدعوا أن بين الحكيمين المقدمين المبرزين أفلاطن وأرسطاطاليس اختلافاً في إثبات المبدع الأول وفي وجود الأسباب عنه وفي أمر النفس والعقل وفي المجازاة على الأفعال خيرها وشرها وفي كثير من الأمور المدنية والخلقية والمنطقية، أردت أن أشرع في مقالتي هذه في الجمع بين رأييهما والإبانة عما يدل عليه فحوى قوليهما ليظهر الاتفاق بين ما كانا يعتقدانه ويزول الشك والارتياب عن قلوب الناظرين في كتبهما وتبين مواضع الظنون ومداخل الشكوك في مقالاتهما لأن ذلك من أهم ما يُقصد بيانه وأنفع ما يُرام شرحه إيضاحه.<sup>23</sup>

When I saw most of our contemporaries argue and dispute with each other about the creation of the world, about its eternity, and claim that between the two first and foremost wise, Plato and Aristotle, there is an opposition in the way of establishing the first Creator and about the existence of

were misled by their rough and naive materialism [...] Not only is Plato's epistemology true in "Aristotle's" presentation, but his cosmology and theology are also true'. Comparing the passage in question with a text by al-Āmirī, a second-generation pupil of al-Kindī, she argues that it is precisely in the latter's circle that the image of Aristotle, a disciple of Plato, is formed, which brings to completion the teaching: 'Here is what he (al-Kindī) says at the beginnings of his *Epistle on the Intellect*. "I have understood your request for putting into writing a concise informative account concerning the intellect according to the opinions of those who were praiseworthy among the Greek ancients. Now among the most praiseworthy of them were Aristotle and his master (*mu'allim*), the wise Plato – since the sum and substance of what Plato had to say about that subject is the same as what was said by his disciple (*tilmīd*) Aristotle"'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 36.5–37.2.



causes from Him, on the issue of the soul and the intellect, on the retribution of good deeds and evil ones, and on many other topics of politics, ethics and logic, I wanted to begin in this treatise to show the harmony between their two opinions, to provide the explanation of what indicates the meaning of their discourses, so that the agreement of their convictions may appear clear, to remove doubt and uncertainty from the hearts of those who examine their books, and to clarify those controversial places in their works that give rise to doubt, because this is the most important of the things that need to be clarified, is the most useful of the things that need to be commented on and explained. (The translation is mine)

On the basis of this very explicit statement, several scholars have suggested that this treatise had such a manifest apologetic purpose as to be a propagandist work in which it was more important to speak persuasively than honestly, even if it meant lying.<sup>24</sup> Here, I shall not provide a detailed history of the studies that have attributed to al-Fārābī a dissimulationist conduct; however, as I have argued elsewhere, it appears that to interpret al-Fārābī's works in this way is to accept it as normal that an author might write things that he does not, in fact, think, an admission that requires at least conclusive evidence. Furthermore, such an admission would cast a shadow of suspicion on all the works of such an author unless one had a clear criterion for distinguishing those in which he expounds his true thoughts from those in which he seeks to persuade others of ideas whose falsehood is wholly evident. This interpretation of *The Harmony* assumes that the work is informative in nature, whereas *The Harmony* can only be understood by an audience familiar with the highly technical aspects of the exegesis of philosophical texts.<sup>25</sup>

However, there is one further element on which I intend to dwell here: in *The Harmony*, al-Fārābī adopts a clear position

<sup>24</sup> Vallat (VALLAT 2004, 85–128) retraces the studies that, from Leo Strauss onwards, have assigned an 'esoteric' intent to al-Fārābī, examining the position of Muhsin Mahdi. Cf., for example, MAHDI 1962, 3–4; ALFARABI 2001b. Cf. furthermore DAIBER 1986, 15; TAMER 2001, 207–62; *Scienza e opinione nella città perfetta* 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 21–27.

in favour of the primacy of philosophy with respect to the ancient books concerning the origins and expressions of religions, and this makes its destination *ad extra* (so to say) implausible. According to al-Fārābī, only philosophy has been capable of radically formulating the notion of creation *ex nihilo* – without mentioning a pre-existing matter – and the conception of God – devoid of all characteristics of what is created and in no space. Now, if the recipients of *The Harmony* were hostile men of letters, grammarians, or theologians whom the treatise was intended to convince that philosophy posed no threat to Islam, this subordination of religious discourse to philosophical discourse in terms of argumentative rigour would have been entirely counterproductive. The themes presented in *The Harmony*, by contrast, are intelligible only to scholars of the Greek philosophical and scientific corpus, who may have been perplexed by the diaphony of positions that emerged from an increasingly rich knowledge of texts and commentary literature. *The Harmony* can, therefore, in my view, certainly be explained in terms of a project of defense of philosophy from its critics – not in the sense, however, that it addresses the latter directly, but rather in the sense that the work prepares philosophers who were contemporaries of al-Fārābī for the controversies in which they may have been called on to defend their intellectual choice.

