

# WHAT'S POETICS GOT TO DO WITH PROPHETS FOR FARABI

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**ABSTRACT:** Farabi's utopia (al-madīnat al-fāḍila), literally meaning «the excellent state», consists of five levels. On the first level stands the philosopher (filsūf) or the prophet (nabī). The second level includes poets (shu'arā), music composers (mulaḥḥinūn), writers (kuttāb) and the likes of them. Farabi strongly believes in the power of imagination (khīyāl) and that most people are under the influence of their imaginative faculty (al-quwwat al-mutakhayyila). This notion has an important outcome which influences his view on religion (milla), prophet, and their relation with the public (jumhūr): Images, in his view, are the most powerful means of influencing the public. Regarding this principle, it could be concluded that there is a shared function between the poet and the prophet. In other words, Farabi's prophet performs, in part, a poetic task.

**KEY WORDS:** Farabi; Poetics; Images; Prophet.

## *Qué tiene que ver la poética con los profetas para Farabi*

**RESUMEN:** La utopía de Farabi (al-madīnat al-fāḍila), que literalmente significa «el estado excelente», consta de cinco niveles. En el primer nivel se encuentra el filósofo (filsūf) o el profeta (nabī). El segundo nivel incluye a los poetas (shu'arā), compositores musicales (mulaḥḥinūn), escritores (kuttāb) y similares. Farabi cree firmemente en el poder de la imaginación (khīyāl) y en que la mayoría de las personas están bajo la influencia de su facultad imaginativa (al-quwwat al-mutakhayyila). Esta noción influye en su visión de la religión (milla), el profeta y su relación con el público (jumhūr): las imágenes, en su opinión, son el medio más poderoso para influir en el público. En relación con este principio, se podría concluir que existe una función compartida entre el poeta y el profeta. En otras palabras, el profeta de Farabi realiza, en parte, una tarea poética.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Farabi; poética; imágenes; profeta.

## INTRODUCTION

Farabi's utopia (al-madīnat al-fāḍila), literally meaning 'the excellent state', consists of five levels. On the first level stands the philosopher (filsūf) or the prophet (nabī). The second level includes poets (shu'arā), music composers (mulaḥḥinūn), writers (kuttāb) and "the likes of them". (Farabi 2004: 54-55) Why does Farabi put poets and writers right after the prophet and the philosopher? Why does he name them as "carriers of religion" (ḥamalat al-dīn)?

Some contemporary studies have focused on Farabi's poetics, analyzing his logical writings on the subject (Kemal 1991) while more recent studies have marked out the notability of artists in Farabi's utopia from a philosophical perspective (Maftouni 2007). Both approaches have speculated, to some extent, the process of mimesis (muḥākā) and how it could be used to affect the audience, but a general axiom in Farabi's philosophy might have been overlooked. Farabi strongly

believes in the power of imagination (*khīyāl*) and that most people are under the influence of their imaginative faculty (*al-quwwat al-mutakhayyila*). This notion has an important outcome which influences his view on religion (*milla*), prophet, and their relation with the public (*jumhūr*): Images, in his view, are the most powerful means of influencing the public. Regarding this principle, it could be concluded that there is a shared function between the poet and the prophet. In other words, Farabi's prophet performs, in part, a poetic task. An examination of Farabi's utopia is essential in deriving such a conclusion.

## 1. LEVELS OF UTOPIA

Farabi's hierarchical structure for his utopia consists of five ranks, first of which belongs to the head of state who is primarily the philosopher or the prophet. But who is the prophet and what is the religion? In some instances, Farabi has spoken of the philosopher and the sage (*ḥakīm*) as the head of utopia without mentioning the prophet. (Farabi 2004: 55) What view leads him to use these ascriptions alternatively? How does he define philosopher and prophet? What is the relation between them? And how are they linked to the second rank? How these questions relate to the power of images?

