THE ETHICAL PROGRESSION OF THE PHILOSOPHER IN AL-RĀZĪ AND AL-FĀRĀBĪ

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Abstract. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925) and al-Fārābī (d. 950) both adopt the classical ideal of a philosophical way of life in the sense that being a philosopher implies certain ethical guidelines to which the philosopher should adhere. In both cases, moreover, their ethical writings appear to reflect a certain tension with respect to what the ethical goal of the philosopher consists of. In this study, I will argue that this apparent tension is relieved when their ethics is understood as a progression in a double sense. In the first sense, both authors adopt the Neoplatonic distinction between pre-philosophical and philosophical ethics. The second aspect of the progression takes place within the degree of virtue required of the philosopher, which for al-Rāzī and al-Fārābī proceeds in contrary directions. For al-Rāzī, the philosopher progresses from the moderately ascetic requirements of Spiritual Medicine to the higher license present in Philosophical Life, following the stages of the life of Socrates. In contrast, for al-Fārābī the progression follows roughly along the Neoplatonic grades of virtue from Aristotelian moderation, which in Exhortation to the Way to Happiness is connected with character training in a pre-philosophical sense, towards purely contemplative existence.

Résumé. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (mort en 925) et al-Fārābī (mort en 950) adoptent tous deux l’idéal classique d’un mode de vie philosophique, au sens où être philosophe implique de respecter une certaine éthique. Dans le cas de ces deux auteurs, leurs écrits sur l’éthique reflètent en outre une certaine tension vis-à-vis de ce qui constitue l’objectif éthique du philosophe. Dans cette étude, je montrerai que cette tension apparente s’estompe lorsque leur éthique est comprise comme une progression entendue en un double sens. Au premier sens, les deux auteurs adoptent la distinction néo-platonicienne entre éthique pré-philosophique et éthique philosophique. Le second aspect de la progression porte quant à lui sur le degré de vertu qui est attendu du philosophe – et qui, pour al-Rāzī et al-Fārābī, s’oriente dans des directions opposées. Pour al-Rāzī, le philosophe se hisse des exigences ascétiques modérées de la Médecine spirituelle vers celles plus élevées de la Vie philosophique, en suivant les pas de Socrate. Au contraire, pour al-Fārābī, la progression suit à peu près les stades néo-platoniciens de la vertu, partant de la modération aristotélicienne, liée, dans l’Exhortation au bonheur, à la formation du caractère au sens pré-philosophique, pour tendre vers une existence purement contemplative.
In his writings, Pierre Hadot famously argued that in the classical idea of philosophy theoretical discourse was always intimately connected to a philosophical way of life.¹ The first philosophers of the Islamic world certainly adopted the ideal of philosophical life, at least in the sense that being a philosopher implies certain ethical guidelines to which the philosopher should adhere.² Within the Aristotelian division of philosophy into theoretical and practical parts, the latter is commonly understood not merely as the study of ethics, alongside economics and political philosophy, but also as a virtuous practice.³ In the early Arabic philosophical tradition, it seems almost topical to define philosophy as both knowledge and virtue.⁴ The ethical end of philosophy is also manifest in the definition of philosophy as “becoming like God,” one of the six standard Alexandrian definitions of philosophy, that was adopted by various Arabic authors.⁵

The purpose of this study is to investigate this practical-ethical aspect of philosophy through the ethical writings of Abū Bakr al-Rāżī (d. 925) and al-Fārābī (d. 950). Both al-Rāżī and in particular al-Fārābī devoted considerable attention to practical philosophy, and both are emphatic that the concept of philosopher involves a virtuous way of living. In both cases, moreover, their ethical writings appear to reflect a certain tension with respect to what the ethical goal of the philosopher consists of. In the following, I will argue that this apparent tension is relieved when their ethics is understood as a progression that the philosopher should follow in the formation of his character. Druart has suggested that the differences between the various ethical writings of al-Rāżī and al-Fārābī should be understood through the Neoplatonic distinction between pre-philosophical and

² Hadot’s idea is broader than this, such as in his concept of philosophy as a spiritual exercise, but the present study is restricted to exploring only this ethical aspect.
³ This is in itself a very Aristotelian idea, as in Aristotle’s statement (Nicomachean Ethics, 1103b26–28) that the goal of ethics as a discipline is not theoretical, that is, knowledge about virtue, but practical, that is, becoming virtuous.
⁴ See, for example, Miskawayh (d. 1030) in Degrees of Happiness (Tartib al-sa’ādāt) (cited in Dimitri Gutas, “Paul the Persian on the classification of the parts of Aristotle’s philosophy: a milestone between Alexandria and Bagdad,” Der Islam, 60.2 (1983): 231–67, p. 232): “Whoever wishes to perfect himself as a human being ... let him acquire these two arts – I mean the theoretical and practical parts of philosophy; as a result, there will accrue to him the essential natures of things by means of the theoretical part, and good deeds by means of the practical part.”
⁵ For the adoption of the Platonic maxim in Alexandrian and Islamic contexts, see Christel Hein, Definition und Einteilung der Philosophie: Von der spätantiken Einleitungsliteratur zur arabischen Enzyklopädie (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), pp. 99–100, 116.
philosophical ethics. In the Neoplatonic philosophical curriculum, pre-philosophical character formation was often seen as an indispensable prerequisite for the study of philosophy, whereas philosophical ethics, requiring knowledge of logical argumentation, formed part of philosophy proper. Both al-Rāzī and al-Fārābī clearly adopt the idea of the necessity of pre-philosophical character formation, and regard it as distinct from philosophical ethics.

In Greek Neoplatonism, there was a further ethical progression along the grades of virtue with respect to the control of passions through the intermediary stage of Aristotelian metriopatheia, rational moderation of passions, towards the Stoic-Neoplatonic goal of apatheia, freedom from passions. The question regarding the conception that al-Rāzī and al-Fārābī have of the philosopher’s ethical practice, then, is whether the ethical development of the philosopher also involves a progression similar to the Neoplatonic grades of virtue. In the following, I will argue that both al-Rāzī and al-Fārābī indeed think that the ethical formation of the philosopher involves a development in the degree of virtue, although in contrary directions, and that this helps explain their differing ethical ideals from one work to another.

2. AL-RĀZĪ

That al-Rāzī conceives philosophy to involve an ethical practice is evident in both of his surviving ethical treatises. The goal of the

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7 Hence, Simplicius (d. c. 560) (cited from Richard Sorabji, The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200–600 AD. A Sourcebook. Volume 1: Psychology (with Ethics and Religion) [London, 2005], p. 323) states: “Perhaps, then, there is every need of an ethical pre-catechism, but not supplied through Aristotle’s Ethics, but through habituation without texts, and through non-technical exhortations, both written and unwritten, to straighten our character, and after that the logical and demonstrative method. After those, we shall be able to take in scientifically the scientific discussions of character and research into reality.”