## 2. *The primacy of philosophical discourse according to The Harmony*

In *The Harmony*, al-Fārābī argues that only philosophy has succeeded in radically formulating the notion of creation from nothing. While ancient and religious narratives of creation offer only the notion that the cosmos was shaped from a pre-existing matter, they do not reach that perfect and unequivocal formulation of the universal causality of the First Principle, which is, instead, the prerogative of philosophy:

وقلنا: ليس لأحد من أهل المذاهب والنحل والشرائع وسائر الطوائف من العلم بحدوث العالم وإثبات الصانع له وتلخيص أمر الإبداع ما لأرسطاطاليس وقبله لأفلاطن ولمن سلك سبيلهما. وذلك أن كل ما يوجد من أقاويل العلماء من سائر المذاهب والنحل ليس يدل عند التفصيل إلا على قدم الطينة وبقائها. وإن أحببت

الوقوف على ذلك فانظر في الكتب المصنفة في المبتدآت والأخبار المروية فيها والآثار المحكيّة عن قدامتهم لترى الأعاجيب من قول بأنّ في الأصل ماء فتحرّك واجتمع الزبد فانعقدت منه الأرض وارتفع الدخان فانتظم منه السماء. ثمّ ما يقوله اليهود والمجوس وسائر الأمم ممّا يدلّ جميعه على الاستحالات والتغايير التي هي أضداد الإبداع. وما يوجد لجميعهم من الأخبار عمّا سيؤول إليه أمر السموات والأرضين من طيهما وتنسيفهما وتبديدهما وطرحهما في جهنم وما أشبه ذلك ممّا لا يدلّ شيء منه على التلاشي المحض. ولولا ما أنقذ الله أهل العقول والأذهان بهذين الحكيمين ومن سلك سبيلهما ممّن أوضح أمر الإبداع بحجج واضحة مقنعة وأنّه إيجاد الشيء لا من شيء وأنّ كلّ ما يكون عن شيء ما فإنه يفسد لا محالة إلى ذلك الشيء، والعالم مبدع من غير شيء فمآله إلى غير شيء، وممّا شاكل ذلك من الدلائل والحجج والبراهين التي توجد كتبها مملوءة منها وخصوصاً ما لهما في الربوبية وفي مبادئ الطبيعة، لكن الناس في حيرة ولبس.<sup>26</sup>

And we say that no follower of the various schools, confessions, religions, and other sects has obtained so much knowledge about the origination of the world, about the proof of the existence of the Artisan, about the core of the issue of creation, as Aristotle and before him Plato and those who followed their paths. In fact, all that is found in the discourses of the learned men of the other schools and confessions points, on closer inspection, to nothing but the eternity of matter and its permanence. If you want to know this, search through the books that have been composed about origins, the stories that have been told about origins, and the traditions reported by their predecessors, to see the miraculous discourses according to which in the beginning there was water and it was set in motion, foam accumulated and it formed the earth, smoke arose and it formed the heavens. Then look for what the Jews, the Mazdeans and other peoples say: everything points to transformations and changes that are contrary to creation. And look again at what is found in all their stories about what will happen to the heavens and the two earths, concerning the fact that they will be folded up, pulverised, scattered, thrown into Gehenna, and other such things none of which implies pure annihilation. If God had not saved men of intellect and reason through these two wise men, those who followed their path and those who clarified the issue of creation with clear and convincing proofs – namely, that creation consists in giving being to a thing out of nothing and that everything that is generated out of a certain thing, if it becomes cor-

<sup>26</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 66.4–67.3.

rupted inevitably returns to this thing, that the world was created from nothing and will return to nothing, and other indications, proofs, and demonstrations that are similar to those of which their books are full, particularly those on sovereignty and the principles of nature – people would still be embarrassed and confused. (The translation is mine)

Al-Fārābī argues that none of the adherents of the various religious and sects has obtained knowledge about the origination of the world, the proof of the Artisan or the core of the issue of creation to the extent Aristotle and, before him, Plato did along with those who followed them. In fact, nothing may be found in the cosmogonic discourses of the scholars of the other schools and confessional factions but a mere indication (literally *laysa yadullu 'ind al-tafṣīl*, ‘it does not particularly indicate that’) of the eternity and permanence of matter. To denote ‘matter’, al-Fārābī uses the term *ṭīna*,<sup>27</sup> which, as Mallet observes,<sup>28</sup> evokes the term *ṭīn*, the clay of the creation of Qur. 3 (The House of ‘Imrān) 49 and Qur. 6 (Cattle) 2. The story that al-Fārābī then presents on the origin of the universe and which he says he draws from the books and traditions established before Aristotle and Plato conforms roughly with the Qur’anic dictation: in the beginning, there was water [Qur. 11 (*Hūd*) 7], which is set in motion; foam accumulated and from it, the earth was formed [Qur. 13 (Thunder) 17]; the smoke arose and from it, the sky was organised [Qur. 41 (Distinguished) 11]. Al-Fārābī underlines how, narratives of this nature, including those originating among other peoples, such as the Jews and the Mazdeans, have offered no descriptions of creation *ex nihilo* but rather have described processes of change and qualitative alteration, for which a second element is generated from a pre-existing one. These same accounts then failed to describe what will become of the universe at the end of its corruption: they say it will be pulverised and cast into Gehenna [Qur. 89 (The Dawn) 21–23]. They do not speak of its going back to nothing. If the good Lord had not, thanks to the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle, opened

<sup>27</sup> GOICHON 1938, 207, note 404.

<sup>28</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 1999, 183–84.

the eyes of men of intellect on the issue of creation, humanity would still be confused. Plato and Aristotle, in their works on the divine sovereignty (*rubūbiyya* – it is difficult not to notice the reference to the pseudo-*Theology of Aristotle*) and of the principles of nature, instead offered convincing evidence that creation consists in giving being to a thing out of nothing and that all that is generated out of nothing; if it becomes corrupted, it will inevitably return to nothing. The universe is created from nothing and will return to nothing, and this explanation is actually in accordance with the authentic Qur'anic dictation that everything will perish except the face of God [Qur. 28 (The Story) 88].

