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## **Art As It Is, and Art As It Should Be: An Analytical Study of Fārābī**

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### **Abstract**

Fārābī discusses two kinds of art: art as it is, and art as it should be – that is, utopian art. Art as it is contains desirable and undesirable aspects. But the utopian art, the art of the utopian artist, consists of only that which is desirable. With reference to this art, Fārābī explains how it brings goodness and happiness into the imagination, and moderates the feelings. Undesirable and wicked art is just the opposite; it corrupts thoughts, and inflames sensual impulses.

In Fārābī's view, people come to comprehend intelligible truths and meanings through the use of their imagination. Furthermore, the arousal of people's feelings and emotions often originates in the imagination, and is caused by imaginary forms. The ultimate utopian goal is for the public to achieve intelligible happiness. Given that the public, based on their nature and general habits, are unable to perceive intelligible truths, the path to intelligible happiness must be presented to them via the imagination. The utopian artist represents intelligible happiness through the use of sensory and imaginary forms; thus, he or she brings intelligible happiness to people's minds through their imagination.

**Keywords:** Art, Farabi, Islamic philosophy, imagination, intelligible happiness.

## **The Issues**

What is art? Does Fārābī answer this question? In Fārābī's works, there are several points at which he speaks of art in general; he also makes reference to particular art forms, such as poetry, music, singing and visual art. Does Fārābī's philosophy include a specific definition of art? And does art have a function in Fārābī's utopia, 'al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah' — the Virtuous City<sup>1</sup> or Excellent City<sup>2</sup>? If so, what is this function?

## **Types of Art**

When describing the characteristics of a poem, Fārābī says,

Poetic speech consists of words that excite a mood in the audience, or demonstrate something higher than what it is or below the reality. These qualities refer to descriptions of beauty, ugliness, magnificence, disgrace, and the like. When listening to poetic words, one's imagination creates sensations so real that they resemble our feelings when we look (for example) at disgusting objects.<sup>3</sup>

In this definition of poetry, Fārābī emphasizes two elements: poetry's ability to excite sensual emotions, and its tendency to create strong responses in the imagination. Elsewhere he divides the arts of singing, music, and poetry into six types: three of these are desirable, and the other three are not.

The first type of art, which Fārābī describes as the highest form, aims at improving the faculty of reason, as well as thoughts and actions. It aims to produce happiness; it leads the mind to consider divine actions, and it glorifies the virtues. The second type of art attempts to moderate radical qualities and attitudes: these include anger, egotism, possessiveness, acquisitiveness, and the like. This second type of art encourages the use of such emotions in order to obtain goodness, rather than in ways that cause discord and result in

obscene expressions. The third type of desirable art aims at the opposite qualities: that is, it tries to do away with apathy and feebleness. This kind of art tries to correct these deficiencies, to moderate lassitude, fear, grief, etc. Again, in doing so, this type of art aims at good behaviour and thoughts.

Fārābī does not describe the three kinds of undesirable and wicked arts, except to say that these arts are of the opposite of the three sorts mentioned above. The wicked arts work to corrupt thoughts, and produce immoderate, sensual qualities and moods.

This discussion begins with poetry, but by the end of the section, Fārābī clarifies that music, songs and melodies are ordered in the same way.<sup>4</sup> In short, when describing the desirable arts, Fārābī focuses on those that produce goodness and happiness in the imagination, as well as those that moderate the emotions.

In many paragraphs of *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr*, also known as *The Great Book of Music*, Fārābī discusses melodies and notes. He believes that there are three types of melodies: 1. Those that create pleasure and comfort and have no other effect. 2. Those that create pleasure *and* inspire the imagination to new ideas. 3. Those that are inspired by jocund or painful emotions.

This division of melodies into categories (pleasing, imaginative, or passive) is repeated later in the book.

When reviewing the motives for singing and playing music, Fārābī also describes three kinds: 1. Some croon with the intention of attaining comfort and pleasure, and to forget their fatigue and the passage of time. 2. Some sing to strengthen or diminish their emotions and sentiments. 3. Some sing in order to explain concepts, to create visions.<sup>5</sup>

In his discussion of melodies, Fārābī further divides this last category. He introduces four purposes for melodies: 1. Melodies

that please. 2. Melodies that create sensual emotions like satisfaction, affection, anger, fear, grief and the like. 3. Melodies that create imaginary forms. 4. Melodies that enable humans to understand the meaning of the words that accompany the notes of the song. Of course, many melodies have more than a single purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Fārābī also pays attention to visual arts. He divides all kinds of images, statues, and paintings into two categories: useful and of little use. The latter sort merely creates pleasure, whereas the useful sort, in addition to causing pleasure, nourishes the imagination and creates emotions that embody other meanings.<sup>7</sup>

Fārābī also suggests a definition for art in general. At the beginning of *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr*, after dividing music into practical and theoretical, he defines art as a taste and a talent, combined with an intelligible element. These talents reflect concepts and imaginings that exist within the soul.<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, when discussing art, Fārābī focuses on components such as taste, imagination, comprehension (i.e., understanding the intelligible), sensual emotions, and pleasure. Of course, it should be noted that, as mentioned above, in his view, people come to understand intelligible truths through the use of their imagination. Furthermore, the arousal of feelings and emotions often originates in the imagination, and in imaginary forms.

