The most famous political teaching of Aristotle is that human beings are “by nature political”; that is to say, their potential is only fully realized within the context of the city, which is a community of modest size wherein the citizens assist one another in the quest for virtue, especially justice. Since Alfarabi is universally understood as a follower of Aristotle—indeed even “the second Master,” after Aristotle—it is surprising to learn that he departs from Aristotle on this most basic point, asserting instead that the Umma is an even more fundamental political reality than the city. Yet, in *Redefining the Muslim Community*, Alexander Orwin argues convincingly for just such an interpretation of Alfarabi.

But what is an Umma? The word is usually translated as “nation,” but that can be somewhat misleading because Alfarabi does not have in mind the modern political arrangement that goes by the term “nation” today. Rather than attempt to unravel what would be meant by something like “premodern nationalism,” Orwin has the good sense not to translate the word, but instead simply to transliterate it and then pursue the task of interpreting what Alfarabi means by it.

In the event, Orwin explains that there are three meanings of the term. Primary for Alfarabi is the ethnic Umma. Relying especially on *The Book of Letters*, Orwin argues that Alfarabi grounds the ethnic Umma in extended family and especially in the development of nonspeaking human groups into communities with language. Language, of course, is replete with conventions, but that human communities, rooted in clans, develop into ethnic communities united through a conventional language is in some sense “natural” for human beings. Peoples all around the world have developed according to this pattern. Once language is established among a people, linguistic sciences come to the fore, as does poetry. The practitioners of these literary arts establish a certain identity for the Umma—something like a “civilization.” Indeed, in Alfarabi’s view, philosophy itself emerges out of this linguistically based trajectory of human development.

When we hear the word “Umma” today, however, what usually comes to mind is a second sort of Umma, the Islamic Umma. Such a meaning of the word is present in the Qur’an itself, although Orwin notes that the word has other meanings there as well. The Islamic Umma aims at becoming a universal Umma, uniting all Muslim believers, and perhaps even uniting all human beings into a single community of belief. Such a religious Umma was unknown to Aristotle, but Alfarabi discusses it especially in *The Book of Religion*. Orwin interprets Alfarabi to be not an open critic but rather a
subtle force for moderation of this second sort of Umma. Clearly tensions will arise between the religious Umma and the many ethnic Ummas that it seeks to absorb. In Orwin’s interpretation, the ethnic Umma is fundamental for Alfarabi, so the religious Umma will need to temper its universalizing aspirations. The religious Umma can unite ethnic Ummas, but it will never be able to do away with them. Conflicts will arise regarding even the very language in which the religious doctrines are composed, as has happened periodically within Islam. If nothing else, the Islamic Umma, in Alfarabi’s view, must demonstrate flexibility so that wars and violence do not become everywhere prevalent; the religious authorities may even have to practice something resembling toleration.

In the latter pages and chapters of *Redefining the Muslim Community*, Orwin turns to what can be called a “nationalist Umma.” Alfarabi gives less emphasis to this sort of Umma, but insofar as he knew what monarchies and the like were, he was familiar with the nationalist Umma as well. Given Alfarabi’s insistence on the primacy of the ethnic or linguistic Ummas, these nationalist Ummas come to sight for him as rather chancy affairs. Instability, it seems, will be common within them. Attempting to create a large nationalist Umma along the lines of an international empire strikes Alfarabi as an extremely difficult task. Like Aristotle, he emphasizes a smaller communal arrangement, even if that smaller arrangement is an ethnic Umma rather than a city.

For most of the pages of *Redefining the Muslim Community*, Orwin concerns himself with a careful exegesis of the Farabian texts. What is most novel in his reading is the emphasis given to the aforementioned *Book of Letters*, a work that has not received the attention garnered by some other works of Alfarabi. This situation may change soon given Orwin’s treatment of the work as well as the forthcoming publication of a new English translation that is being prepared by Charles Butterworth. At some point in *Redefining*, however, virtually every part of the known Farabian oeuvre is treated.

In addition to showing his readers how to understand Alfarabi’s books, Orwin also attempts to show the enduring relevance of Alfarabi’s thought. Less space is devoted to this task, but Orwin is, for example, able to show how Alfarabi’s treatment of the tense relationship between the ethnic and the religious Umma has played itself out in the recent history of Islamic lands. It is also possible for him to show how attempts to resuscitate a strongly unified, multinational Islamic Umma have succumbed to just the sort of temptations that Alfarabi warned against. Finally, Orwin also shows briefly but adeptly how Alfarabi could have been of assistance to the modern projects of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Iqbal, despite their rather curt dismissals of earlier Islamic political thinkers.

Of course, since Alfarabi is a philosopher, we would anticipate that his analysis of political life would transcend the Islamic context in which it was composed. His teaching on the ethnic Umma in particular, if it is as foundational as Orwin’s book argues, ought to extend to other times and places.
Redefining the Muslim Community limits its analysis to the Islamic situation for the most part. Orwin does claim, however, that certain affinities may be observed between Alfarabi’s ideas and Rousseau’s Considerations of the Government of Poland. In his brief conclusion, moreover, Orwin suggests that the three Ummas could be usefully employed in considering the political structure even of the United States. If one abstracts momentarily the presence of many minorities in the United States, Orwin says that one can identify a religious Umma that is broadly Christian and biblical, a linguistic English Umma, with a literature stemming from Shakespeare, and a national Umma that began in 1776. What a Farabian analysis would then bring to light would include the many predictable tensions that stem from attempts to unite or separate these various Ummas, as well as from attempts to incorporate minority groups within them. Such a starting point, it seems, might broaden political conversation and permit it better to take into account the various cultural aspects of political life.

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Stuart Gray argues that comparing early Greek and early Indian political thought can enable one to produce a political theory which gives appropriate weight to the interests of the nonhuman world, and will therefore produce more environmentally friendly and sustainable policies than current Western ideology. He uses historical and comparative study to justify a contemporary program. This book is not so much about justifying the state (as the title implies) but rather about seeing how the concept of the state has been related to metaphysics.

The Greek and Indian texts could hardly be more different (this comes as no surprise). The strength of his work lies in his painstaking and enlightening textual analysis of the early Indian texts, ranging from the beginnings (ca. 1500 BCE) to around 500 BCE. He excavates the processes by which two different notions of “rule,” order, the cosmos, and humanity emerged. His close textual analysis shows (in a way that, so far as I know, is original) how the notion of kingship developed between approximately 1500 and 500 BCE, from a primarily cosmic concept to one which also accounted for human