Several lines later, al-Fārābī addresses the question of the representations of God and writes:

فإن من تصوّر من أمر المبدع الأول أنّه جسم وأنّه يفعل بحركة وفي زمان ثم لا يقدر بذهنه على تصوّر ما هو اللطيف من ذلك وأليق به ومهما توهم أنّه غير جسم أو أنّه يفعل فعلاً بلا حركة لا يثبت في توهمه معنى متصوّر البتّة، وإن جبر على ذلك زاده غياً وضلالاً، كان فيما يتصوّر ويعتقده معذوراً مصيباً. ثم من قدر بذهنه على أن يعلم أنّه غير جسم وأنّ فعله بلا حركة غير أنّه لا يقدر على تصوّره على أنّه في غير مكان وإن جبر على ذلك وكلف، أذاه ذلك إلى ما هو أروأ منه وأشدّ ضرراً، فهو أيضاً مصيب فيما يعتقده ومعذور فيما يعلمه. وكذلك لا يقدر أكثر الجمهور على معرفة شيء يحدث لا من شيء أو يفسد لا إلى شيء. فذلك ما قد خطبوا بما قدروا على تصوّره وإدراكه وتفهمه ولا يجوز أن ينسب شيء من ذلك في موضعه إلى الخطأ والوهي بل الكل صواب مستقيم. فطرق البراهين الحقيقيّة مستقاهما من عند الفلاسفة الذين تقدّمهم هذان الحكيمان أعني أفلاطن وأرسطاطاليس. فأما طرق البراهين المقنعة المستقيمة فمستقاهما من عند أصحاب الشرائع الذين عُضدوا بأنواع الوحي والإلهامات.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, he who imagines the First Creator as the one who is body and acts through a movement, and in time, is then unable with his own mind to form a representation of something more subtle than this and more suitable for Him; whenever he imagines that He is not a body or that He acts without moving, he is unable in any way to form in his imagination a concept that represents Him. If, however, he is forced to do so, he grows in his own error and bewilderment. Such a one is to be excused and is right in what he represents, and in what he believes. Then there is someone who is able with his mind to come to know that He is not

<sup>29</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 67.16–68.10.

a body and that His action is without motion, but he is not able to form the concept that He is not in a spatial location; if, however, he is compelled to do so, this leads him to what is even worse and more harmful; the latter too is correct in what he believes and is to be excused for what he knows. In the same way the majority of the multitude are unable to know one thing that does not come from another or does not corrupt itself into another. For this reason, they have been addressed with what they are capable to conceive, comprehend and understand. It is not permissible to attribute any of these things, in their foundation, to error or weakness, but on the contrary it is all right and correct. The methods of true demonstrations are to be required of philosophers, among whom these two sages, namely Plato and Aristotle, have primacy. As for convincing and upright methods of demonstration, these are to be borrowed from the legislators, who are aided by various kinds of revelation and inspirations. (The translation is mine)

Al-Fārābī first presents the corporeal representations of those who are unable to represent God in any other way, imagining that He is a body and that He acts in time with a movement. If they were forced to abandon this primitive representation of theirs, for another that is more sophisticated and superior to their ability to understand, they would fall into an even deeper confusion. Therefore, however imperfect their conception of the Creator, they should be excused and regarded as believers. Then, there are those who are able to form a more accurate representation of God in their minds, and therefore believe that He is not a body and does not act by motion but continue to place God in a place. If they were forced to abandon such a representation, they would probably come up with an inferior one. Even these men are to be excused. In fact, the masses are largely incapable of knowing anything other than what can be generated and corrupted and must therefore be provided with an adequate representation of what they are capable of understanding. For the followers of the content of religion (*aṣḥāb al-sharāʿi*), a convincing argument is required. Only the philosophers – especially, Plato and Aristotle, who instead followed the path of demonstration – are able to conceive of a First Principle that

is not a body, that does not occupy a space, that is timeless and immobile and that is endowed with absolute ontological priority.

### 3. *The fortune of the Farabian doctrine*

Al-Fārābī's doctrine is disseminated throughout the Muslim East, for example in Avicenna as we read his *al-Ilāhiyyāt*:

ولا ينبغي له أن يشغلهم بشيء من معرفة الله تعالى فوق معرفة أنه واحد حق لا شبيه له. فأما أن يعدي بهم إلى أن يكلفهم أن يصدقوا بوجوده وهو غير مشار إليه في مكان، ولا منقسم بالقول، ولا خارج العالم ولا داخله، ولا شيئاً من هذا الجنس، فقد عظم عليهم الشغل وشوش فيما بين أيديهم الدين، وأوقعهم فيما لا مخلص عنه، إلا لمن كان المعان الموفق الذي يشد وجوده ويندر كونه، فإنه لا يمكنهم أن يتصوروا هذه الأحوال على وجهها إلا بكّد، وإنما يمكن القليل منهم أن يتصوروا حقيقة هذا التوحيد والتنزيه، فلا يلبثون أن يكذبوا بمثل هذا الوجود، ويقعوا في تنازع وينصرفوا إلى المباحثات والمقاييس التي تصدهم عن أعمالهم المدنية. وربما أوقعهم في آراء مخالفة لصالح المدنية، ومنافية لواجب الحق، وكثرت فيهم الشكوك والشبه، وصعب الأمر على إنسان في ضبطهم، فما كل بميسر له في الحكمة الإلهية، ولا إنسان يصلح له أن يظهر أن عنده حقيقة يكتمها عن العامة، بل يجب أن لا يرخص في تعرض شيء من ذلك، بل يجب أن يعرفهم جلاله الله تعالى وعظمته بروز وأمثلة من الأشياء التي هي عندهم جليلة وعظيمة، ويلقي إليهم مع هذا، هذا القدر، أعني أنه لا نظير له ولا شريك له ولا شبيه له، وكذلك يجب أن يقرر عندهم أمر المعاد على وجه يتصورون كلفيته، وتسكن إليه نفوسهم، ويضرب للسعادة والشقاوة أمثالاً مما يفهمونه ويتصورونه. وأما الحق في ذلك فلا يلوح لهم منه إلا أمراً مجملاً، وهو أن ذلك شيء لا عين رأت ولا أذن سمعته، وأن هناك من اللذة ما هو ملك عظيم ومن الألم ما هو عذاب مقيم. واعلم أن الله تعالى يعلم أن وجه الخير في هذا، فيجب أن يوجد معلوم الله تعالى على وجهه على ما علمت، ولا بأس أن يشتمل خطأ به على رموز وإشارات تستدعي المستعدين بالجيلة للنظر إلى البحث الحكمي.<sup>30</sup>