8 See John Dillon, “Plotinus, Philo and origen on the grades of virtue,” in Horst-Dieter Blume and Friedhelm Mann (eds.), Platonismus und Christentum: Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, suppl. 10 (Münster, 1983), pp. 92–105; Dominic J. O’Meara, Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity (Oxford, 2003), pp. 40ff.; Sorabji, The Philosophy of the Commentators, pp. 337ff. The distinction between the grades of ‘political’ (politeikai) and ‘purificatory’ (kathartikai) virtue is made by Plotinus in Enneads, I.2, but is developed into considerably more elaborate classifications by the later Neoplatonists.

9 The two treatises are edited in Rasā’il falsafiyya (Opera philosophica), ed. Paul Kraus (Cairo, 1939), pp. 15–96 (Spiritual Medicine) and pp. 98–111 (Philosophical Life). There is an English translation for the first treatise in Arthur J. Arberry, The Spiritual Physick of
Philosophical Life (Kitāb al-Sīra al-falsafiyya) is apologetic, to show that his way of life has been worthy of a philosopher, in response to the contrary claim of his anonymous opponents. His understanding of philosophy is one where philosophy consists of knowledge (ʿilm) and practice (ʿamal) equally,\(^{10}\) where the latter refers to the actions of the philosopher, rather than practical philosophy as a discipline to be studied.\(^{11}\) In Philosophical Life, al-Rāzī repeatedly refers back to his earlier ethical tractate, Spiritual Medicine (Kitāb al-Tibb al-rūḥānī). He claims that the six basic principles on which he founds his ethical doctrine are derived from a number of earlier works, “especially our book known as Spiritual Medicine, for it is indispensable in seeking to complete the aim of this treatise.”\(^{12}\) Later on, he states that whereas the principle of imitatio dei summarizes the idea of philosophical life, its details (tafāsīl) are presented in Spiritual Medicine, “for there we have set down how to remove vices from the human soul, and how much effort the one who loves philosophy (mutafalsif) should apply in terms of pursuing, amassing, and spending wealth, and seeking out ranks of leadership.”\(^{13}\) Al-Rāzī therefore seems to view the two treatises as forming a unified whole, together presenting the guidelines for the ethical conduct of the philosopher.

Despite al-Rāzī’s insistence on the unity of his two ethical works, many scholars have seen them as portraying notably distinct, even inconsistent, ethical doctrines.\(^{14}\) They diverge in style: Spiritual Medicine employs many colourful anecdotes to prove its point while Philosophical Life relies on more sober philosophical argumentation. Doctrinally, Spiritual Medicine is ambivalent about the afterlife and silent about the principle of imitation of God, which represent the first two ethical principles in Philosophical Life. As for the standard of virtue set for the philosopher, the former appears to endorse an ascetic ideal and the latter a moderate one.\(^{15}\)

\(^{10}\) Rasāʾil falsafiyya, p. 108.

\(^{11}\) It seems to be the case that al-Rāzī understands the practical part of philosophy to consist only of the actions, and relegates theoretical reflection of ethics to the theoretical part, as suggested by Peter Adamson, “The Arabic tradition,” in John Skorupski (ed.), The Routledge Companion to Ethics (New York, 2010), pp. 63–75, at p. 65.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 108 (translation cited from McGinnis and Reisman, Classical Arabic Philosophy, p. 42).


Druart has argued that many of the differences between the two works can be explained when fitted within the distinction of pre-philosophical and philosophical ethics. When *Spiritual Medicine* is understood as an introductory work for aspiring philosophers, its reliance on persuasive arguments and anecdotes becomes understandable. The necessity of moral training before the study of philosophy is attested to in *Spiritual Medicine* through a story about Plato’s amorous pupil, where Plato accuses the fellow students of neglecting to rectify the boy’s appetitive soul before he proceeded to study philosophy in the first place. In contrast, *Philosophical Life* outlines an ethical system and requires prior philosophical knowledge. This distinction between the two modes of ethical argumentation is made clear in the story about the over-indulgent date-eater who is persuaded about the folly of the unrestricted following of passions by a purely hedonistic argument. For the philosopher, who knows that pleasure is not man’s highest end, the same is evident based on Platonic psychology, and the ethical and eschatological goal of man:

> [And upon my life, such reasoning as this satisfies those who have not been trained in the discipline of philosophy, more than arguments based on philosophical principles. This is because the man who believes that the appetitive soul is united with the rational soul only in order that it may supply this body, which serves the rational soul as an instrument and an implement, with sufficient to keep it alive for the period required by the rational soul to acquire knowledge of this world – such a man will always suppress the appetitive soul and prevent it from obtaining food above the level of sufficiency (kafāf). For he takes the view that the object and purpose of feeding in created beings is not enjoyment but survival, which cannot be secured without food.]

Seeing the two works as successive stages within the philosopher’s progression from pre-philosophical to philosophical ethics explains the differences in ethical argumentation, but how are the differing ethical standards to be explained? Although the two works in fact agree on man’s ethical goal to a large extent, the tension in the

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16 Druart, “The ethics of al-Razi.” Adamson proposes a similar distinction, between an initial stage where the lower soul is subjected to reason, and a stage of philosophical morality, which is motivated by neither pleasure nor desire to avoid pleasure. See Peter Adamson, “Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925), the spiritual medicine,” in Khaled el-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford, forthcoming).

17 *Rasā’il falsafiyya*, p. 42.

18 For al-Rāzī’s view of pleasure, see Peter Adamson, “Platonic pleasures in Epicurus and al-Rāzī,” in Peter Adamson (ed.), *In the Age of al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century* (London and Turin, 2008), pp. 71–94.


20 See Druart, “The ethics of al-Razi” and Adamson, “Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925), the spiritual medicine.” Both works include the doctrine of the mean, knowledge and justice as man’s
standard of virtue still remains. The general ethical tone of *Spiritual Medicine* appears to be moderately, although not excessively, ascetic. The treatise presents itself as a guidebook for gradually training one’s character towards the “suppression of desires” (*qamʿ al-hawā*) and “opposition in most cases to what nature (*ṭībāʾ*) urges us to do.”\(^{21}\) Only the “virtuous philosopher” (*al-rajul al-faylasūf al-fāḍīl*) is capable of attaining this virtue to the highest extent possible for human nature, and, in this regard, philosophers are with respect to common people (*ʿawāmm*) like men with respect to animals.\(^{22}\)

As for the level of suppression required, according to al-Rāzī, for those philosophers who deny the soul’s immortality, it is sufficient to reject desires to the extent that their gratification would result in greater overall pain than pleasure. But al-Rāzī clearly aligns himself with the second group of philosophers, the Platonists, who believe that the soul “employs the body as an instrument, and is not destroyed with the body, and hence they rise to a much higher degree in their reining of nature and fighting and opposing of desire.”\(^{23}\) Such people know that the rational soul is attached to a body only in order to gain knowledge enabling its well-being in the afterlife and “disdain and loathe this body and corporeal world altogether, knowing that as long as the sensitive soul is attached to any of it, it will always be afflicted by the pain and harm due to the alternations of generation and corruption in it.”\(^{24}\) Philosophical knowledge about the relation between the rational soul and body, and man’s eschatological goal, then promotes an apathetic attitude towards the body and bodily desires.