### **Imagination**

Fārābī conceptualizes the imagination as including three principal activities: 1. It stores sensory forms. 2. It analyzes and synthesizes sensory forms. That is, the imaginary faculty produces a variety of analyses and syntheses that combine into infinite compositions and decompositions. Sometimes these are in concord with the sensible world, and sometimes they are not.<sup>9</sup> For example, the imagination invents the winged human through combining the wings of the bird

with the human body. 3. The imagination uses metaphor and embodiment. Among the different faculties of the soul, only the imagination is able to portray the sensible and the intelligible. It can even depict the intelligible truths of utter perfection, such as the prime cause and abstract beings. Of course, it embodies these truths using the most exalted and most perfect sensible forms, beautiful and stunning things. It also embodies the opposite – imperfect intelligible affairs through the use of despicable, ugly and imperfect sensible forms.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the imagination is a force that stores, analyzes, and synthesizes sensory forms, and utilizes them to embody the sensible and the intelligible. For example, the Iranian poet Sa'dī has created one of the best metaphors for analogizing the intelligible and the sensible:

Adam's sons are body limbs, to say;  
For they're created of the same clay.  
Should one organ be troubled by pain,  
Others would suffer severe strain.  
Thou, careless of people's suffering,  
Deserve not the name, "human being".<sup>11</sup>

In this poem, Sa'dī simplifies many intelligible concepts such as sympathy, compassion, and sacrifice. He makes them accessible to the imaginary faculty by embodying human beings as organs of one body.

Before Fārābī, Aristotle spoke about the nature of the imagination in his discussions of the self. However, it is held that, he did not consider the third feature mentioned above.<sup>12</sup> This fact has been demonstrated by researchers.<sup>13</sup>

### **Happiness and the Imagination**

According to Fārābī, final happiness is the state in which a human being successfully perceives the intelligible, and achieves the



nearest possible status to the Active Intellect.<sup>14</sup> For him, people who cannot understand the rational nonetheless have full use of their imagination.<sup>15</sup> So intelligible truths – and thus, happiness – should be somehow transferred to the imagination of such people. This task should be undertaken first by the Prophet, who has himself been linked to the Active Intellect, and has thus received all facts in their intelligible and imaginary forms.

According to Fārābī, there are two ways to achieve understanding: one can perceive the essence of a thing and imagine it in its existing form, or one can imagine an idea, and all the things similar to it.<sup>16</sup> It is not possible to speak of or bring into action the particular details of that which is non-sensible – such as the soul, the ten heavenly intellects, the hyle, and all abstract beings. It is not possible, that is, unless they are formed in the imagination. Although such things cannot be felt, we can imagine them through analogy, parallelism, or allegory.<sup>17</sup>

This relates to those concepts and beings that one cannot explain or describe through the use of reason alone. However, it is important to note that the majority of people do not have the reasoning power, due to their nature or habitude, to comprehend rationally even those things that can be described in this way.<sup>18</sup> In other words, they are not used to reasoning about the intelligible. In most people, the soul is attracted to the imagination, and the imagination controls the self. Bodily forces prevent the soul from being solely concerned with its essence and rational perceptions. So the self finds a confidence in the sensible to the extent that it denies the existence of the intelligible truths, and considers them to be baseless delusions.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the proper method for educating the public on such affairs is through transferring images and resemblances into their minds through the imagination.<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere, Fārābī reiterates that the public is not to follow the intelligible. Human actions are often guided by the imagination, even though the imagination may be in conflict with one's

knowledge, or be subject to one's suspicions.<sup>21</sup> In some cases, one's beliefs are actually contrary to what one imagines. One may be quite sure that reality is different from what one imagines. For instance, when a person merely imagines something frightening, he or she feels a sense of horror as if the idea were real.<sup>22</sup> And most people would be afraid to sleep next to a corpse, even though we know that dead bodies are harmless.

Ultimately, in order to make people experience happiness, it is necessary to transfer facts and intelligible happiness through the use of images and embodied forms.

### **Art as Embodiment of the Intelligible**

Art serves a special function in Fārābī's utopia. The utopia is governed by five kinds of wise leaders. The first section is composed of the sages, as well as those who are clear-sighted in important affairs.<sup>23</sup> The ultimate leader of the utopia, however, is none other than the prophet. His government is blessed by divine revelation, and all his actions and views are based on heavenly inspiration.<sup>24</sup> In second place, there are the "religion-conveyers" including orators, missionaries, poets, singers, writers and the like.<sup>25</sup> Fārābī places these poets, singers and the like, all of whom he refers to as artists, immediately after the prophet, and next in importance to orators and religious missionaries.