But he [the Prophet] ought not to involve them [the common people] with anything [doctrinal] pertaining to the knowledge of God, exalted be He, beyond the knowledge that He is One, the Truth, and has nothing similar to Him. To go beyond this and obligate them to believe in His existence as being not referred to in place, as being not subject to verbal classifications, as being neither inside nor outside the world, nor anything of this kind [is to ask too much].

<sup>30</sup> IBN SĪNĀ 1960, II, 442.13–43.12.

He will [simply] render their task too great, confuse the religion they have, and cause them to fall into something from which deliverance is only for one who is [divinely] helped and led to success, [the occurrence of] whose existence is unusual, his coming to be [most] rare. For it is only with great strain that they can conceive the true states of such matters in their true aspects; it is only the very few among them that can understand the truth of divine 'unity' and divine 'transcendence'. [The rest] would come to deny the truth of such existence, fall into dissensions, and indulge in disputations and analogical arguments that stand in the way of their performing their civil [duties]. This might even lead them to adopt views contrary to the city's welfare, opposed to the imperatives of the Truth. Their complaints and doubts will multiply, making it difficult for a human to control them. For it is not for everyone that [the acquisition] of divine wisdom is facilitated. Nor is it proper for any human to reveal that he possesses knowledge he is hiding from the commonality. Indeed, he must never permit any reference to this. Rather, he should let them know of God's majesty and greatness through symbols and similitudes derived from things that are for them majestic and great, adding this much: that He has neither an equal, nor a partner, nor anyone like Him. Similarly, he must instill in them the belief in the resurrection in a manner that they can conceive and in which their souls find rest. He must tell them about [eternal] bliss and misery in parables derived from what they can comprehend and conceive. Of the true nature of [the afterlife] he should indicate only something in general, that it is something that 'no eye has seen and no ear heard' and that there are pleasures that are great possessions and miseries that are perpetual torture. Know that God, exalted be He, knows that the good lies in [such a state of affairs]. It follows, then, that that which God knows to be the good must exist in the way that [He knows it], as you have known [from our preceding discussion]. But there is no harm if the legislator's words contain symbols and signs that might call forth those naturally disposed toward theoretical reflection to pursue philosophic investigations.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> AVICENNA 2005, 365–66.



However, al-Fārābī's doctrine also makes its way to the Muslim West: it is known that Fārābī's works – *The Harmony* likely among them – were circulated in al-Andalus. Elamrani-Jamal, in his study of al-Fārābī's influence on Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyūsī (or al-Baṭalyawsī) (d. 1127) – a grammarian, lexicographer, and jurist originally from Badajoz, who lived between the second half of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century, before the great philosophical personalities such as Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185) and Ibn Rushd – noted that *The Harmony* is among the sources used by this author.<sup>32</sup> Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyūsī appears to have been among the first Andalusian authors to seek a reconciliation between the science of the ancients and religion, and in response to one of the questions included in the *Book of Questions (Kitāb al-Masā'il)*, which deals precisely with this topic, he writes:

ذكر الفارابي أن فلاسفة يونان كلهم أرسطاطليس وغيره كانوا يرون أنه لا فرق بين الفلسفة والشريعة في الغرض المقصود اليه غير أن الفلسفة تعطي الأمور برهانا وتصورا والشريعة تعطيها قناعا وتخيلاً وذلك أن الناس لما اختلفوا في قرائعهم وإفهامهم كاختلافهم في صورهم والوانهم وغير ذلك من أحوالهم جعل الباربي تعالى للعلم طريقين طريق برهان وتصور لمن قوي فهمه واستحكم عقله وطريق إقناعه لمن ضعف فهمه ولم يستحكم عقله.<sup>33</sup>

Al-Fārābī reports that all the philosophers of Greece, Aristotle, and others, thought that there was no difference between philosophy and religious law from the point of view of the end sought; rather, the difference lies in the fact that philosophy established things through formal demonstration and representation, while religious law established them through persuasion and imagination. This is due to the fact that since human beings differ in their natural dispositions and intelligence, as well as in their physiognomy, colours, and other characteristics, God gave two ways to attain knowledge: the method of demonstration and formal representation for those who have a sound understanding

<sup>32</sup> ELAMRANI-JAMAL 1996, 160. Cf. on the author and his analysis of the relationship between philosophy and religion: RAMÓN GUERRERO 1995, 51–66; URVOY 2005, 245–55; ELIYAHU 2013, 51–63; ELIYAHU 2015, 165–98; ELIYAHU 2022, 161–72; and the historical context of al-Andalus SERRANO 2002, 53–92.