In this context, al-Rāzī presents a brief summary of the three Platonic parts of the soul, and their corresponding mediate states, in what would at first glance amount to an ideal of moderation.\(^{25}\) But, with respect to the appetitive soul, the medium is between the defect (*taqṣīr*) of failing to nourish the body to a degree necessary for maintaining bodily health, and the excess (*ifrāt*) of providing the body with more than it needs.\(^{26}\) The resulting ethical ideal is a

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\(^{21}\) Rasāʾil falsafiyya, p. 20.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 21.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 24. While refusing to take an explicit stand on the immortality of the soul in *Spiritual Medicine*, it is the first ethical principle of *Philosophical Life* (p. 101; McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic philosophy*, p. 58): “we have a state after death that is either praiseworthy or blameworthy, depending on the way we lived during the time our souls were with our bodies.”

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 30.


\(^{26}\) Rasāʾil falsafiyya, p. 29.
moderately ascetic one, where the bodily needs are fulfilled only to the minimal degree necessary for preserving mental and bodily health. In this context, al-Rāzī speaks in a rather positive tone of moderately ascetic practices:

This group of philosophers ascend from reining and opposing of desire, and even of its humiliation (ihāna) and mortification (imāta), into something extremely magnificent, so that they attain only sustenance (qūt) and what is sufficient (bulgha) of food and drink, and do not acquire wealth, property or houses.27

Such a state of sufficiency (kafāf) appears as the goal for the philosopher elsewhere in the work as well. Al-Rāzī admonishes against pursuing material welfare beyond sufficiency (kafāf), which is the most restful state (rāḥa) for the soul.28 In the date-eater story he tells us that the philosopher will only nourish his body up to the degree of sufficiency, because he knows that the appetitive soul is merely a temporary instrument for the rational soul.29 A somewhat ascetic tone also emerges in the discussion of the specific vices. The prudent man should ideally avoid any attachments which cause grief upon loss, such as having children,30 and reject love (ʾishq),31 shun intimacy (alf),32 refrain from sex,33 and drink only for repelling anxiety, not for the sake of pleasure.34 The way of life that Spiritual Medicine endorses for the philosopher, then, is a moderately ascetic one, although not to the degree of causing pain or harm to oneself:

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27 Ibid., pp. 26–7.
28 Ibid., pp. 53–4, 87–8, 90–1. The argument here is in fact based on a hedonistic calculus, since the pleasure brought by higher states of status or wealth is only transient, overweighed by the trouble expended in the effort of gaining it.
29 Ibid., p. 71 (passage quoted above).
30 Ibid., pp. 65–6. While not having the attachments in the first place is the optimal case, al-Rāzī also offers advice for treating the sorrow caused by their loss, such as preparing oneself by visualizing the loss of one’s children before it happens, and arguments for dissipating the sorrow after it has happened. This “therapeutics” of the soul seems to be ultimately Stoic in origin, although it is probably mediated to al-Rāzī by Galen. For the Galenic strand of ethics in Arabic philosophy, see Gotthard Strohmaier, “Die Ethik Galens und ihre Rezeption in der Welt des Islams,” in Jonathan Barnes and Jacques Jouanna (eds.), Galien et la Philosophie (Genève, 2003), pp. 307–29; Adamson, “Arabic tradition,” pp. 69ff. and id., “Health in Arabic ethical works,” in Peter Adamson (ed.), Health. Oxford Philosophical Concepts (Oxford, forthcoming).
31 Rasāʾil falsafiyya, pp. 35ff.
32 Ibid., p. 46.
33 Ibid., pp. 74ff. While the main argument is that sexual desire is a powerful passion that enslaves reason, al-Rāzī also cites the harmful effects of sexual intercourse for the bodily health. In another, purely medical, treatise on the subject, al-Rāzī, however, also lists its beneficial effects besides the harmful ones. See Peter Pormann, “Al-Rāzī (d. 925) on the benefits of sex: a clinician caught between philosophy and medicine,” in Arnoud Vrolijk and Jan P. Hogendijk (eds.), O ye Gentlemen: Arabic Studies on Science and Literary Culture, In Honour of Remke Kruk (Leiden and Boston, 2007), pp. 115–27.
34 Rasāʾil falsafiyya, pp. 73–4.
In contrast, *Philosophical Life* appears to set much more lenient standards for the philosopher. The ultimate purpose of the work is to define the boundaries within which the philosopher is allowed to pursue pleasure in order to refute al-Rāzī’s anonymous opponents who had accused him of not following Socrates’ example in this regard. Al-Rāzī claims that there were two Socrateses. The youthful one went to extremes in his asceticism, shunned the company of kings, entertainment (*lahw*), possessions, delicious food, and meat and wine, and instead dressed in shabby clothes, lived in a barrel, and had no children. In contrast, the mature Socrates lived a moderate life, ate delicious food — although remaining a vegetarian — drank moderately, attended sessions of entertainment (*majālis al-lahw*), fought in a war, and had children. According to al-Rāzī, the philosophers should emulate the moderate lifestyle of the latter Socrates, rather than the excessively ascetic one of the former.

Based on six primary ethical principles, the work proceeds to outline more precisely the boundaries of the philosophical life — defining the lower and upper limits with respect to gratification of desires. The lower limit consists of limiting oneself to the satisfaction of the basic human needs, but avoiding seeking pleasure for its own sake, that is, for example, that the philosopher “eats what does not cause him harm or make him ill, and does not go beyond that to desire and pursue what brings him the most pleasure, so that his aim becomes the pleasure and the desire and not the appeasement of hunger.” This would appear to be close to the level of sufficiency recommended in *Spiritual Medicine*, although al-Rāzī now explicitly attacks extreme ascetic practices among Hindus, Christians, Manicheans, and Muslims as pointless, since they cause pain without avoiding any greater pain. The upper limit, however, explicitly allows seeking all pleasure, except what can only be attained through “perpetrating oppression and murder and, in sum, anything that invites divine displeasure, or should be avoided according to the judgment of reason and justice.” This goes together with al-Rāzī’s previous statement that all pleasures, except those where the pain overweighs the pleasure in the long run, or which prevent salvation, are allowed.

