

**AL-FARABI AND HIS DOCTRINE OF THE VIRTUOUS SOCIETY**

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The great thinker Abu Nasr Muhammad Ibn Tarkhan al-Farabi (c. 870–950 CE) left behind an invaluable spiritual and intellectual legacy. Al-Farabi lived during the cultural and scientific zenith of the Arab Caliphate, a period marked by its profound intellectual and spiritual allure that attracted many peoples of the East, including the Turkic populations of Central Asia. This era of flourishing knowledge and cultural synthesis provided fertile ground for the development of thinkers like Al-Farabi, whose contributions resonate across the fields of philosophy, ethics, and political thought.

**Keywords**

Al-Farabi, Virtuous City, Islamic Philosophy, Philosopher-King, Political Philosophy, Aristotelianism, Platonic Thought, Ethical Society, Medieval Philosophy, Islamic Golden Age.

**Introduction**

The phenomenon of Al-Farabi can be understood primarily through his exceptional nature, a divine gift of intellect, and his philosophical genius. The unique educational system of the early Islamic civilization played a significant role in nurturing his intellectual brilliance. Moreover, it can be asserted that Al-Farabi represents the first and most significant intellectual flowering of Turkic culture, with his worldview profoundly elevated by the light of Islam.

Al-Farabi's philosophical journey reflects a harmonious blend of Islamic values and classical Greek thought, particularly the works of Aristotle and Plato. He is often

referred to as “The Second Teacher” (after Aristotle) for his groundbreaking interpretations and extensions of Aristotelian philosophy, especially in the realm of metaphysics and ethics. His vision of the virtuous society (al-madina al-fadila) stands as one of his most profound contributions. In this society, the ruler is not merely a political leader but a philosopher-king, embodying wisdom, justice, and a deep understanding of the divine order.

As Al-Farabi himself stated, “Happiness can only be achieved when society is governed by wisdom, virtue, and a shared vision of the common good”. His ideal society reflects a deep commitment to the interdependence of moral and intellectual virtues, suggesting that a truly flourishing community arises from the cultivation of both individual excellence and collective harmony. Much of Al-Farabi’s life remains shrouded in mystery, allowing for thoughtful speculation about his spiritual and intellectual pursuits. It is evident, however, that his later years were marked by a profound focus on spiritual contemplation and asceticism. For reasons not entirely clear, Al-Farabi left Baghdad, the bustling capital of the Caliphate, in 942. He lived in Syria and Egypt before ultimately settling in Aleppo at the court of the Syrian ruler Sayf al-Dawla. There, he embraced a modest, almost ascetic lifestyle, dedicating himself to the pursuit of wisdom until his passing in Damascus.

Al-Farabi’s enduring legacy lies not only in his philosophical writings but also in his profound belief in the transformative power of knowledge and virtue. As he noted, “The perfection of human beings lies in their ability to attain knowledge and act upon it to realize the highest good for themselves and their communities”[1]. This timeless message continues to inspire scholars and leaders alike, reminding us that the pursuit of a virtuous society remains as relevant today as it was in his time.

From the perspective of both scholarship and statecraft in his era, Al-Farabi’s doctrine on the ideal society stands out as one of his most prominent contributions. This doctrine is encapsulated in his renowned allegorical treatise on cities, distinguishing between the virtuous and the ignorant. In this context, the term “city” is not confined to its literal meaning but is understood as a metaphor for society or even

the state as a whole [2]. Al-Farabi's teachings on society are often labeled as utopian. However, they are far more than mere idealism; his work integrates profound insights and scientific recommendations that remain relevant to this day.

In the reality of the 21st century, amidst the global crisis of modern civilization, Al-Farabi's ideas about the Virtuous City resonate with remarkable contemporary relevance. His vision addresses the profound ethical and existential dilemmas of humanity, highlighting the absence of a viable alternative to a healthy civilization. This lack of an alternative has led to a global trend of moral and ethical self-destruction, a trajectory that continues to imperil human societies.

On the other hand, within the Muslim world and the broader Middle East, we witness the widespread vulgarization and distortion of religious values, alongside the rise of extremist and revolutionary ideologies. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need to actively promote the philosophical, socio-political, and ethical dimensions of religious teachings. As Al-Farabi himself stated, "The ultimate purpose of a virtuous society is to achieve true happiness, a state where human perfection is cultivated through reason, virtue, and cooperation"[3].

Al-Farabi's vision of the Virtuous City is built on the premise that a society's prosperity depends on the moral and intellectual qualities of its leaders and citizens. Drawing inspiration from Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, he argued that the ruler of the ideal society must be a philosopher, someone who embodies wisdom, justice, and a deep understanding of human nature[4]. This philosopher-king, much like Plato's ideal ruler, serves not merely as a political figure but as a guide toward spiritual and ethical enlightenment.

