

ISLAMIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: ITS BEGINNINGS AND GOALS

Political philosophers in the medieval Islamic tradition had to contend with a major controversy about the relationship between reason and revelation. However much they might have learned from Plato and Aristotle, they could not ignore the influence of Islam and its new teaching. In seeking to further philosophical investigation, they had to overcome the claims of theologians and jurists that faith was enough and reasoning – especially when it was inspired by pagan Greeks – pernicious. So powerful is the controversy that it continues in our own time.

Alfarabi (870-950) must surely be credited with having founded political philosophy. To appreciate how he did that and what he understands by it, we will study two writings usually cited as evidence that he was a proponent of political theology, not political philosophy: *Political Regime* and *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*. We will also study part of a work that looks to be an introduction to metaphysics, but is not – *Book of Letters*. As an introduction to these works and to see how Alfarabi thought these books should be read, we will look at his intriguing *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* plus what appears to be a general statement of his understanding of these two writers, *Selected Aphorisms*. These writings set forth what may be termed the beginnings of political philosophy in the medieval Islamic tradition.

Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-1198), the justly famous commentator on Aristotle, carried on the project started by Alfarabi in the second and third parts of a remarkable trilogy – *Decisive Treatise* and *Uncovering the Methods of Proofs with respect to the Beliefs of the Religious Community*. In both, he shows how to preserve the sound approach to philosophy introduced by Alfarabi. We will read together only the second part, the *Decisive Treatise*, but students are encouraged to read the third, the *Uncovering*, on their own.

The questions raised by these two authors and their opponents, surely as important today as when first formulated, must be examined on their terms so that their debate becomes our own.

To receive credit for this course, two papers are required. One, to be presented or handed in at the beginning of one of the class sessions 2-14, should provide a critical analysis of the material for that session in about 1750-2000 words (7-8 double-spaced pages). The other, of 3500-3750 words in length (14-15 double-spaced pages), should be a comprehensive investigation of Alfarabi's or Averroes's teaching or some central point that arises in it. It is due on May 16, that is, one week after the last day of classes.

For the record:

1. The UMD Code of Academic Integrity will be enforced. In short, no cheating. See www.inform.edu/CampusInfo/Departments/po/code_acinteg.html.
2. Students with disabilities should see the instructor. Their needs will be accommodated.
3. The UMD policy of respecting the religious observances of students will be followed.

Students are strongly encouraged to take advantage of office hours and make contact outside of class with me, both to become acquainted and to discuss any problems that may arise. In addition to posted hours, I will be happy to make special appointments.

READING SCHEDULE

CLASS 1, January 24 INTRODUCTION plus Alfarabi, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, Ch. 5

CLASS 2, January 31 Alfarabi, *Book of Religion*

CLASS 3, February 7 Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness*, Parts I-II

FEBRUARY 14, NO CLASS

CLASS 4, February 21 Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness*, Parts III-IV

CLASS 5, February 28 Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato* and *Philosophy of Aristotle*, Secs. i-ii

CLASS 6, March 7 Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Aristotle*, Secs. iii-xix

CLASS 7, March 14 Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms*

MARCH 21: SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS

CLASS 8, March 28 Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms*

CLASS 9, April 4 Alfarabi, *Political Regime*

CLASS 10, April 11 Alfarabi, *Political Regime*

CLASS 11, April 18 Alfarabi, *Virtuous City*

CLASS 12, April 25 Alfarabi, *Virtuous City*

CLASS 13, May 2 Alfarabi, *Book of Letters*, Part Two

CLASS 14, May 9 Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*

BOOKS TO ORDER

Alfarabi, Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) ISBN 0-8014-9716-1. \$14.00

Alfarabi, The Political Writings: "Selected Aphorisms" and Other Texts, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) ISBN 0-8014-8913-X. \$19.95

Averroes, The Book of the Decisive Treatise, Determining the Connection Between the Law and Wisdom, and Epistle Dedicatory, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), ISBN 0-8425-2479-7. Distributed by University of Chicago Press; \$24.95.

Alfarabi, Political Regime and Virtuous City will be made available in a xerox packet.

Recommended

Averroes, *Uncovering the Methods of Proofs with respect to the Beliefs of the Religious Community = Faith and Reason in Islam: Averroes' Exposition of Religious Arguments*, trans. Ibrahim Najjar (One World Publishing: Oxford, 2001), ISBN 1-85168-263-5, \$23.95.

Muhsin S. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy: Essays in Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), ISBN 0-226-50186-8, \$ 45.00.

Joshua Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religion: Introducing Alfarabi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), ISBN 13: 978-0-7914-6690-2, \$ 19.95.