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36 For the Arabic Socrates, who was often blended together with the Cynic philosopher Diogenes, see Ilai Alon, *Socrates in Medieval Arabic Literature*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science, 10 (Leiden and Jerusalem, 1991).
Although al-Rāzī does state that it is better for the philosopher to gradually tune himself towards the lower limit, there is no mention that the afterlife would necessitate further suppression of desires, or invoke a generic apathetic attitude towards the body and the appetites in the philosopher. Rather, one of al-Rāzī’s primary principles states that the rational soul attains salvation through knowledge and justice, which constitute man’s ultimate ethical goal, instead of pleasure.

If *Spiritual Medicine* represents the pre-philosophical, and *Philosophical Life* the philosophical, stage of the philosopher’s ethical development, that would mean that with respect to the control of passions, the philosopher should progress from more ascetic towards more moderate requirements. But why would this be the case? Perhaps the progression in virtue can be explained as a method of spiritual training. The goal of character formation for al-Rāzī is suppressing the desires, so that they are subjected to reason, and not vice versa. This is done by means of gradually habituating oneself to fight against the appetites, and the nature that induces them, so that resisting them in the end becomes a firm disposition (khuluq), and the “appetitive soul becomes used to being guided by the rational soul.” For the purposes of training, the student of philosophy should sometimes reject even “licit” desires:

And this alone is not sufficient. For in many cases he should suppress his desires – even when he sees no disagreeable consequences for them – in order to train (yumarrin) and discipline (yarūd) his soul to endure and become accustomed to it. For then it will be easier for him when the consequences are bad, and also the desires will not gain control of him and dominate him. The desires in any case preside over the very nature and human disposition to such a degree that it should not be reinforced by habit as well, so that man will find himself in a state where he is unable to resist them at all.

The harsher requirements of *Spiritual Medicine* would then correspond to the stage of character training where the aspiring philosopher fights against the desires arising from his nature in order to

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44 Druart, “The ethics of al-Razi,” p. 57, suggests a similar possibility of a pedagogical device where the beginner is urged towards the opposite of his natural tendency, in the hope of his ending up in moderation.
45 Rasā’il falsafiyya, p. 32. See also p. 21: “He who wants to perfect this virtue must habituate his soul to the fighting of desire.”
46 *Ibid.*, p. 22. Al-Rāzī repeats the same principle in *Philosophical Life* (p. 102) (cited with modifications from McGinnis and Reisman, *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, p. 39): “But the philosopher will often forego many of these permitted pleasures for the sake of training (yumarrin) and habituating (yu’awwid) his soul to resistance, so that when it becomes necessary he will find that easier and more effortless, as we wrote in our *Spiritual Medicine*.”
eventually attain a stable disposition where the rational soul is liberated from their control. In contrast, *Philosophical Life* portrays the ethical boundaries for the philosopher who ideally has already achieved such a disposition, and no longer needs to train his soul as harshly. The moderate asceticism of *Spiritual Medicine* is not an ethical goal in itself for the philosopher, but an instrument for achieving a relative freedom with respect to the desires induced by human nature. It is this ambivalence towards bodily desires that enables the considerably greater license emerging in *Philosophical Life*.

The philosopher is allowed to gratify his desires to the degree that he is not enslaved by them and they are not antithetical to the goals of knowledge and justice.

When interpreted this way, the ethical progression of the student of philosophy would follow the stages of the life of Socrates as described at the beginning of *Philosophical Life*, proceeding from the passionate renunciation of everything but philosophy to a more stable moderate disposition. In the initial habituation of the soul, harsher means are necessary, whereas once the disposition has become established in the soul, more licence is possible:

His behavior in the beginning was the result of his strong fascination with and love for philosophy; his intense desire to turn away from spending his time on pursuing bodily desires and being occupied with pleasures, and towards philosophy; his natural propensity to do that; and his scorn and disdain for anyone who does not examine philosophy with the keen eye that it deserves and who chooses instead something of lower value. At the outset of any pursuit that is desired and loved, one cannot but turn towards it excessively, and be excessive in loving it, persevere in it, and hate anyone opposed to it, until, after he has immersed himself in it and it has become established in him, he abandons the excess and returns to moderation.

3. AL-FĀRĀBĪ

While al-Fārābī – unlike al-Rāzī – did not write a treatise on the philosophical life, his later biographers believed him to have followed the ancients in living according to the philosophical ideals of virtue:

He was of pure soul, strong intellect, and turned away from the world, being content with what provided him with the barest subsistence, leading the way

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47 This may be compared with the ambivalent attitude of Avicenna’s philosopher, at the end of his ethical and intellectual progression (*Ishārat wa-al-tanbīhāt*, ed. Sulayman Dunya, 2nd edn (Cairo, 1968), IV, pp. 107–8): “For the knower (*ārif*), asceticism (*qasīfa*) may appear as equal to luxury, or he may prefer asceticism. Similarly, malodorous may appear to him as equal to fragrant, or he may prefer the malodorous. This is because in his mind he despises everything other than the Truth.”

of life of the ancient philosophers… It is said that he only received from all that Sayf al-Dawla bestowed on him four silver dirhams daily which he spent on the necessities of living. He was not concerned with outer appearance, housing, or profit, and it is said that he used to nourish himself exclusively with the water of the hearts of Aries and divine wine. And it is told that he was at first a judge, but when he learned the sciences, he gave that up, and devoted himself completely to learning them, and no longer relied on any of the worldly things.49

Al-Fārābī also attributes a philosophical way of life to the ancient philosophers. In Philosophy of Plato (Falsafat Aflatūn), he tells us that Socrates chose death over life when he realized that the corrupted opinions of his city would prevent him from living the rest of his life according to philosophical knowledge and virtue.50 The Agreement between the Opinions of the Two Philosophers Divine Plato and Aristotle (Kitāb al-Jam’ bayna ra’ay al-ḥakīmān Aflatūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristīṭālīs) presents the divergence between the ways of life of Plato and Aristotle as one of the apparent contradictions between the two philosophers.51 While Plato shunned most worldly things (al-asbāb al-dunyawīyya), and admonished against them, Aristotle married, had children, worked as Alexander’s minister, and gathered worldly possessions. Al-Fārābī explains that the disagreement was

49 Ibn Abī Usaybi’a, ‘Uyūn al-anbā’ fi tābaqāt al-ātibbā’, 2, ed. August Müller (Cairo, 1882), p. 134. See Philippe Vallat, Farabi et l’École d’Alexandrie: Des prémisses de la connaissance à la philosophie politique (Paris, 2004), p. 23, note 4, for understanding the cryptic expressions “water of the hearts of Aries” (mā qulāb al-humātān) and “divine wine” (al-khānār al-rayḥān) as abstention from meat and wine, as opposed to, for example, Rafael Ramón Guerrero, “Apuntes biográficos de al-Fārābī según sus vidas árabes,” Anauque de estudios árabes, 14 (2003): 231–8, p. 232, who translates them as “nourishment with lambs’ internals and fruit juices.”


not doctrinal, but temperamental. Both emphasized the communal virtues, Plato founded political philosophy, and Aristotle followed him in his political writings. When carrying out the ethical theory into practice, the deficient “natural faculties” (quwā al-tabīʿīyya) of Plato rendered him successful in purifying his own soul, while he failed in conveying his perfection to others, whereas Aristotle’s excessive natural faculties caused him to fall short in the first and excel in the latter.

