

F O R E W O R D

Muhsin Mahdi presents here a full and totally new account of Alfarabi's teaching with respect to religion and politics. He does so with a depth of understanding and philosophic insight based on decades of scholarly investigation and textual recovery as well as on his rediscovery of the scope and focus of medieval political philosophy in the Islamic tradition. He does so, moreover, primarily with a view to showing how an accomplished philosopher addresses religious and political questions generally and those that arise within the medieval Islamic context more particularly. Thus he places the reader directly before these and related questions without dwelling on traditional procedures in such an undertaking, that is, without providing an elaborate account of what the book is about or how it proceeds and without saying much about where it fits in the contemporary scholarly literature on Alfarabi. Defensible as is the author's decision to pass over such matters in order to focus, from the outset, on the more important task of demonstrating how Alfarabi founded Islamic political philosophy, it may not be amiss to offer here a brief account of both subjects.



In the introduction, Mahdi focuses on the major stumbling block that faces all those who seek to understand Alfarabi, the apparent Neoplatonic character of his works. He speaks briefly about Alfarabi's life and the intellectual context in which he flourished, his goal being to indicate that in formulating his political philosophy Alfarabi leaned more to the movement that preceded Neoplatonism—Middle Platonism. This school of Platonic interpretation flourished from about 25 B.C.E. until about A.D. 250, that is, from the time of Antiochus of Ascalon until about the time of Plotinus. Though the *Didaskalikos* of Alcinous is the extant text that best represents the tenets of this movement, Mahdi makes no at-

tempt here to identify putative sources upon which Alfarabi may have drawn. His emphasis is on how Alfarabi's use of this line of Platonic interpretation, rather than the Neoplatonic one connected with theological issues, allowed him to focus on Plato's political concerns and attempt simultaneously to render Aristotle more acceptable to his readers. In addition, Mahdi notes why in pursuing such a course Alfarabi nonetheless utilized the basic themes and language of Neoplatonism to suggest a harmonization of sorts between philosophy and religion, even though he ultimately subordinates the latter to the former. The significance of Middle Platonism for Alfarabi is Mahdi's discovery, as is his recognition that the two works usually taken as representative of Alfarabi's full political teaching—the *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* and the *Political Regime*—actually play another role that can be fully appreciated only in the light of the new project Alfarabi sets forth in the *Enumeration of the Sciences*, chapter 5, and especially in the *Book of Religion*.

Acknowledging the merit of Ibrahim Madkour's early work on Alfarabi, incomplete as it necessarily was, Mahdi identifies Leo Strauss as the scholar who first discerned the importance of Alfarabi's trilogy, the *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, and then explored Alfarabi's use of Plato in his review essay of the *Philosophy of Plato*. For Mahdi, Strauss's insights made it possible to think anew about the *Enumeration of the Sciences*, chapter 5. And Mahdi's own discovery of the all-important *Book of Religion* allowed him to see in what sense the *Virtuous City* and *Political Regime* needed to be understood primarily as models or patterns for Alfarabi's new presentation of political science and especially of the relationship between politics and religion that he brings to light in the *Book of Religion*. The discovery of Alfarabi's new political teaching is central to the argument of the entire book and forms the core of Mahdi's unique contribution to the understanding of Alfarabi as well as to scholarship on this all-important philosopher. It is for this reason that he devotes the bulk of the introduction to an explanation of why one must learn to read the *Virtuous City* and the *Political Regime* in a new manner and come to understand, in addition, why it is perfectly appropriate for Alfarabi to preface what appears first and foremost as a political teaching with a cosmological teaching.

Consequently, with one exception, Mahdi says nothing about scholarship on Alfarabi since Leo Strauss's article on Alfarabi published in 1945. The exception is his indirect reference to Richard Walzer's erroneous interpretation of the *Virtuous City*—as set forth in his edition and

translation of the work, along with a commentary, published four decades later. Mahdi's silence is understandable, for in those intervening years nothing of significance with respect to Alfarabi's political philosophy appeared. D. M. Dunlop's introduction to his edition and translation of Alfarabi's *Aphorisms of the Statesman* (1961) merely repeats the standard notions about Alfarabi's Neoplatonism, and Ann K. S. Lambton's appendix about Alfarabi's political philosophy in her *State and Government in Medieval Islam, an Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (1983) relies extensively on Mahdi's own writings.