On different occasions, Farabi introduces the head of utopia to be the philosopher or the prophet or the lawmaker (*wāḍi' al-nawāmīs*). (Farabi 2003: 121; 2005: 92; See also: Nuri 2019: 92) These are three characteristics of the same entity. Considering the notion of achieving the intellectual truth (*al-ḥaqā'eq al-aqlīyya*) from the active intellect (*al-aql al-fa'āl*), he is the philosopher. (Farabi 2003: 121) His translation of the intellectual concepts into words understandable for the public makes him the prophet. (Farabi 2003: 121) And the laws (*nawāmīs*) he designs to set rules for the society makes him the lawmaker. (Farabi 2005: 92) The second rank of Farabi's utopia is not limited to poets but includes music composers and writers near the orators (*khutabā*) and preachers (*bulaghā*). Describing them all as "carriers of religion", he leaves room for similar fields by adding "and all those who are in the same pattern and are counted among them." (Farabi 2004: 54) The third rank consists of those who deal with calculation and measurement (*muqaddirūn*) like architects and physicians. The fourth rank includes strivers (*mujāhidūn*) like fighters and guards. And the last rank belongs to those who deal with capital (*mālīyyūn*) like merchants, businessmen, farmers and peasants. (Farabi 2004: 54-55) There should be close ties between the first two ranks of the utopia since the first belongs to the prophet and the second to the carriers of religion. But what point defines the relation between these two ranks? How does the second rank carry the religion defined by the first rank?

An examination of Farabi's regard to poetics and how he describes the capabilities of, not only poets, but music composers, sculptors and painters whom henceforward we loosely call artists, would benefit the understanding of the first rank of utopia and its relation to poetics.

## 2. PERCEPTUAL FACULTIES OF THE SOUL

Farabi introduces the concept of perceptual faculties which should be regarded as a prerequisite to further topics. According to him, there are three perceptual faculties in the soul: the sensory faculty (al-quwwat al-hāssa), the imaginative faculty and the intellectual faculty (al-quwwat al-nātiqa). The sensory faculty is in charge of the five senses, while the intellectual faculty conceives the meanings without any attachment to imaginary or sensory forms. The sensory faculty is realized in every living human being and also in animals while the intellectual faculty is exclusive to human beings and is realized in very few of them. But the imaginative faculty, which is in an intermediary position, is the one that Farabi focuses on when dealing with the public. He marks out three functions for the imaginative faculty first of which is saving the forms received by the senses as the senses lose touch with those forms (e.g. being able to review one's appearance after the eyes are closed). The second function is composition and decomposition of such forms. In some instances the outcome matches with the things in the sensible realm and in some instances it does not (Farabi 2003: 84, 95) (e.g. attaching the wings of an eagle to a lion and creating a flying lion). The third function of the imaginative faculty is mimesis (muḥākā). It is solely this faculty, among the three faculties, which has the ability of creating alternative images for sensible objects (maḥsūsāt) (e.g. likening the beloved to a flower) or creating allegorical images for intellectual ideas (ma'qūlāt). The latter function, besides dealing with poetics, has a role in Farabi's theory of prophethood (nubuwwa) which will be discussed later. But as an instance, Farabi mentions that Plato in his *Timaeus* has implemented the rendering of intelligible concepts into their allegories from among sensible entities "like the one who likens matter with desert or nothingness with darkness." (Farabi 2005: 70)

## 3. FARABI'S POETICS AND THE POWER OF IMAGES

The main focus of this writing is the relation between prophethood and imagination, and a discussion on Farabi's poetics and its relation to imagination needs extended examination. Here are merely some instances where he stresses the importance of creating images for the audience of art.

In his definition for poetic accounts (al-aqāwīl al-shi'rīyya), Farabi expresses that, first and foremost, he believes in the effectiveness of images: "A poetic account consists of words that arouse emotions in the listener, or represent a thing at a superior level compared to what it is in reality or at an inferior level. It consists of the description of elegance, ugliness, grandeur, pudency and so forth. As we hear a poem, the feeling that we perceive is similar to that which we perceive when we observe [for instance] a disgusting object". (Farabi 1996: 42; 1949: 67-68) In this definition he underlines the stimulation of feelings which is caused by perception of effective images. In his *The Grand Book of Music* (kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr), Farabi

classifies melodies and songs into three types. He firstly mentions songs that cause tranquility and delight for the soul without having any additional function. He then marks out songs that, besides causing comfort, create images and imaginations in the soul. The third type includes songs sung by a person affected by agony and ecstasy. (Farabi 1967: 62-63) His classification of songs to passive, imaginative and comforting is again mentioned further in the same book. (Farabi 1998: 19-20)