<sup>33</sup> ASÍN PALACIOS 1935, 381.9–15.

and a deep-rooted intellect, and the method of persuasion for those who have a weak understanding and an intellect, that is not deep-rooted. (The translation is mine)

Elamrani-Jamal observes that, in these lines, Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyūsi provides a faithful account of the Farabian passage presented above.

Even Ibn Rushd, in his *Faṣl al-Maqāl fī mā bayn al-ḥikma wa-l-sharī'a min Ittiṣāl* (*Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of the Connection between Religion and Philosophy*) takes up the two Farabian passages within two decidedly more complex argumentative frameworks and emphasises the idea reported in the lines also taken up by Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyūsi.

Ibn Rushd is addressing the debated question on which he was questioned by the Caliph Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf (r. 1163–1184) himself according to al-Marrākushī's account: is the world eternal or created?<sup>34</sup> If philosophers lean towards the first solution and theologians towards the second and consider them incompatible with one another, it is only for semantic reasons.<sup>35</sup> Both acknowledge the existence of three kinds of beings. The first extreme is what comes into being thanks to something that differs from itself (i.e. an agent cause) and something that pre-exists itself in time (i.e. matter) – that is, all bodies subject to generation and perceived by the senses. The opposite extreme consists in that which is not produced by anything and is not preceded by anything, not even by time – that is, the First Principle or God Blessed, the Exalted, Artisan and Preserver of all things. Regarding the third species of being (i.e., the world as a whole), Ibn Rushd argues that (i) it is not preceded by anything in the sense that it is not preceded by a material from which it will be modelled as in the case of the first species of being; (ii) no time precedes it; and (iii) it owes its existence to something else – that is, it has an external agent.



<sup>34</sup> AL-MARRĀKUSHĪ 1994, 203.

<sup>35</sup> Pointing out that bad interpretations may result from misinterpreting the semantics of terminology and thereby producing diaphony between opinions is also typical of *The Harmony*: e.g., AL-FĀRĀBĪ 2008, 54.16–55.16–18.

Theologians and philosophers now agree on these three characteristics. The world appears to exhibit a certain resemblance to the two other extreme species of being. Whoever insists on its resemblance to the First Principle or God in view of the fact that it is not preceded by anything, including time, defines it as eternal; whoever instead associates this third kind of being with that which is brought into being by something other than itself defines it as a product. In reality, it is neither properly created nor eternal, since that which is created corrupts, while even theologians admit that the world is infinite according to time *a parte post* [that part of (all) time that follows a given instant]. That which is eternal, however, has no cause that brings it into being. Why then should the doctrines of theologians be believed and those of philosophers accused of disbelief, particularly given that even the literal dictate of the Qur'an is not rigorously and radically consistent with the notion of creation from nothing in a timeless instant:

فإن ظاهر الشَّرْع إذا تصفَّح ظهر من الآيات الواردة في الأنبياء عن إيجاد العالم أن صورته محدثة بالحقيقة وأن نفس الوجود والزمان مستمر من الطرفين، أعنى غير منقطع. وذلك أن قوله تعالى: "وهو الذي خلق السماوات والأرض في ستة أيام وكان عرشه على الماء" يقتضي بظاهره أن وجودًا قبل هذا الوجود وهو العرش والماء وزمانًا قبل هذا الزمان، أعنى المقترن بصورة هذا الوجود الذي هو عدد حركة الفلك. وقوله تعالى: "يوم تبدل الأرض غير الأرض والسماوات" يقتضي أيضًا بظاهره أن وجودًا ثانيًا بعد هذا الوجود. وقوله تعالى: "ثم استوى إلى السماء وهي دخان" يقتضي بظاهره أن السماوات خلقت من شيء. فالمتكلمون ليسوا في قولهم أيضًا في العالم على ظاهر الشرع، بل متأولون. فإنه ليس في الشرع أن الله كان موجودًا مع العدم المحض ولا يوجد هذا فيه نصًا أبدًا. فكيف يتصور في تأويل المتكلمين في هذه الآيات أن الاجماع انعقد عليه.<sup>36</sup>

This becomes clear when we look at the verses revealed to the Prophets that deal with the coming to be of the world. In these verses we read that the world was originated, but we also read that existence and time are continuous at both ends, that is, without interruptions. For God the Exalted says, 'it is He Who created the heavens and the Earth in six days, while His Throne was upon the waters' [Qur. 11 (*Hūd*) 7]. If this saying is taken in its literal meaning, these words indicate that there was a certain being before this

<sup>36</sup> IBN RUSHD (AVERROES) 1959, 21.1–16.

present being, namely the Throne and the water, and that there was a time before this time, a time related to this form of existence, namely the number of movements of the celestial sphere. Similarly, the words of God the Exalted, ‘Upon the day the Earth shall be changed into other than the Earth, and the heavens as well’ [Qur. 14 (Abraham) 48], if taken literally, indicate that another being will exist after this being. In the same way the following verse, ‘Then He lifted Himself to the heaven when it was smoke’ [Qur. 41 (Distinguished) 10], if taken literally, indicates that the heavens were created out of something that already existed. Thus, even theologians, when dealing with the world, do not keep to the letter of the religious law, but rather interpret (going beyond the letter). In fact, there isn’t in Scripture the suggestion that God existed in absolute privation (of any other kind of being). How then is it conceivable that the allegories of the theologians are universally accepted, while the literal meaning of the Scriptures on the existence of the world is more respected by the schools of philosophers? (The translation is mine)