Al-Fārābī stresses this view of philosophy, that is, that virtuous practice forms an inseparable part of being a philosopher, in a number of writings. In his introduction to Aristotelian philosophy, the final goal of philosophical learning is stated to be two-fold: knowledge of the Creator as the culmination of theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and “becoming like God in one’s actions as much as is possible for a human being” on the other.\(^{52}\) The two-fold definition of philosophy as both knowledge and virtue is repeated in the Selected Aphorisms (Fuṣūl muntazaʿa).\(^{53}\) In the Attainment of Happiness (Kitāb Tahṣīl al-saʿāda), al-Fārābī defines the true philosopher (al-faylasūf fī al-ḥaqiqā) as one who combines theoretical knowledge with moral virtue, as well as political capability, whereas those who lack one of the three characteristics form different classes of false philosophers.\(^ {54}\)

Since moral virtue clearly forms an indispensable part of being a philosopher, what are the ethical standards to which the philosopher should adhere? Druart has argued that al-Fārābī distinguishes between religious, pre-philosophical and philosophical levels of ethics, employing poetic-rhetorical, dialectic, and demonstrative arguments respectively, and each addressing distinct groups of people.\(^ {55}\) Like al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī would then view the ethical education of the philosopher as a progression from a pre-philosophical to a philosophical level. This clearly seems to be the case, as al-Fārābī’s works accord ethics an ambiguous position as both the beginning and end of philosophy. But, in contrast to al-Rāzī, it also appears that the function of pre-philosophical character training is largely taken over by


religious morality, as I will argue below, and the poetic-rhetorical and dialectical levels are not that sharply distinguished within the philosopher's moral education.

Al-Fārābī presents moral virtue as a necessary prerequisite for philosophical studies in a number of works. In the prolegomena, in the context of the question of the correct starting point of philosophy, al-Fārābī ends up supporting the view that the moral dispositions (akhlāq) of the appetitive soul must be corrected before the study of philosophy so that the appetites (shahwa) are oriented towards what is virtue in reality, as opposed to the false virtues related to the two lower parts of the soul.\(^{56}\) In Attainment of Happiness, al-Fārābī draws from The Republic to present the prerequisites for a student of philosophy, which include both intellectual and moral virtues:

For he who sets out to inquire ought to be innately equipped for the theoretical sciences – that is fulfill the conditions prescribed by Plato in the Republic. He should excel in comprehending and conceiving that which is essential. Moreover, he should have good memory and be able to endure the toil of study. He should love truthfulness and truthful people, and justice and just people; and not be headstrong or a wrangler about what he desires. He should not be gluttonous for food and drink, and should by natural disposition disdain the appetites, the dirham, the dinar, and the like. He should be high-minded and avoid what is disgraceful in people. He should be pious, yield easily to goodness and justice, and be stubborn in yielding to evil and injustice. And he should be strongly determined in favor of the right thing. Moreover, he should be brought up according to the laws and habits that resemble his innate disposition. He should have sound conviction about the opinions of the religion in which he is reared, hold fast to the virtuous acts in his religion, and not forsake all or most of them. Furthermore, he should hold fast to the generally accepted virtues and not forsake the generally accepted noble acts. For if a youth is such, and then sets out to study philosophy and learns it, it is possible that he will not become a counterfeit or a vain or a false philosopher.\(^{57}\)

The beginning of the passage gives the impression that al-Fārābī presumes that the philosopher should be disposed to disdain appetites and prefer virtue by inborn nature (bi-al-fitra). But clearly virtue is also the result of character formation since the text requires that the philosopher be brought up within a political community whose laws resemble his natural virtuous dispositions and that he should adhere to the religious and “generally accepted” virtues (al-fadā’il

\(^{56}\) Risāla fl-mā yanbaghī, §3, p. 53. The relevant passage is translated in Druart, “Al-Farabi on the practical and speculative aspects of ethics,” p. 476.

allatī hiya fī al-mashhūr faḍā‘īl). Al-Fārābī would then seem to equate the pre-philosophical character formation either with religious ethics or the common opinions about virtue within the political community in which the student of philosophy lives, which would correspond to poetic-rhetorical and dialectic ethics respectively. This is also evident in the definition of the “vain philosopher” (al-faylasūf al-bahraj): “The vain philosopher is he who learns the theoretical sciences, but without going any further and without being habituated to doing the acts considered virtuous by a certain religion or the generally accepted noble acts. Instead he follows his own desires (hawan) and appetites (shahawāt) in everything, whatever they may happen to be.” While again the reformation of the appetitive soul is necessary for becoming a true philosopher, the character training takes place through conforming to the morality of the religious or political community.

In other contexts, al-Fārābī presents moral virtue as the culmination of theoretical sciences, and emphasizes the role of theoretical knowledge as an indispensable pre-condition for virtue. In the Prolegomena this idea is expressed through the maxim “perfection of knowledge is action” (tamām al-‘īlm al-‘amal). In the Aphorisms, not only philosophical knowledge about virtue, but also knowledge about theoretical philosophy, is required for becoming truly virtuous:

One of the benefits of the theoretical part of philosophy is that it is necessary for the practical part from various aspects. One of them is that an action becomes virtue and correct only when man has come to attain true knowledge about the virtues that are virtues in reality and the virtues that are presumed to be virtues but are not so, has habituated his soul to the truly virtuous actions so that they become a disposition (hay’a) in him, has come to know the degrees of existence and ranks of merit and how all things descend to his degree within it and accord him his rightful position that is the degree and rank among the ranks of existence that has been bestowed to him, and has come to prefer what he should prefer and avoid what he should avoid and not prefer what is presumed to be preferable and not avoid what is