Moreover, Al-Farabi's teachings extend beyond governance to encompass the harmony of all societal elements. He emphasized the interconnectedness of individual virtues and collective well-being, asserting that "the happiness of the individual is inseparable from the happiness of the society"[5] This notion aligns with his broader metaphysical and ethical framework, wherein the ultimate goal of existence is the attainment of unity, both within the self and within the larger cosmic order.

## Hierarchy and Society as a Conscious Organism

The central idea of the classical Islamic thinker Al-Farabi, who proposed peaceful and evolutionary methods and forms for transforming society based on universal spiritual and moral values, is rooted in his concept of the *Virtuous City* (*al-Madinat al-Fadila*)[6]. This doctrine is built on a hierarchical structure that reflects both the principles of Islamic worldview and the inherent meaning and laws of human society, shared across all traditional civilizations.

For Al-Farabi, hierarchy mirrors the objective order of the cosmos, with the structure of society on earth serving as its reflection. In the world, there will always be elders (leaders, wise individuals, and those endowed with experience and knowledge) alongside those with lesser intellectual, moral, or experiential capacities. Al-Farabi writes that within the Virtuous City, every individual must have one craft, one function, or one responsibility, emphasizing that “each member of society must remain within their appointed role, whether it is at the level of service or leadership”[7].

Al-Farabi’s concept of hierarchy is not merely about order but about harmony and balance. In his philosophical system, he likens society to the human body, where the *heart* symbolizes the ruler – the spiritual elite, composed of the wise and the virtuous. The second most essential organ is the *brain*, which represents the worldly ruler, the king, or the commander, who must serve the heart in its noble aspirations. By mobilizing the will and intellect, the brain ensures the harmony and health of the entire organism, facilitating its integration and proper functioning.

The citizens of the Virtuous City, much like the organs and components of a living, conscious organism, fulfill roles corresponding to their capabilities and responsibilities. This analogy of society to a living being is not a mere metaphor; it is a profound philosophical and scientific perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness, integration, and mutual dependence of societal groups. Thinkers such as the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov[8] have similarly drawn parallels between the laws of society and the functioning of a conscious organism, emphasizing the necessity of collective subordination to a higher truth and spiritual purpose.



Solovyov, in his writings, eloquently spoke of the autocracy of conscience, underscoring the moral imperative that guides such a system.

This notion of voluntary submission to a Higher Truth and spiritual aim, central to Al-Farabi's doctrine, aligns with his vision of a just and virtuous society. In this society, every individual is assigned a role that corresponds to their innate abilities, and their collective purpose is directed toward the attainment of ultimate perfection – both individual and communal. For Al-Farabi, the harmony of the Virtuous City is achieved through adherence to moral and intellectual excellence, guided by the principles of justice, wisdom, and mutual cooperation.

By proposing this hierarchical and organic model of society, Al-Farabi not only offers a practical vision of governance but also bridges the metaphysical order of the cosmos with the ethical foundations of human civilization[9]. His ideas resonate with the enduring philosophical quest to reconcile individual purpose with collective well-being and transcendence.

### **A Philosophical Perspective Based on Al-Farabi's Teachings**

Building upon the earlier discussion, it is clear that the ruler of the virtuous city (the Imam, the guide of the faithful) must possess high moral standards and virtues. As a wise leader, the ruler must embody both intellectual and ethical virtues. According to Al-Farabi, intellectual virtues represent the "rational part of the soul" encompassing traits such as intellect, wisdom, and sharp reasoning. However, the moral virtues are of utmost importance; these are attributes of the "desirous part of the soul" – the qualities that drive one's actions. These include, for example, honesty, moderation, generosity, and justice.

In Al-Farabi's view, the ruler must be a morally elevated figure, having attained the "highest happiness" – a state achieved through the refinement of both mind and heart, and through philosophical understanding. As such, the ruler is positioned as the guide toward happiness for the citizens. The ruler-imam is expected to renounce indulgence, avoid wealth as a priority, and eliminate corruption and other moral vices. Furthermore, the imam should exemplify physical well-being, a strong sense of justice,

intellect, eloquence, organizational skills, and other traits that serve as a model for all citizens.

Al-Farabi, being a great philosopher, was not utopian in his expectations. He understood that the manifestation of all virtues in a single individual was rare. Therefore, he acknowledged that effective governance would likely require the ruler to rely on a team of capable, loyal assistants and advisors. The concept of governance, in this sense, operates within a collective structure, where the ruler's virtuous character is complemented by the qualities of trusted aides.