Ibn Rushd’s second reprise from al-Fārābī is even more explicit: according to Ibn Rushd, the Muslim religion, which is true and incites man to pursue his greatest happiness (i.e., the knowledge of God and his creatures), encompasses all possible methods of approaching God and therefore prescribes to every Muslim a particular kind of assent to the truth that is suited to their temperament and nature: men are qualitatively different. Philosophers assent to rational demonstrations, theologians to dialectical disputes and common believers to rhetorical discourses. Rational demonstration, dialectical dispute and rhetorical discourse differ in their degree of adequacy to the truth/reality of the object to which they refer: the apodictic rational demonstration is absolutely true and captures the essence of the object; in dialectical dispute, the reality of the object may be distorted in discourses that seek to ensure that one opinion prevails over the other; the rhetorical discourse speaks of the reality of the object – complex in itself – through a simple image that is immediately accessible to the listener. This triple modality of assent to the Truth expresses divine providentialism as well as the protection of the social and political order. Ibn Rushd writes:

ولذلك قال عليه السلام في السوداء (إذ أخبرته) أن الله في السماء 'اعتقها فإنها مؤمنة'. إذ كانت ليست من أهل البرهان. والسبب في ذلك أن الصنف من الناس الذين لا يقع لهم التصديق إلا من قبل التخيل – أعنى أنهم لا يصدقون بالشيء إلا من جهة ما يتخيلونه – يعسر وقوع التصديق لهم بوجود ليس منسوباً إلى شيء متخيل. ويدخل أيضاً على من لا يفهم من هذه النسبة (إلا المكان، وهم الذين شدوا على) رتبة الصنف الأول قليلاً (في النظر «بانكار» اعتقاد) الجسمية.<sup>37</sup>

That is why the Prophet – peace on him –, said to the Black woman, when she told him that God was in the heaven, 'Free her, for she is a believer'. This was because she did not belong to the demonstrative class; and the reason for the (the Prophet's) decision was that this kind of people, who give their assent only with the help of the imaginative faculty – for they transfigure everything with the imagination – have difficulty in recognizing the existence of beings who are not in some way connected with something imaginable. Also in this category are those who cannot conceive of (God) without relating Him to a place; that is, they are those who have barely surpassed the lowest degree of knowledge by rejecting the belief in divine corporeality. (The translation is mine)

Ibn Rushd's passage cannot fail to call to mind the passage by al-Fārābī's that we have encountered above: "Then there is someone who is able with his mind to come to know that He is not a body and that His action is without motion, but he is not able to form the concept that He is not in a spatial location; if, however, he is compelled to do so, this leads him to what is even worse and more harmful; the latter too is correct in what he believes and is to be excused for what he knows". For this reason, unlike Campanini<sup>38</sup> and in agreement with the editors 'Ammāra, Hourani<sup>39</sup> and Geoffroy,<sup>40</sup> *bi-inkār* ('rejecting') must be accepted as part of the text. Ibn Rushd is reasoning on the Farabian model: whoever conceives God in a place, even if he does not need to have a corporeal idea of Him is, so to speak,

<sup>37</sup> IBN RUSHD (AVERROES) 1959, 25.5–12.

<sup>38</sup> AVERROÈ 2017, 154, note 51, in disagreement with the Arabic text: IBN RUSHD 1972.

<sup>39</sup> IBN RUSHD (AVERROES) 1959, 25 and note 223.

<sup>40</sup> AVERROÈS 1996, 143.

despite his weakness, nonetheless one step higher in terms of subtlety towards conceiving the First Principle.

The passage also underlines the fact that anyone who does not belong to the demonstrative class cannot assent, except with the assistance of the imaginative faculty; in fact, what he manages to conceive is necessarily connected to something that can be imagined. Images are a tool for teaching, and in *Philosophy of Aristotle (Falsafat Aristūṭālīs)*, al-Fārābī argues that images and symbols play a didactic role in that they grant access to the most difficult truths to attain up to the First Principle:

فالتخييل والمحاكاة بالمثلات هو ضرب من ضروب تعليم الجمهور والعامّة لكثير من الأشياء النظرية الصعبة لتحصل في نفوسهم رسومها بمثالاتها. ويجتزأ منهم ألا يتصوروها ويفهموها كما هي في الوجود، ولكن يفهمونها ويعقلونها بمناسبتها إذ كان فهمها ذواتها على ما هي عليه في الوجود عسراً جداً، إلا على من سبيله أن يفرد بالعلوم النظرية فقط.<sup>41</sup>

For image-making and imitation by means of similitudes is one way to instruct the multitude and the vulgar in a large number of difficult theoretical things so as to produce in their souls the impressions of these things by way of their similitudes. The vulgar not conceive and comprehend these things as they are. It is enough if they comprehend and intellect them by means of what corresponds to them. For to comprehend them in their essences as they are is extremely hard except for whoever devotes himself to the theoretical sciences alone.<sup>42</sup>

Ibn Rushd expresses this idea of the difference between the demonstrative knowledge required of the philosophers and that of the masses, which is through rhetorical and poetic statements, in his *Commentary on Plato's Republic* and he attributes this doctrine to Plato:

We say that there are two ways by which the virtues in general are brought about in the souls of political humans. One of them is to establish the opinions in their souls through rhetorical and poetical arguments. This is limited to theoretical sciences presented to the multitude of humans, while the way by which the elect few learn the

<sup>41</sup> AL-FĀRĀBĪ 1961, 8.7–12.