Since then, two books on Alfarabi's political teaching have been published, both by students of Muhsin Mahdi. The year 1990 marked the appearance of Miriam Galston's *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi*. Five years later, the volume *Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's "Laws"* by Joshua Parens was issued. Both volumes represent an attempt to explain Alfarabi's full political teaching. Galston addresses that subject thematically, looking at the way different subjects are treated in Alfarabi's various writings—including the logical writings—and contrasting her own understanding of his teaching with those set forth by the different interpreters of Alfarabi since Madkour. Her book is important both for the careful manner in which she follows out particular themes in these different texts by Alfarabi and for her gentle but firm use of these analyses to correct the earlier interpretations. Parens, on the other hand, addresses Alfarabi's political teaching by examining different aspects of the little known *Summary of Plato's "Laws."* The undertaking obliges him to consider Plato's *Laws*, *Republic*, and other relevant dialogues as well as several of Alfarabi's writings—most notably the *Political Regime*, *Virtuous City*, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, and *Book of Religion*—in addition to the vast array of scholarship surrounding Alfarabi generally as well as his *Summary* and Plato's *Laws* in particular.

Once the reader grasps the way Mahdi speaks about the secondary literature in the introduction—namely, to identify those writings that led him to his own understanding of Alfarabi's teaching and to suggest ever so discreetly how that differs from the dominant opinion about that teaching in recent times—his silence about these books by his own students is perfectly understandable. Moreover, given that these books necessarily draw upon his research and reflect his influence, his reticence to speak about them appears even commendable. So, too, does his reluctance to quarrel with, even to attempt to correct, those whose interpretations he finds faulty. Mahdi's arguments and interpretations are grounded

in thorough scholarship and based on painstaking research into the primary sources, on the careful investigation and presentation of manuscripts that he discovered, on the consideration of doctrines and schools of thought relevant to Alfarabi's undertaking but not heretofore examined in this context, and on his own thoughtful appreciation of the secondary literature. But these arguments and interpretations are presented here as reasoned conclusions, as philosophic judgments based on ratiocination rather than on scholarly dialectic.

Again, because others who have written on Alfarabi's broader philosophical teaching in recent times—Dominique Mallet, Thérèse-Anne Druart, and Shukri Abed, to name but a few—have also studied with Mahdi, he refrains from citing their writings. The desire that the book become no more an encomium than a polemic seems to keep him from citing or discussing the works of those with whom he agrees as well as disagrees, except in the one case already noted. In a related respect as well, Mahdi follows a unique approach in this book: noted as he is for painstaking and thorough scholarship, he eschews here the traditional scholarly convention of citing secondary literature that is more or less relevant to a particular topic. He does so, I think, in order to oblige the reader to consider with him the texts of Alfarabi passed in review and to think primarily about their philosophical implications. His book is, therefore, without parallel in the history of scholarship on Alfarabi.



Mahdi's goal is to encourage the interested reader to reflect about how Alfarabi shows the way to his full political teaching. The questions raised in the introduction—especially those concerning the relationship between religion and philosophy, on the one hand, and politics and religion, on the other—are addressed in the essays constituting the book itself in such a manner as to show how Alfarabi resolves them while keeping the philosophic enterprise of the ever masterful second teacher fully before the reader's eyes. The chapters are divided into three parts.

The goal of the first part is to provide a general sense of the philosophical debate, an orientation as it were to the respective spheres of philosophy, political thought, theology, and jurisprudence within Islam simply and within medieval Islam at the time of Alfarabi more particularly. Here, a clear distinction between political philosophy and political theology as well as between political philosophy and mysticism is evoked. In addition, attention is drawn to the way Alfarabi differs from his immediate predecessor al-Kindī and near contemporary al-Rāzī by focusing on

Plato as one who sought primarily to explain how human beings might live together well in political community. Alfarabi's Plato is not the Plato of the *Timaieus*, intent upon understanding the heavens, but the Plato of the *Republic* and especially of the *Laws*, intent upon understanding what needs to be said about the heavens and the gods to the citizens of the city so that they may live in a well-ordered and fully responsible manner.

