ambiguous: Is it a discovery or a revelation? And is the role of the philosopher merely to be a prophet, warning about the consequences of not turning toward the Good? Mitchell asserts that religion and philosophy are members of the same genus (p. 18) but never clarifies what the specific difference might be (see, however, pp. 139–44).

Perhaps because he emphasizes philosophy's proximity to religion, Mitchell seems to deny that there is a tension between philosophy, or divine reason, and the city. This is brought out textually in his glossing over the first two waves of the regime in speech (p. 60); his silence about the ultimate decline of the regime in speech (*Republic* 546a–e); and in at least three places where he substitutes "philosophy" for the rule of philosopher-kings as the cure to our ills (pp. 50, 144, 193). Moreover, his emphasis on the necessity of replacing the ancestral pattern with the divine pattern overlooks not only the difficulty of replacing the ancestral pattern but also perhaps the desirability of doing so: "A complete break is needed. The philosopher understands this" (p. 108). Might the philosopher also understand the impracticality or undesirability of doing so, given the difficulty of turning others toward the divine pattern?

Mitchell thinks not: He says that both the philosopher and tyrant recognize the desirability—for admittedly different reasons—of dispensing with such things as filial piety (p. 69, 108). But Socrates, however much he desired to replace the mortal pattern of Athens with the divine, was always careful in how he raised questions about the difference between the ancestral and the good. The *Republic* takes place in the dark, outside of the city, after Cephalus leaves.

Despite these hesitations, *Plato's Fable* represents an original and worthwhile contribution to scholarship on the *Republic*. Mitchell certainly will find no favor with the postmodern souls he gently likens to tyrants (p. 174), and his account of liberalism will raise the ire of its theorists (see especially his critique of rights on pp. 115–19). The book's most natural audience, ancient political theorists, may be dismayed that he has taken little note of current Platonic scholarship. But it would be a shame if Mitchell's words fell, as he claims those of socrates do, on deaf ears.

–Kevin M. Cherry

THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

Joshua Parens: *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions: Introducing Alfarabi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. Pp. ix, 170. $55.00, hardcover.)

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Abu Nasr Muhammad Alfarabi (870–950 C.E.) was recognized as a celebrated philosopher, "the greatest indeed that the Muslims ever had," in the

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words of the Muslim biographer al-Qifti (1172–1248). Born in Transoxiana, (Turkestan), Alfarabi moved to Baghdad in the first part of the tenth century, where he pursued his study and writing. At Baghdad, a great center of learning under the Abbasids, he indulged in the study of the "philosophical sciences," tutored by Christian (Nestorian) scholars and translators of Greek philosophy, and also at Harran (ancient Carrhae), a center of pagan sciences and rationalistic philosophy. Alfarabi was also known as the "Second Master," next only to Aristotle, and the father of Islamic philosophy.

After centuries of neglect, Alfarabi has been enjoying widespread revival and popularity among scholars. Professor Leo Strauss of the University of Chicago encouraged some of his students (beginning with this reviewer) to explore the philosophy of this great Muslim thinker, in particular his political philosophy. Through his study of the philosophy of Maimonides (1135–1204), Strauss came to appreciate Alfarabi's interpretations of Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato and Aristotle. In a now famous letter, Maimonides wrote his translator, Ibn Tibbon, "Do not busy yourself with books ... except for what was composed by the wise man Abu Nasr Alfarabi. For, in general, everything that he composed—and particularly his book on the *Principles of Beings* [also known as *The Political Regime*]—*c'est de la farine pure*." (quoted in Leo Strauss, "Quelques Remarques sur la Science Politique de Maimonides et de Farabi," *Revue des Etudes Juives* C [1936], p. 5). Prompted by Strauss's advice, Dr. Muhsin Mahdi of Harvard University, in addition to editing, translating, and commenting on Alfarabi's philosophy, has supervised a number of young scholars, including the author of the book under review, to investigate various aspects of his philosophy.

As a Muslim philosopher, Alfarabi sought to introduce Greek philosophy, in particular the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, into Islamic society and culture. For him, "these two sages are the fountain heads of philosophy, the originators of its beginnings and fundamentals, the fulfillers of its ends and branches." It was mainly in Plato's political philosophy that Alfarabi (*Alfarabi: The Political Writings, Selected Aphorisms and other Texts*. Translated and annotated by Charles E. Buttersworth [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press], 125–126) found the mechanisms for reconciling Islam with the philosophy of the pagans. This is the central concern that characterizes Alfarabi's teaching. Islam, being not only a faith but also a law (Shari'a) that envisages a virtuous political regime governed by God's laws, is compared to Plato's virtuous regime, wherein the philosopher-ruler is identified with the imam, prince or prophet-legislator.

In the introduction, Parens tells us that his book "is intended as an introduction to Alfarabi's thought ... through an analysis of his treatise *Attainment of Happiness* (AH)" (p. 1). Knowing that AH is an introduction to Alfarabi's summaries of Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies, one may safely infer that Alfarabi considered philosophy and not religion as the way

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to true happiness. In this important treatise, Alfarabi makes his position on the relation between philosophy and religion clear. He says that philosophy is "prior to religion in time," and that "religion is an imitation of philosophy" (*Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*. Translated with an Introduction by Mushin Mahdi [The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962], 6). However, religion remains essential, even indispensable, to the philosopher-ruler in order to represent the "beings" to the multitude in images and similes they can understand, as Parens shows in this essay.