<sup>42</sup> ALFARABI 2001a, 93.

theoretical sciences are the true ways, as shall be stated later on. In teaching wisdom to the multitude, he [Plato] used rhetorical and poetical ways because they [i.e., the multitude] are in this respect in one of two situations: either they can know them [i.e., the speculative truths] through demonstrative arguments, or they will not know them at all. The first [situation] is impossible [for the multitude]. The second is possible – since it is fitting that every-one [obtain] as much of human perfection as is compatible with what is in his nature to obtain of this and with his preparation for it. Furthermore, their believing what they endeavour to believe of [what pertains to] knowledge of the first principle and of the final cause, as far as it is in their nature to believe, is useful with regard to the other moral virtues and practical arts, which they were being prepared [to acquire].<sup>43</sup>

This idea will go on to be widely shared. See, for example, the following passage taken from Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (Chapter 5, § 14–16), with which I would like to close my contribution. For Spinoza, the truth – that is, the truth deduced in its radicality by the intellect and not according to an appropriate image conveyed in a story – would be reserved only for the learned men, while Scripture was revealed for the benefit of all mankind:

[14] *Si quis hominibus aliquid suadere, vel dissuadere vult, quod per se notum non est, is, ut id iidem amplectantur, rem suam ex concessis deducere, eosque experientia vel ratione convincere debet, nempe ex rebus, quas per sensus experti sunt, in natura contingere, vel ex axiomatibus intellectualibus per se notis. [...] Verum quia ad res ex solis notionibus intellectualibus deducendum, longa perceptionum concatenatio sæpissime requiritur, & præterea etiam summa præcautio, ingenii perspicacitas, & summa continentia, quæ omnia raro in hominibus reperiuntur, ideo homines ab experientia doceri malunt, quam omnes suas perceptiones ex paucis axiomatibus deducere, & invicem concatenare; unde sequitur, quod si quis doctrinam aliquam integram rationem, ne dicam, universum humanum genus docere, & ab omnibus in omnibus intelligi vult, is rem suam sola experientia confir-*

<sup>43</sup> Averroes on Plato's *Republic* 1974, 10–11.

*mare tenetur, rationesque suas, & rerum docendarum definitiones ad captum plebis, quæ maximam humani generis partem componit, maxime accommodare, non autem eas concatenare, neque definitiones, prout ad rationes melius concatenandum inserviunt, tradere; alias doctis tantum scribet, hoc est, a paucissimis tantum hominibus, si cum reliquis comparentur, poterit intelligi. [15] Cum itaque tota Scriptura in usum integræ nationis prius, & tandem universi humani generis revelata fuerit, necessario ea, quæ in ipsa continentur, ad captum plebis maxime accommodari debuerunt, & sola experientia comprobari. [16] Rem clarius explicemus. Quæ Scriptura docere vult, quæ solam speculationem spectant, hæc potissimum sunt, nempe dari Deum, sive ens, quod omnia fecit, & summa sapientia dirigit, & sustentat, & quod hominum summam habet curam. [...] Atque hæc Scriptura sola experientia comprobatur, nempe iis, quas narrat, historiis, nec ullas harum rerum definitiones tradit, sed omnia verba, & rationes captui plebis accommodat. Et quamvis experientia nullam harum rerum claram cognitionem dare possit, nec docere, quid Deus sit, & qua ratione res omnes sustentet, & dirigit, hominumque curam habeat, potest tamen homines tantum docere, & illuminare, quantum ad obedientiam, & devotionem eorum animis imprimendum sufficit. Atque ex his satis clare constare puto, quibus, & qua ratione fides historiarum in Sacris contentarum necessaria sit.<sup>44</sup>*

[14] If anyone wishes to persuade his fellows for or against anything which is not self-evident, he must deduce his contention from their admissions and convince them either by experience or by ratiocination; either by appealing to facts of natural experience, or to self-evident intellectual axioms. [...] But the deduction of conclusions from general truths *a priori*, usually requires a long chain of arguments, and, moreover, very great caution, acuteness, and self-restraint – qualities which are not often met with; therefore, people prefer to be taught by experience rather than deduce their conclusion from a few axioms and set them out in logical order. Whence it follows, that if anyone wishes to teach a doctrine to a whole nation [not to speak of the whole human beings], and to be understood by all men in every particular, he will seek to support his teaching with experience, and will endeavour to suit his reason-

<sup>44</sup> SPINOZA 1670, Chapter 5, § 14–16.



ings and the definitions of his doctrines as far as possible to the understanding of the common people, who form the majority of mankind and he will not set them forth in logical sequence nor adduce the definitions which serve to establish them. Otherwise, he writes only for the learned – that is, he will be understood by only a small proportion of the human beings. [15] All Scripture was written primarily for an entire people and secondarily for the whole human beings; therefore, its contents must necessarily be adapted as far as possible to the understanding of the masses and proved only by examples drawn from experience. [16] We will explain ourselves more clearly. The chief speculative doctrines taught in Scripture are the existence of God, or a Being Who made all things, and Who directs and sustains the world with consummate wisdom; furthermore, that God takes the greatest thought for men. [...] All this is proved in Scripture entirely through experience—that is, through the narratives there related. No definitions of doctrine are given, but all the sayings and reasonings are adapted to the understanding of the masses. Although experience can give no clear knowledge of these things, nor explain the nature of God, nor how He directs and sustains all things, and he takes care of men, it can nevertheless teach and enlighten men sufficiently to impress obedience and devotion on their minds. It is now, I think, sufficiently clear what persons are bound to believe in the Scripture narratives, and in what degree they are so bound.<sup>45</sup>

### *Conclusion*

*The Harmony* presents two passages on creation and the conceptualisation of God in which the author maintains the primacy of philosophical discourses over pagan accounts of origins or prophetic revelation contained in the Qur'an and other scriptures. According to al-Fārābī, only philosophy formulates the notion of creation *ex nihilo* without mentioning a pre-existing matter, contrary to all other traditions, which only describe processes of change and qualitative alteration, for which a second element is generated from a pre-existing one. Again, according to al-Fārābī, only the philosophers – particularly

<sup>45</sup> SPINOZA 1883.