Importantly, Al-Farabi emphasizes the unity of the various parts of the city, meaning the different groups of people. These groups are bonded through love and maintained by justice. It is justice that ensures cohesion and harmony within the community, providing the foundation for social order and prosperity. Al-Farabi regards the adherence to divine justice as one of the fundamental principles of the virtuous city. This justice permeates all aspects of society, including the equitable distribution of both material and spiritual goods, because, as Al-Farabi asserts, “each citizen should receive a share of the common good commensurate with their service”[10].

The spirit of love and mutual assistance that Al-Farabi advocates stems from the participation in these virtues. In this framework, the virtuous society is based on both intellectual enlightenment and a commitment to ethical principles, binding all individuals together in a shared pursuit of the good.

The philosophical ideas presented in the above text are deeply influenced by Al-Farabi's works on political philosophy, especially his “Al-Madina al-Fadila” (“The Virtuous City”)[11], which remains a foundational text in understanding the concept of a just society in Islamic philosophy. This book was written in the 10th century and continues to be an essential work for anyone exploring the intersection of philosophy, governance, and ethics in the Islamic world.

### **Happiness in Al-Farabi's Philosophy: A Philosophical Analysis**

Al-Farabi paid great attention to the concept of happiness (“Sa'adah” in Arabic). He is the author of the treatise On Achieving Happiness. According to Al-Farabi, the

true path to happiness is connected to shaping the correct metaphysical picture of the world[12]. Unlike animals, humans are distinguished by their ability to seek self-knowledge and explore the true sources of their heart and intellect. Al-Farabi proves the existence of God, the Supreme and Primary Intellect, asserting that the existence of God is irrefutable.

Absolute and highest happiness, for Al-Farabi, lies in knowing God. The practical manifestation of happiness occurs in the Virtuous City, where people assist each other in the pursuit of happiness, meaning that it reflects the spiritual self-improvement of individuals. In this city, the inhabitants do not aim for domination or ownership of the world or others but strive toward the highest spiritual goal. This is a fundamental part of Al-Farabi's thought.

This principle recalls a well-known Sufi wisdom: “Be a servant of your Lord, not the master of His creatures”[13]. In this context, the words “theocentrism” and “theocracy” in Al-Farabi's philosophy should not mislead us, as they do not refer to any external force that infringes upon human freedom or society, as interpreted in the philosophy of V. Solovyov.

According to Al-Farabi, the primary path to happiness is not intellectual exercises but self-awareness and the conscious improvement of one's moral character. The key feature of the Virtuous City, a category that corresponds to happiness in Al-Farabi's philosophy, is its reliance on religious values and universal human spirituality.

### **Civic equality does not mean equality of hearts and moral virtues**

The information presented in the text above appears to be derived from Al-Farabi's philosophical and political teachings, particularly his ideas about the virtuous society and the role of education, morality, and governance in achieving a just and harmonious society. Al-Farabi's work, *Al-Madina al-Fadila* (The Virtuous City)[14], outlines many of these ideas.

The key concepts discussed in the text, such as the importance of moral education, the distinction between good and evil, and the need for rational governance and law enforcement, are central themes in Al-Farabi's philosophy. His vision of a virtuous

society emphasizes that individuals must be guided by wisdom and virtue, and the state must provide a framework that encourages the flourishing of those qualities. This view can be found in Al-Farabi's work, *Al-Madina al-Fadila*, where he contrasts the ideal virtuous city with the corrupt and ignorant cities.

*Revised Version with Philosophical Language:*

Al-Farabi's philosophical reflections on the “City of the Ignorant” explore societies consumed by materialism, corporeal pleasures, the lust for power, and the adoration of wealth. In this context, physical desires and lower appetites dominate human conduct. For Al-Farabi, the ultimate purpose of human existence lies in attaining true happiness, which arises from intellectual and moral virtue. Actions leading away from this ultimate purpose are deemed base or corrupt.

In the “ignorant city” individuals are unaware of the higher metaphysical truths and live solely for immediate gratification and material gain. Their pursuits are confined to satisfying their bodily appetites, such as sustenance, ornamentation, shelter, and procreation. Social relations in such a society revolve around mutual assistance in achieving these transient goals. The overarching focus on physical enjoyment renders their lives devoid of higher spiritual or intellectual pursuits.

Al-Farabi also critiques societies driven by egocentric ambitions, such as those seeking power or external acclaim. These communities prioritize constructing monumental edifices and attaining prestige, using wealth and social status as their primary measures of success. Such misplaced values, Al-Farabi argues, lead to moral decay and societal discord.

Despite the challenges, Al-Farabi proposes that even the “ignorant city” is not beyond redemption. He compares the ruler of such a society to a physician, tasked with diagnosing and remedying moral and ethical deficiencies. Through education, persuasion, and if necessary, corrective measures, individuals can be guided toward virtuous behavior and the realization of true happiness.



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