60 Risāla fī-mā yānbaghī, §5, p. 53.
presumed to be avoidable. This is a state that is not attained and perfected except after experience and complete demonstrative knowledge and the completion of physical and metaphysical sciences according to the correct order and arrangement until he in the end reaches the science dealing with happiness that is in reality happiness ... Then he will know how the theoretical and deliberative virtues come to be the cause and principle for the coming to be of the practical virtues and arts. All this comes to be only through the practice of theoretical reflection and passage from one degree and rank to another (within the sciences).\(^61\)

Here al-Fārābī presents a strikingly distinct picture of virtue from the one above, that is, adherence to commonly shared morality. Philosophical virtue is based on theoretical knowledge, and is sharply distinguished from any common sense or religious notions of virtue. The position of virtue within the philosopher’s intellectual and moral progression is moreover placed at the very end of the philosophical education, that is, after all of theoretical philosophy, corresponding to the position of ethics within the Arabic philosophical curriculum. After the completion of theoretical philosophy, then, the student of philosophy “progresses to the practical part, and may begin to act the way he is supposed to act.”\(^62\) This is because, for al-Fārābī, ethical knowledge is founded on physical and metaphysical knowledge about the world, or the “degrees of existence and ranks of merit.” Ethical knowledge is essentially knowledge about happiness as man’s telos, or ultimate perfection (kamāl), and knowledge about the perfection of any being requires knowledge about its position within the hierarchy of being.\(^63\) Therefore, in the Philosophy of Aristotle, al-Fārābī states that man’s telos or happiness can only be discovered through finding his function within the whole of the cosmos, which requires physical and metaphysical knowledge about the world.\(^64\) In Principles of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City (Mabādī’ ārā’ ahl al-madīnā al-fādīla), al-Fārābī reiterates this idea of theoretical knowledge as a prerequisite for virtue in terms of the faculties of the soul: “When this happiness becomes known through theoretical reason and is set up as an aim and desired by the appetitive faculty, and when the deliberative faculty discovers what ought to be done in order to attain that with the assistance of the faculty of representation and the senses, and when those actions are performed

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\(^{61}\) Fusūl muntaza’a, §94, pp. 95–6.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., §94, p. 98.

\(^{63}\) Taḥṣīl al-sā’dā, §49, p. 81: “For every existent has been formed in order to attain the ultimate perfection (aṣṣā al-kamāl) that it may attain in accordance with its specific grade (rutba) within existence. Man’s specific perfection is called ultimate happiness (al-sā’āda al-quswā), and that of each individual man varies in accordance with his grade in humanity, and this is the ultimate happiness specific to that genus (of men).”

\(^{64}\) Falsafat Aristāfālīs, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut, 1961), p. 68.
by the instruments of the appetitive faculty, then the actions of man will be all good and noble.”65 Becoming virtuous then follows upon demonstrative knowledge about happiness as man’s end, deliberation about the means to attain that end, and the reformation of the appetites, and other sub-rational faculties, to serve for attaining that end. In other words, moral virtue is wholly instrumental with respect to attaining happiness.

If pre-philosophical virtue is based on religious or commonly shared opinions, while philosophical virtue is founded on demonstrative knowledge, how are the two related to each other? In a further passage of Aphorisms, it becomes clear that the commonly shared and philosophical concepts of virtue are at least relatively close to each other:

We posit two men: the first has learned all of what is contained in Aristotle’s books on the physical, logical, metaphysical, political, and mathematical sciences, but all or most of his actions are contrary to what is considered to be good according to the first opinion shared by all men (bādiʿ al-raʾy al-mushтарاک ‘inda al-jamīʿ). The second man is such that all of his actions are in accordance with what is considered to be good according to the first opinion shared by all men, but has no knowledge about the sciences that the first man has learned. This second man is closer to becoming a philosopher than the first, all of whose actions are contrary to what is considered to be good according to the first opinion shared by all men, for he is more capable of attaining what the first man has attained than the first man is capable of attaining what the second man has attained. For philosophy, according to the first opinion and in reality is for man to acquire the theoretical sciences, and for all of his actions to become in accordance with what is good according to the first common opinion and (what is good) in reality. He who only restricts himself to the theoretical sciences, without all of his actions being in accordance with what is held to be good by the common opinion, is prevented by the habit ingrained in him of performing the actions that are good according to the first opinion shared by all men. Therefore he is more likely to be prevented by his habit of his actions becoming in accordance with what is good in reality. But he who has habituated himself to the actions that are in accordance with what is held to be good according to the first opinion shared by all men is not prevented by his habit of learning the theoretical sciences or of his actions becoming in accordance with what is good in reality.66

For a devoted Aristotelian like al-Fārābī to claim that a virtuous but philosophically ignorant man is closer to being a philosopher than a non-virtuous man fully versed in Aristotelian philosophy is in itself surprising. But in addition, al-Fārābī defines the virtuous man as

66 Fuṣūl muntazaʾa, §98, pp. 100–1.
someone who adheres to the commonly shared notion of the good (jamīl). This is explained by the fact that, despite his theoretical knowledge, it is harder for the second man to habituate his soul towards what is good in reality (mā huwa fī al-ḥaqīqa jamīl) when his vicious actions are firmly established in him than it is for the virtuous man to acquire theoretical knowledge and philosophical virtue. Clearly, then, the commonly shared opinions about virtue are sufficiently close to the notion of virtue based on demonstrative knowledge, that the first is conducive to the latter. But why should the common-sense and philosophical ideas of virtue be harmonious with each other to such degree? One answer would be that ethical knowledge is inborn, which is a view that al-Fārābī holds to a degree.67 But while philosophical ethics may be founded on such primary knowledge, clearly people do not universally agree on the nature of virtue, and in particular the contents of happiness as man’s ultimate ethical end.68

The intimate relationship between commonly shared and philosophical virtue makes more sense when it is situated within the context of al-Fārābī’s political thought. Al-Fārābī is more famous as a political than as a moral philosopher, and for the most part he discusses ethics in a political context. Al-Fārābī is emphatic that happiness—or any kind of satisfactory existence for that matter—is only possible as part of a society.69 While ethics as a science has a universal and demonstrative part, its practical application to a particular time and place is imprecise, and is primarily the task of the political community through moral education (ta’dīb), by means of both persuasive and passionate arguments (al-aqāwīl al-ignā’iyyalinfī’āliyya) and coercive legislation.70 In the non-virtuous cities, the laws, customs, and opinions would habituate the would-be philosopher to non-virtuous dispositions, which is why Plato, according to al-Fārābī, decided that he must found a city based on philosophical principles.71 In contrast, in al-Fārābī’s virtuous city (al-madīna al-fādīla), around which his political philosophy revolves, the inhabitants’ shared

67 Al-Fārābī asserts the existence of ethical primary intelligibles in various works, as discussed by Druart in “Al-Fārābī, ethics, and first intelligibles,” which enables the rather un-Aristotelian notion of demonstrative ethics.