If the *Republic* is Alfarabi's main focus in introducing philosophy into Islamic culture—through which the philosopher-king serves as a model for the prophet-legislator—an analysis of Plato's scheme becomes essential. In the chapter "The Impossibility of the City in the *Republic*," the author, following the familiar arguments about the impediments to the realization of the philosopher-kingship adumbrated in the discussion between Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus, articulates in depth those areas of immediate interest and relevance to Alfarabi's project.

In the process, he adds a number of serious and insightful reflections on how Plato was understood or misunderstood by Western thinkers, such as Rousseau, Machiavelli, and Karl Popper. Rather than viewing the *Republic* "as an ideal in need of realization or a totalitarian regime," he views it "as a cross between a standard and a cautionary tale" (p. 13). This is also how he views Alfarabi's virtuous world regime. Although he recalls Socrates' statement "that it would require some form of divine intervention for kings to become enamored of philosophy," he strongly endorses the seriousness of the effort to construct an ideal city in speech. It is worth noting that for Alfarabi, the realization of such a virtuous regime is a matter of chance; he uses the secular Arabic term *ittafaqa* (by chance) to express Socrates' skepticism.

When Alfarabi lived and wrote, the Muslim state or empire extended from India to Spain, which meant that he was apt to think in more universalistic dimensions than those of a city-state. This predilection, needless to say, multiplies the impediments to the realization of the philosopher-kingship. In addition to Socrates' list of impediments, such as the animosity between the philosopher and the multitude, the desire of the politically ambitious to rule, the reluctance of the philosopher to be politically involved or his unsuitability to rule, or even whether philosophy is necessary to the "balanced management of the city," Alfarabi was confronted with a vast geographical expanse, a number of ethnic and religious groups incorporated in the Muslim state, different languages and dialects, and varied climates, all of which he took into account.

A more serious philosophical difficulty in realizing a virtuous regime is what Parens calls "tension within the virtues," such as "the tension between the need for the philosophic ruler to possess warrior hardness and philosophic softness" (p. 1). Elaborating further, he says: "When Alfarabi … includes within character formation compulsion and even compulsion of nations, we begin to feel the strain between the philosopher

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and the ruler" (pp. 41, 42). The question of the compulsion of nations leads to the discussion of jihad, Islamic holy war. Alfarabi uses "war" and "jihad" interchangeably. Lest the reader rushes to associate this with the contemporary jihad of the radical Islamists, Parens points out that Alfarabi's concept of jihad has no aggressive connotations. Force is necessary to maintain order and defend the community against aggression. In the end, the role of religion will be to represent the beings to the multitude and help to maintain order and peace as much as it is possible.

The ultimate difficulty the philosopher faces in managing the good city or nation is that he "lacks access to the highest metaphysical knowledge about God" (p. 52). If this is so, asks Parens, "[H]ow can philosophers proffer fitting images for the vulgar?" (p. 1). The answer, provided by Muhsin Mahdi, seems to be that Alfarabi, by including political science in theoretical perfection, suggests that "[philosophers] can distinguish between a lower and higher theoretical perfection, the lower being practical and the higher more strictly theoretical." According to Mahdi, Alfarabi seems to suggest that the lower perfection can serve as the "foundation of right action, even in the absence of a comprehensive knowledge of all beings" (p. 1). In other words, philosophy is for the elite, and religion is for teaching moral virtues to the masses. Yet this may prove to be impossible. In that case, "the alternative of the private pursuit of knowledge is all that remains" (p. 52).

The three key parts of Parens's argument focus on Alfarabi's comparison of Islam's universalistic ambition to the virtuous city of the *Republic*, on the requirement of every city and every nation to become virtuous in its own right, and, this being remote if not impossible, "each religion must be suited in each time and place to the national character of each people." He concludes: "A virtuous regime of the inhabited world, then, would have to include a multiplicity of virtuous religions" (pp. 97–98).

Finally, is constructing an ideal political regime in speech a futile attempt? Not really. The benefit of the inquiry, Parens judiciously says, is that "we learn about the limits of what can be achieved in public life about human nature" (p. 14). If the philosophers are unable or unwilling to rule, "[T]heir works in political philosophy enable them to engage in philosophy while also serving their communities." He adds: "Alfarabi is not spinning out castles in the sand pointlessly. He teaches us as much, if not more, about politics by constructing such a regime in speech than he would laying out possible political mechanisms for a particular country or group of countries" (37).

The paradox of Alfarabi, like that of Averroes, is that he is appreciated in the West but ignored in his own country. There has been no other time during which the Arab-Muslim world has needed the rationalistic philosophy of these two sages more than today. Professor Parens has written a timely book. It is thoughtfully written and well-documented, with deep sensitivity to the human condition, in particular in the homeland of Alfarabi.

–Fauzi M. Najjar

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