Part 2 focuses on the city and, above all, on the virtuous city. Here, philosophy is distinguished from science and from religion. In addition, the role of the founder as founder—whether founder inspired by revelation or founder prompted by reason—is examined, and the considerations Alfarabi deemed basic to founding qua founding are made explicit. The exposition centers on a careful exegesis of Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences* and *Book of Religion* as works that set forth the fundamental principles for his political science or political philosophy. It is followed by a novel, perhaps even completely unprecedented, attempt to demonstrate that the other books usually taken to be indicative of Alfarabi's political philosophy are nothing of the sort. To this end, the *Selected Aphorisms*, the *Political Regime* (whose full title is *Political Regime, Nicknamed "Principles of the Beings"*), and especially the *Virtuous City* are subjected to close analysis and comparative readings as a means of unraveling Alfarabi's attempt to present a number of different examples of the ways in which his principles of political science or political philosophy might be applied. The argument is surely novel, and it runs counter to the assumptions currently held as sacrosanct by scholarship on Alfarabi, most notably that branch of it stemming from Richard Walzer and his disciples. It will stand or fall on its merits.

Chapter 4, that having to do with Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*, may strike some readers as difficult to fathom and certainly as exceedingly prolix. To appreciate the merit of this chapter, it is necessary to discern the remarkably thorough interpretation of the work it provides. Indeed, this chapter represents the first attempt anyone has made to analyze the work as a whole. In a literal and a figurative sense, Mahdi considers the parts of the treatise carefully and from several different perspectives in order to show how the work fits together as a whole and to suggest the way in which it serves as an introduction to Alfarabi's larger political teaching. No one who follows his interpretation of the *Enumeration of the Sciences* through to the end, difficult as such an undertaking is, will ever again fall prey to the temptation to consider that work as a mere summary or popular encyclopedic account of the sciences. With great exegetical skill, Mahdi shows here how the key to the understand-

ing of Alfarabi's broader philosophical teaching rests in a firm grasp of its minutest details.

In the third part, particular attention is paid to the work that first prompted thoughtful students of Alfarabi to entertain the notion that his teaching might be primarily political, namely, the trilogy known as the *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*. This work opens with a treatise entitled *Attainment of Happiness*, in which Alfarabi explores the relationship between the theoretical and practical sciences, especially the way in which the pursuit of theoretical science repeatedly comes to an impasse that can be overcome only after looking anew at practical science. That treatise is followed by the *Philosophy of Plato*, and it, in turn, by the *Philosophy of Aristotle*. The focus here is above all on the last treatise, this in order to explain the novel use Alfarabi made of Plato in his writings and to indicate the unusual role he assigned to Aristotle. The interpretation also draws on Alfarabi's little known *Book of Letters* (one of the treatises Mahdi discovered at the beginning of his research into Alfarabi) and on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, book Lambda, as well as on a fragment from one Aristoteles/Aristocles entitled *On Philosophy*. In this part, the reader is also urged to consider the importance of Alfarabi's opinion about the cycles through which human life tends to pass and how this becomes manifest in his political teaching.

The chapters in this part, as in the book as a whole, are so written that the inattentive reader will wonder what Mahdi is trying to accomplish. Why, for example, does he spend so much time on the *Attainment of Happiness* in chapter 8 and on the *Philosophy of Plato* and *Philosophy of Aristotle* in chapter 9? Similarly, why does the book end with an account of the different cyclical views of history? To repeat that Mahdi does so in order to indicate how Alfarabi suggests what the relationship between theoretical and practical science might be, how the two need to be pursued independently and yet in conjunction, and that the two are interrelated, but not interdependent, is the beginning of an answer. More to the point, Mahdi dwells so on such issues in order to explain their nuances and point to their ramifications without reducing them to a simple formula. Aware that these are better understood as problems than as issues that have been resolved, he strives to provide the reader with all the tools for appreciating Alfarabi's approach to, and use of, them. This is also why he insists on the novel use Alfarabi makes of Plato in his writings and alerts the reader to the importance Alfarabi attaches to cyclical theories of human development.

In sum, Muhsin Mahdi presents here a philosophical reading and in-

terpretation of one of the most important philosophers in the medieval Arabic and Islamic tradition. Grounded in decades of pathbreaking research and informed by a deep understanding of the history of philosophy, especially of philosophy as it relates to political life, this account of Alfarabi as founder of political philosophy in Islam clearly provides the fullest and most masterful explanation of what the second teacher sought to do in these writings that intrigue even as they elude or baffle all but the most persistent and thoughtful reader.

Charles E. Butterworth