68 See Kitāb al-Tanbīth, §2, in Al-A’māl al-falsafiyya, p. 229, for the assertion that people agree about happiness as the highest end of man, but disagree about its contents. Al-Fārābī’s ignorant cities (al-madīna al-jāhiliyya) are, moreover, distinguished from the virtuous city by their identification of happiness with some form of false happiness, such as pleasure, wealth, honor, or power. See Al-Farabi on the Perfect State, pp. 254–6.


71 Falsafat Aflāṭūn, p. 19.
opinion about virtue is ultimately founded on philosophical knowledge. This is ensured by the existence of the philosopher-prophet, who is the founder of al-Fārābī’s virtuous religion (milla fādīla) and whose legislation is based on universal philosophical knowledge as well as a well-developed faculty of practical reasoning. The philosopher-prophets are like doctors of the soul who are capable of legislating for each nation, and each group within the nation, the precise psychical remedies that are most suitable for their particular condition. The practical part of al-Fārābī’s virtuous religion is then essentially an application of philosophical ethics to a particular political context. Within it the commonly shared and philosophical opinions about virtue would be entirely harmonious with each other since the former are derived from the latter.

It would then appear that al-Fārābī sees an ethical progression for the philosopher in the sense of a transition from common sense or religious virtue to a philosophically grounded one. The pre-philosophical character formation takes place primarily through the philosopher’s acceptance of the norms of the virtuous city or religion, whereas for the philosopher virtuous action is founded on demonstrative knowledge. But what is the more precise content of the virtuous life that the philosopher should live, and does it also involve a progression within the degree of virtue? Unlike al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī does not offer practical information on the degree to which the philosopher is allowed to satisfy his bodily desires and engage with the world. In fact, given al-Fārābī’s insistence on the necessity of moral virtue for the philosopher, his ethical writings are disappointingly meager in explaining what virtue is. In some texts, such as the Exhortation to the Way to Happiness (Kitāb al-Tanbih ‘alā sabīl al-sa‘āda) and Aphorisms, he presents man’s ethical goal as Aristotelian moderation, where virtue is defined as a mediate disposition between two excessive qualities. The list of specific virtues, such as courage (shajā‘a), temperance (‘iffa), and generosity (sakhā), are drawn

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72 See Kitāb al-Milla, p. 47.
73 See Fuṣūl muntazā‘a, §1–5, pp. 23–6, §21, p. 39; Kitāb al-Milla, pp. 56–9. It is instructive of al-Fārābī’s emphasis on the political context of ethics that he shifts the classical metaphor of philosophy or ethics as medicine of the soul to the political level. For the classical metaphor, see Martha Nussbaum, The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics (Prince ton, 1994), pp. 13–77, and for its employment in Arabic philosophy in the non-political sense, see Adamson, “Arabic tradition,” pp. 69–71 and id., “Health in Arabic ethical works.”
routinely from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, without much further reflection. Given al-Fārābī’s understanding of ethics as an imprecise science in its practical application and his political emphasis, al-Fārābī’s terseness makes sense. Al-Fārābī himself states that the lists of virtues are only meant as an illustration (ʿalā sabīl al-tamthīl) of the general principle. In *Exhortation*, al-Fārābī does, however, offer some practical advice on how to gradually habituate the psychical dispositions towards virtuous mediate dispositions. *Exhortation* is a clearly pre-philosophical work, which al-Fārābī presents as being introductory to logic, the first part of the philosophical curriculum. This would imply, firstly, that, besides adherence to religious morality, al-Fārābī accords ethical self-governance a role within pre-philosophical character formation, and, secondly, that he attaches Aristotelian moderation at least to the pre-philosophical stage of character training.

To make al-Fārābī’s ethical ideal more difficult to assess, however, he does not seem to consistently commit himself to the Aristotelian ideal of moderation. In his more theoretical works, there is no trace of the definition of virtue as a mediate disposition, but virtue is defined instrumentally as the dispositions or actions that lead to happiness. Moreover, al-Fārābī’s concept of happiness is extremely intellectualist. In *Virtuous City, Political Governance* (*Al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya*), and *Epistle on the Intellect* (*Al-Risāla fi al-ʿaql*), al-Fārābī defines happiness – man’s highest ethical goal – as purely contemplative:

Happiness means that the human soul reaches a degree of perfection in its existence where it is in no need of matter for its support, since it becomes one of the incorporeal things and of the immaterial substances and remains in that state continuously for ever.78

For al-Fārābī, happiness is ultimately a state in the afterlife where the intellect is in any case liberated of the body. But al-Fārābī sets cutting off the dependence from body as a pre-condition for the soul

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75 *Kitāb al-Tanbh*, §10, in *Al-Aʿmāl al-falsafīyya*, p. 241. See also *Nicomachean Ethics* (I, 1094b13ff.) for Aristotle’s assertion of the imprecise nature of ethics.
78 *Al-Fārābī on the Perfect State*, pp. 204–6. A similar definition of happiness is given in *Risāla fi al-ʿaql*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut, 1938), p. 31 and *Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*, p. 32: “The function of the Active Intellect is to watch over the rational animal and endeavor to have him reach the highest level of perfection that man can reach, namely, ultimate happiness, which is for man to arrive at the level of the Active Intellect. The way that this occurs is by becoming separate from bodies, without needing anything below (whether it be body or matter or accident) in order to subsist, and by remaining in that state of perfection forever.”
becoming an immortal substance, meaning that, for the philosopher, the ‘afterlife’ should in fact start already in this life. Since for al-Fārābī the human essence is the theoretical intellect, this is primarily an epistemological state. Upon attaining its perfection, or the state of acquired intellect (al-ʿaql al-mustafād), the theoretical reason dispenses with senses and imagination for acquisition of intelligible knowledge. But is the soul’s independence of the body only an epistemological state, or does it also involve liberation from bodily affections more generally? Virtuous City defines virtue and virtuous actions as the means for reaching happiness without introducing the Aristotelian doctrine of moderation. The state of ultimate happiness is further identified with becoming alike with the incorporeal Intellecst of the celestial region, connected to the ideal of purely contemplative incorporeal existence. This would seem to involve an ideal of virtue going beyond Aristotelian moderation.