Plato and Aristotle – can conceive of God as a First Principle that is not a body, not in a space, timeless and immobile and endowed with absolute ontological priority.

As Avicenna's passage in his *al-Ilāhiyyāt* testifies, these doctrines were disseminated not only in the Muslim East but also reached Muslim Spain, al-Andalus. For Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyūsī, who appears to seek a reconciliation between the science of the ancients and religion, *The Harmony* serves as a reference source. Even Ibn Rushd, in his *Decisive Treatise* quotes it – in particular, the two Farabian passages. Ibn Rushd maintains that the philosophical discourse concerning the creation out of nothing in a timeless instant is more rigorous than the literal dictate of the Qur'an and that the philosophical conception of God is the highest in terms of subtlety. However, as al-Fārābī has already stated, since images and symbols provide access to the most difficult truths, up to the First Principle, those who do not belong to the demonstrative class can only give their assent with the help of the imaginative faculty.

This idea was widely disseminated, as illustrated by the passage taken from Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (Chapter 5, § 14–16). According to Spinoza, one knows either by appealing to facts of natural experience or through the deduction of conclusions from general truths *a priori*, in a long chain of logically ordered arguments. The first method is appropriate for imparting a doctrine to the common people, who form the majority of mankind: this is the reason why Scripture does not present definitions, but the chief speculative doctrines taught in Scripture – the existence of God as creator and provident – are proven by narratives that rely on experience. Although experience can in no way clearly explain these doctrines, it can enlighten men sufficiently to impress devotion on their minds.

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## Abstracts

In two passages on creation and the conceptualisation of God presented in *The Harmony of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle (Kitāb al-Jam' bayna ra'yay al-ḥakīmayn Aflātūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristūṭālīs)*, al-Fārābī asserts the primacy of philosophical discourse over pagan accounts of origins or prophetic revelation contained in the Qur'an and other Scriptures. According to al-Fārābī, only philosophy can formulate the notion of creation *ex nihilo* without mentioning any pre-existing matter, in contrast to



all other traditions that only describe processes of change and qualitative alteration, and only philosophers – especially Plato and Aristotle – can conceive of God as a First Principle that is not a body, not in a space, timeless and immobile, and endowed with absolute ontological priority.

Ibn Rushd himself, Averroes, will refer to both passages in his *Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of the Connection between Religion and Philosophy* (*Faṣl al-Maqāl fī mā bayna al-ḥikma wa-l-sharī‘a min al-itṭiṣāl*), to argue for the legitimacy of philosophy. Ibn Rushd claims that the philosophical discourse of creation out of nothing in a timeless instant is more rigorous than the literal dictates of the Qur’an and that the philosophical conception of God is the most subtle. However, as al-Fārābī has already stated, since images and symbols provide access to the most difficult truths, up to the First Principle, those who do not belong to the demonstrative class can only give their assent with the help of the imaginative faculty. This paper examines these two passages from *The Harmony* and how Ibn Rushd reinterprets them.

*Keywords:* Religion, Philosophy, Creation, God, Medieval Philosophy in the Islamic World

Ne *L’armonia delle due opinioni dei due sapienti: il divino Platone e Aristotele* (*Kitāb al-Jam‘ bayna ra’yay al-ḥakīmayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristūṭālīs*) si trovano due passi concernenti la creazione e i modi di concepire di Dio in cui al-Fārābī sostiene il primato del discorso filosofico sui racconti pagani e sulle scritture profetiche. Solo la filosofia formula la nozione di creazione *ex nihilo* senza menzionare una materia preesistente, contrariamente a tutte le altre tradizioni, che si limitano a descrivere processi di cambiamento e di alterazione qualitativa, e solo i filosofi – in particolare Platone e Aristotele – possono concepire Dio come un Principio Primo che non è corpo, non è in uno spazio, è senza tempo e immobile ed è dotato di assoluta priorità ontologica.

Ibn Rushd, Averroè, fa tacitamente riferimento a entrambi i passi farabiani nel suo *Trattato decisivo sull’accordo della filosofia con la religione* (*Faṣl al-Maqāl fī mā bayna al-ḥikma wa-l-sharī‘a min al-itṭiṣāl*) per sostenere la legittimità della filosofia. Averroè sostiene che il discorso filosofico sulla creazione dal nulla in un istante senza tempo è più rigoroso del dettato letterale del Corano e che la concezione filosofica di Dio è la più alta in termini di sottigliezza. Tuttavia, come già affermava al-Fārābī, chi non appartiene alla classe dimostrativa non può dare assenso, se non grazie alla facoltà immagi-

nativa, poiché le immagini e i simboli permettono di accedere alle verità più difficili fino al Principio Primo. Il presente saggio esamina i due passi de *L'armonia* e la loro ripresa in Averroè.

*Parole chiave:* Religione, Filosofia, Creazione, Dio, Filosofia medievale nel mondo islamico

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