Now we reach the function of the utopian artist. Among the elements mentioned in Fārābī's discussion of art, imagination and the comprehension of the intelligible are most useful in explaining the task of the utopian artist. As mentioned above, Fārābī believes that the most exalted art is in the kind that uses imaginary forms to lead the people to imagine divine thoughts and actions. Moreover, desirable art, by nourishing the imagination, works to moderate extremes of emotions.

According to Fārābī's theory of the imagination, there is a relation between the imagination and the intellectual faculty: specifically, the imaginary faculties are able to access the intelligible through imaginary and sensory forms. The ultimate goal of the utopian rulers is to provide the public with intelligible happiness. The prophet, through revelation, perceives all the truths, both rationally and in his imagination. He has the ability to perceive the essence of truths; in addition, he knows the metaphors and analogies through which to describe these truths.

But since intellectual perception of true happiness is not possible for the public, metaphors are provided that will appeal to the peoples' imaginary faculties.

The utopian artist produces intelligible happiness through creating sensory and imaginary forms. So the artist performs an activity similar to that of the prophet.

## **Conclusion**

Fārābī describes two kinds of art: art as it is, and art as it should be — utopian art. Art as it is includes desirable and undesirable formations; these are classified into six different kinds. Utopian art is produced by the utopian artist. The ultimate goal of the utopia is to provide the public with intelligible happiness. But, given that the public, based on their nature and their habits, are unable to perceive intelligible truths, intelligible happiness must be brought to their imagination. The utopian artist is able to convey intelligible happiness through his or her art, using sensory and imaginary forms. Thus the utopian artist, like the prophet, brings intelligible happiness to people's minds.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> M. Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism*, 79.
- <sup>2</sup> I. Alon, "Fārābī's Funny Flora Al-nawābit as Opposition," *Arabica* 37(1990): 56.
- <sup>3</sup> Fārābī, *Iḥṣā' al-Ulūm*, trans., H. Khadīvjām (Tehrān: Elmifarhangi, 2002), 66-67.
- <sup>4</sup> Fārābī, *Fuṣūl Muntaza 'ah*, 53-54.
- <sup>5</sup> Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr*, 19- 24.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, 554-555.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, 559.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, 13.
- <sup>9</sup> Fārābī, *Ārā' Ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah wa Muḍāddātihā*, ed., Ali Bumelham (Beirut: Dār wa Maktaba al-Hilāl, 2003), 84, 95.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, 106-107.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Sa'dī, *Kullīāt Sa'dī. ed.*, M. A. Furūghī (Tehrān: Behzād, 2009), 15. Poem translated by H. V. Dastjerdī, *Mashriq Ma'rifat* (Qum: Anṣāriyān, 2006).
- <sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed., J. Barnes (Princeton University Press: 1995), 427 a 18- 429 a 4, 432 a 9.
- <sup>13</sup> Black, D. L. "Al- Fārābī", *History of Islamic Philosophy* , ed. S. H. Naṣr and O. Leaman (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 185.
- <sup>14</sup> Fārābī, *Risālah fī al-Aql*, ed., M. Bouyges (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1984), 31.
- <sup>15</sup> Fārābī, *Al-Tanbīh 'alā Sabīl al-Sa'ādah wa al-Ta'liqāt wa Risālatān Phalsaphīyatān*, ed., J. Āl Yāsīn (Tehrān: Hikmat, 1992), 129-130.
- <sup>16</sup> Fārābī, *Al-Sīyāsah al-Madanīyah*, ed., H. Malikshāhī (Tehrān: Surūsh, 1997), 225.
- <sup>17</sup> Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr*, 43.
- <sup>18</sup> Fārābī, *Al-Sīyāsah al-Madanīyah*, 225.
- <sup>19</sup> Fārābī, *Al-Tanbīh 'alā Sabīl al-Sa'ādah wa al-Ta'liqāt wa Risālatān Phalsaphīyatān*, 129 -130.
- <sup>20</sup> Fārābī, *Al-Sīyāsah al-Madanīyah*, 225.
- <sup>21</sup> Fārābī, *Al-Mantiqīyāt*, (Vol. 1), ed., M. T. Dānishpajūh, (Qum: Maktaba al-Marashi, 1987), 502.
- <sup>22</sup> Fārābī, *Fuṣūl Muntaza 'ah*, 52-53.
- <sup>23</sup> Fārābī, *Fuṣūl Muntaza 'ah*, 55.
- <sup>24</sup> Fārābī, *Al-Millah wa Nuṣūṣ Ukhra*, ed. M. Mahdī (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1991), 44.
- <sup>25</sup> Fārābī, *Fuṣūl Muntaza 'ah*, 55.