In the Aphorisms, al-Fārābī attributes to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle a sharp distinction between the physical and contemplative lives:

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are of the opinion that human beings have two lives. The subsistence of the first is due to nourishment and the other external things which we need today for our survival. This is the first life. The other is that in which the subsistence is due to its essence without its requiring for the subsistence of its essence things external to it, but it is sufficient in itself for its continued preservation. This is the afterlife (al-ḥayāt al-akhīra). For a human being has two perfections, first and last. The last one is attained for us in this life and in the afterlife when it is preceded before by the first perfection in this life of ours. The first perfection is that a man does the actions of all the virtues, not that he merely possesses virtue without performing its actions, for the perfection consists in his acting, not that he acquires the dispositions (malakāt) from which the actions ensue … By means of this perfection, the last perfection is attained for us, which is

79 Risāla fī al-ʿaql, p. 31. See Herbert Alan Davidson, Alfarābī, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect (New York, 1992), pp. 44ff., for al-Fārābī’s somewhat divergent accounts of the intellect.
80 This is stated explicitly in Fūsūl muntazaʿa (§81, pp. 86–7): “For this [the soul dispensing with the bodily faculties] pertains only to the soul specific to the human being, namely, the theoretical intellect. For when it reaches this state, it becomes separated from the body regardless of whether that body is living in that it is nourished and has sense perception, or whether the faculty by which it is nourished and by which it perceives has already been abolished. For if it no longer needs sense perception or imagination in any of its actions, it has already reached the afterlife.”
81 See the passage quoted in the previous note.
82 Alfarābī on the Perfect State, p. 206.
83 See Alfarābī, The Political Writings (p. 25, note 22) for the manuscripts supporting this reading, as opposed to the one chosen by Najjar and Douglas M. Dunlop, Al-Ḥarābī, Fūsūl al-madanī, Aphorisms of the Statesman (Cambridge, 1961), p. 39: “The last results to us not in this life but in the afterlife.”
ultimate happiness, that is the absolute good (al-khayr al-āl al-itlāq). It is what is preferred and desired for its own sake and not – at any moment at all – preferred for the sake of something else. The rest of what is preferred is preferred only for the sake of its usefulness for attaining happiness, and each thing becomes good when it is useful for attaining happiness. And whatever obstructs from it in some way is bad.84

In this passage the two lives form a progression where virtuous actions and the Aristotelian 'external goods' only form part of the first life and are merely instrumental for attaining the ultimate perfection.85 The final stage of contemplative life is purely self-sufficient, and within it the external goods, or states related to the lower psychological faculties, have no independent value. Al-Fārābī does not, however, state that bodily desires or emotions should be completely eradicated. In another aphorism he rather states that the "accidents of the soul" (awārid al-nafs) are neither good nor bad in themselves, but only insofar as they are employed to gain either happiness or its contrary.86 As we have seen, for al-Fārābī virtue as the culmination of philosophy is founded on demonstrative knowledge about happiness, and it is that knowledge together with practical deliberation and directing of the appetites towards the goal of contemplative happiness that enables virtue. It would then appear that the virtuous actions leading to contemplative perfection would involve orienting the appetites wholly towards contemplation, the highest good, and only minimally towards nutrition and other bodily activities that enable theoretical activity.

Is the Aristotelian ideal of moderation then to be interpreted as only the first stage of 'political virtue,' which the philosopher, pursuing


85 Al-Fārābī seems to be using the terms first and second perfection (kamāl) here differently from their usual technical epistemological sense (see Alfarabī on the Perfect State, pp. 204–6). Normally he identifies first perfection (al-istikmāl al-awwal) with the initial stage of the intellect where it possesses only the primary intelligibles (al-maʿqūl al-uwal) that make theoretical thought possible. The second perfection is identified with the stage of acquired intellect, or fully actualized thought, which al-Fārābī again identifies with ultimate happiness. Although first perfection is what enables the attainment of second perfection, or happiness, here al-Fārābī defines first perfection in terms of virtue, rather than in epistemological terms.

86 *Fusūl muntaza‘a*, §75, p. 82. In an introduction to *Eisagōgē*, attributed to al-Fārābī, and translated in Douglas M. Dunlop, “The existence and definition of philosophy. From an Arabic text ascribed to al-Fārābī,” *Iraq*, 13, no. 2 (1951): 76–94, al-Fārābī does, however, explicate the Platonic definition of philosophy as "practice for death" as follows (p. 89): "We say that death and life for the philosophers are of two kinds: natural death and death of the will, natural life and life of the will. Natural death is separation of the form from the matter, I mean of the soul from the body, death of the will is a man's killing his desires and making his intellectual faculty victorious and rendering it, as it were, king in his body, ruling over all the bodily faculties and regulating their actions." To attenuate this, however, later on he cites the Platonic cardinal virtues as means between excessive and defective dispositions (p. 92).
purely contemplative life, in the end surpasses? It is certainly interesting that al-Fārābī omits the Aristotelian doctrine of mediate dispositions in the passages where he discusses contemplative happiness. The idea of grades of virtue could be further supported by al-Fārābī’s political writings, where the seemingly unified ethical goal of happiness in fact diverges into a plurality of goals since each class within the city is oriented towards the perfection, or happiness, corresponding to its “degree in humanity.”

Virtue is defined as means to happiness, and one could assume that different goals also imply different means. Philosophers are the only ones capable of attaining purely contemplative happiness, and their degree of virtue would be correspondingly higher. In any case, al-Fārābī’s view of the virtuous philosopher does not involve any such ascetic ideal that would imply social isolation, as he – on the contrary – requires that the philosopher should share his theoretical and moral perfection with others. But as O’Meara has shown, this is not at all contradictory with the Neoplatonic grades of virtue, which are accompanied by the necessity of the philosopher sacrificing his purely contemplative existence by returning to the “Platonic cave.”

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this study I have argued that both al-Rāzī and al-Fārābī view the ethical development of the philosopher as involving a progression in a double sense. Both adopt the Neoplatonic distinction between pre-philosophical and philosophical ethics. The ethical education of the philosopher then proceeds from pre-philosophical character formation to the practice of philosophical virtue, where the latter is deeper in the sense that it ensues from understanding the theoretical principles underlying that practice. While al-Rāzī’s Spiritual Medicine offers practical advice for pre-philosophical character training, al-Fārābī accords the virtuous religion or polity the primary, although not exclusive, role in implementing it.

The second aspect of the progression takes place within the degree of virtue required of the philosopher, which for al-Rāzī and al-Fārābī proceeds in contrary directions. For al-Rāzī, the moderately ascetic requirements of Spiritual Medicine reflect the necessity of harsher means of habituation at the beginning of character training in order to enforce the control of reason over the appetitive soul and attaining the stable psychical disposition permitting the higher license present in Philosophical Life. In contrast, for al-Fārābī the progression

87 See Tahṣīl al-saʿāda, §49, p. 81.
88 O’Meara, Platonopolis, pp. 73ff.
appears somewhat similar to the Neoplatonic grades of virtue. The Aristotelian moderation, which in *Exhortation* is connected to character training in a clearly pre-philosophical sense, provides only the means for reaching the purely contemplative existence.