When describing the intentions of those who sing songs or perform music, he marks out that some implement a melody in order to make a statement more imaginable and more comprehensible. (Farabi 1998: 24) In another classification aimed at paintings and statues, he puts them into two categories of advantageous and less advantageous. The latter type merely intends to cause joy (*ladhdha*) for the senses without any additional benefit for the soul while the former type, in addition to causing joy, creates imaginations and depicts other meanings through mimesis. (Farabi 1967: 1180) This function, besides being a task done by a painter or a poet, is the one he emphasizes when dealing with the relation between revelation, the prophet and the public.

#### 4. PROPHETHOOD AND MIMESIS

Farabi's theory of prophethood is based on his views regarding functions of the imaginative faculty. The process of revelation (*wahy*) is explained by Farabi in two aspects, both springing from his theory of imagination: First, pertaining to perception of the revelation from the active intellect and second, transmission of the revelation to the public. Farabi believes that the prophet is a person who has accomplished the levels of perfection and has reached a connection with the active intellect. (Farabi 2003: 115) Such a connection is established when one's imaginative faculty reaches the utmost perfection (Farabi 2003: 110). What is bestowed from God (Allah<sup>1</sup>) to the active intellect reaches the prophet's intellectual faculty and then it reaches his imaginative faculty (Farabi 2003: 121). This faculty in the prophet has the utmost power which makes sensible objects and sensory forms less effective in occupying it. It is not entirely submissive to the intellectual faculty either. As a result, at the same time that the imaginative faculty of the prophet is busy dealing with the intellectual faculty and the sensory faculty, it still owns a wide empty space and an enormous power for its internal functions. The imaginative faculty of such a person is similar to that of an ordinary person while being asleep. The imaginative faculty of a sleeping person is free from both intellectual and sensory faculties. (Farabi 2003: 110)

<sup>1</sup> Aside from mentioning Allah as the primary cause, it is hard to trace any reference to a particular religion or prophet in Farabi's discussions on revelation and prophethood while there are direct remarks on how various religions can function in different utopias (Farabi 1997: 226) since he, like Plato, believes that the idea is one, and then asserts that the examples that prophets issue for every society might vary based on people's diverse perceptions. (FARABI 1997: 226)

What is the role of the imaginative faculty in this theory? Why isn't Farabi satisfied with the intellectual faculty alone receiving all the intellectual concepts from the active intellect? It seems the main reason Farabi has for the inclusion of the imaginative faculty in his characterization of the prophethood is that prophet's role is basically transferring the ultimate truth gained from the active intellect to the public. Such intellectual concepts are not perceivable by the public since the majority of people ('amma) are unable to implement their intellectual faculty whether because of natural limitations (tab') or because they are not accustomed to it ('ada). (Farabi 2013: 89) Emphasizing such inability in perception of intellectual concepts (ma'qūlāt), Farabi concludes that the prophet, or the sages of the utopia, who are most aware of the intellectual truth, convey it to people's imaginative faculties through allegories and examples (Farabi 2013: 89), that is, by means of an imaginable form. As an instance, Farabi mentions that there are some degrees in the existence which are not space bound or time bound and therefore these degrees are not easy to imagine for the people which makes it inevitable to make time-and space-bound allegories to make them understand those degrees. (Farabi 2005: 70-71) Although the head of utopia is intimate with argument and reasoning, he uses tangible allegories dealing with the masses and tries to persuade them by using their imagination. (Farabi 2005: 79; 1986:152) He mentions that the imaginative faculty, through mimesis, has the power of creating images for the most inexplicable and intangible intellectual ideas like the primary cause (al-mabda' al-awwal) and separate substances (mufāriqāt). (Farabi 2003: 106-107) In one instance, when describing the advantageous type of music, Farabi mentions the rendering of intellectual concepts into imaginable forms and then offers an unexpected example:

Like the way of the ancient statues which were revered by the public in the old days given that they were exemplifications of the deities they were worshipping besides Allah, be he glorified, or apart from him. Because they were depicted based on characteristics which informed the deeds, behaviors and sentiments they attributed to those deities. Like what Galen has recounted of the idols he saw, or like what is now present in farthest sites of India. (Farabi 1967: 62-63)

The remarkable point about this example is how he shifts from music to faith and ideology. Can we conclude that he has the same believe about what his ideal philosopher-prophet does? Is his religion, in the same way, consisting of allegories that, through mimesis, tend to render the intellectual concepts into imaginable forms?

## 5. RELIGION AS THE ARTISTIC CREATION OF THE PHILOSOPHER

As we mentioned in prophet's case, Farabi marks out that the active intellect bestows intellectual concepts to prophet's intellectual faculty and then these concepts are transmitted to his imaginative faculty. Whether the latter part, i.e. the transmission of intellectual concepts to the imaginative faculty of the prophet, is

done by the active intellect or by the prophet himself, is a subject of controversy. (See: Ibn Taymīyya 1955: 361-362) Some have assumed that Farabi believes this transition could not be done by the active intellect since what he transfers is merely intellectual and immaterial (*mujarrad*) and the active intellect has no relation with imaginable or sensible arenas. If this leads to the conclusion that prophet himself is converting the intelligible concepts into imaginary forms, there will be a byproduct. Based on such a conclusion it could be said that many verses in the scripture (i.e. Quran), at least the verses that deal with imaginable details, are not actually the contents of revelation, but are the result of prophet's effort in rendering the intelligible into imaginable. So, is Farabi saying it is the prophet who creates these images about afterlife, heaven and hell, or are these the exact images transmitted by the active intellect to the prophet and the prophet has not altered or created anything? If one concludes that Farabi believes it is the prophet who does the conversion of intellectual to imaginable, it would necessarily mean that, Farabi believes the contents of the scripture, unlike what is stated in it, are not untouched narration of the revelation, but the prophet's representation of the intellectual ideas he has received from the active intellect. Farabi doesn't give a direct reply to this question while his succeeding philosopher, Avicenna, mentions in one instance that what prophet receives from the active intellect is merely intellectual (*al-ʿaql al-maḥḍ*) but he has been allowed to implement imagination to render these intellectual ideas understandable for the public. (Avicenna 1952: 17) That debate aside, it is a fact that Farabi believes the head of state, in case of his own words, uses imaginary ways to simplify intellectual concepts and teach them to the public. (Farabi 1995: 85) He also believes that the lawmaker, which is another feature of the head of state, has a responsibility of teaching the laws to the public with persuasive (*iqnāʿī*) skills and depicting it with imaginary forms. (Farabi 1986:152) While mentioning the use of persuasion (*iqnāʿ*) and imagination (*takhyīl*) in dealing with the public, Farabi underlines that the public are more compliant with imagination rather than persuasion. These points explain why Farabi assigns a poetic feature to the prophet spelling out how the second rank of the utopia should include artists as carriers of religion.

## CONCLUSION

Farabi designs a hierarchical utopia consisting of five levels, first of which belongs to the philosopher or the prophet. The second rank includes 'carriers of the religion' who are preachers, orators, poets, music composers, writers and so on. There is a shared task between the first two ranks which is the translation of intellectual concepts into imaginable forms in order to make them understandable for the public. The philosopher, on the first level, uses allegories to render the intelligible into imaginable and it is this regard towards the public that makes him the prophet. The artists' duty, on the second level includes, but is not limited to, the same task of simplification of intellectual concepts. This is what makes them

the 'carriers of religion'. An interpretation of Farabi's discussions on philosopher, prophet and utopia could lead to the notion that religion is nothing but the artistic creation of the philosopher, a product which tends to approximate the public to the intellectual truth.

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