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## AL-FARABI AND THE QUESTION ON EXISTENCE

Farabi's (also Al Farabi) fundamental question is the question of existence. Metaphysics, physics, ethics, politics and civil science of Farabi can be understood and evaluated within the problem of existence. Exploration of the meaning of existence has overshadowed his whole philosophy. Farabi must be seen as the systematic beginning of Islamic Philosophy not as its fountain-head. Farabi owes his own ontological system more to the religious teachings, Islamic culture and thought and Iranian wisdom, heritage and tradition. Precisely speaking, main and true origin of Islamic philosophy is not Greece rather Quranic verses and prophetic traditions as well as prayers and scriptural texts. Emergence or uncovered-ness of existence in Farabi becomes connected with thinking. Wherever there is no thinking, existence will be in covered-ness or hiddenness. In search of the meaning of existence, Farabi does not ask of its quiddity (what-is-it-ness). Question of quiddity of existence is basically wrong and makes one to get stuck in the swamp of verbalism and more dangerous than it, turns the existence into an object.

Existence is not separated from thinking. Existence is not an object along with other objects in the outside world so that we can ask of its nature or quiddity. Existence is of uncovered-ness (Unverborgenheit) only within the horizon of thinking. Question of quiddity or what-is-it-ness of existence is tantamount to its forgetfulness and covered-ness. Has Farabi had any innovation in the domain of ontological issues that would make him distinguished by us as compared to his predecessors? Does he speak of a type of novel ontology that can serve as an alternative to the existing ones? What are differences between his philosophy and those of Plato and Aristotle? Are we encountered with different definitions, types of notions, categories or approaches in Farabi? If there are such inventions, would they be to the extent that could they lead to the establishment of a system within the sphere of ontology? Examination of these questions shows that Farabi has a distinguished concern in philosophy different from those of the Greek philosophers. Religious teachings, paying attention to the role and influence of oriental wisdom or Sophia Iranica in philosophical thinking, search for true wisdom and separation from Greek notions and finally providing a theory of synthesis and reconciliation of religion and philosophy constitute Farabi's main approach.

**Key words:** Farabi, Existence, Epistemic Detachment, Greek Tradition, Aristotle.

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**Әл-Фараби және болмыс туралы мәселе**

Фарабидің (сонымен қатар әл-Фарабидің) негізгі мәселесі – болмыс туралы мәселе. Фарабидің метафизикасын, физикасын, этикасын, саясаты мен азаматтық ғылымын болмыс мәселесі аясында түсінуге және бағалауға болады. Болмыстың мағынасын зерттеу оның бүкіл философиясына көлеңке түсірді. Фарабиді исламдық философияның қайнар көзі емес, жүйелі бастауы деп қарау керек. Фарабидің онтологиялық жүйесі діни ілімдер мен ислам мәдениетіне, ирандық даналығына, мұрасы мен дәстүріне сүйеніп құрастырылған. Дәлірек айтсақ, ислам философиясының негізгі және шынайы қайнар көзі Греция емес, Құран аяттары мен пайғамбарлық дәстүрлер, сондай-ақ дұғалар мен қасиетті мәтіндер. Фарабидегі болмыстың пайда болуы немесе ашылуы адамның ойлауымен байланысты. Ой жоқ жерде болмыс көрінбейді немесе жасырылады. Болмыстың мәнін зерттегенде Фараби оның мәнін табуға талпынады. Болмыстың мәні туралы мәселе түбегейлі қате болып табылады және адамды вербализмге итеруге мәжбүр етеді және оған қарағанда қауіпті, болмысты нысанға айналдырады.

Болмыс ойлаудан бөлінбейді. Экзистенция сыртқы әлемнің басқа объектілерімен тең дәрежеде нысан болып табылмайды, сондықтан оның табиғаты немесе сапасына таң қалуға болады. Болмыс ойлау көкжиегінде ғана ашылады. Болмыстың мәні немесе мәні туралы мәселе оның ұмытшақтығы мен құпиялылығымен пара-пар. Фарабидің онтологиялық мәселелер саласында оны бізден өзгелермен салыстырғанда ерекшелендіретін жаңалығы болды ма? Ол бұрынғыларға балама бола алатын жаңа онтологияның түрі туралы айтып отыр ма? Оның

философиясы мен Платон мен Аристотель философиясының айырмашылығы неде? Біз Фарабидің әртүрлі анықтамаларын, ұғымдарының түрлерін, категорияларын немесе тәсілдерін кездестіреміз бе? Егер осындай өнертабыстар болса, олар онтология саласында жүйені құруға әкелетін дәрежеде бола ма? Бұл мәселелерді зерттеу Фарабидің философияға деген ерекше қызығушылығы бар екенін көрсетеді, бұл грек философтарының мүдделерінен ерекшеленеді. Шығыс даналығының немесе *Sophia Iranica* философиялық ойлаудағы рөлі мен әсеріне, шынайы даналықты іздеу мен грек ұғымдарынан алшақтыққа және, ақырында, дін мен философияның синтезі мен үйлесімділігі теориясын ұсынатын діни ілімдер – осының бәрі Фарабидің негізгі тәсілін құрайды.

**Түйін сөздер:** Фараби, болмыс, эпистемалық бөлік, грек дәстүрі, Аристотель.

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### **Аль-Фараби и вопрос о существовании**

Фундаментальный вопрос Фараби (также аль-Фараби) – это вопрос о существовании. Метафизику, физику, этику, политику и гражданскую науку Фараби можно понять и оценить в контексте проблемы о существовании. Исследование о смысле существования охватило всю его философию. Фараби следует рассматривать как систематическое начало исламской философии, а не как ее источник. Фараби больше обязан своей онтологической системой религиозным учениям, исламской культуре и мысли, а также иранской мудрости, наследию и традициям. Точнее говоря, основным и истинным источником исламской философии является не Греция, а коранические стихи и пророческие традиции, а также молитвы и священные тексты. Возникновение или раскрытие существования у Фараби связывается с мышлением человека. Там, где нет мышления, существование будет покрыто или скрыто. В поисках смысла существования Фараби не спрашивает его качества (того, что есть). Вопрос о сущности существования в корне неверен и заставляет увязнуть в вербализме и, что еще более опасно, превращает существование в объект.

Существование неотделимо от мышления. Существование не является объектом наравне с другими объектами внешнего мира, поэтому мы можем задать вопрос о его природе или качестве. Существование раскрыто только в пределах горизонта мышления. Вопрос о сущности или о сущности существования равносителен его забвению и скрытности. Было ли у Фараби какое-либо новшество в области онтологических проблем, которое сделало бы его отличным от нас по сравнению с его предшественниками? Говорит ли он о типе новой онтологии, которая может служить альтернативой существующим? В чем разница между его философией и философией Платона и Аристотеля? Встречаются ли нам разные определения, типы понятий, категории или подходы самого Фараби? Если есть такие новшества, будут ли они в той степени, в которой они могут привести к созданию системы в сфере онтологии? Изучение этих вопросов показывает, что Фараби имеет особую заинтересованность в философии, отличающуюся от интересов греческих философов. Религиозные учения, обращающие внимание на роль и влияние восточной мудрости или *Sophia Iranica* в философском мышлении, поиск истинной мудрости и отделения от греческих понятий и, наконец, обеспечение теории синтеза и примирения религии и философии, всё это составляет основной подход Фараби.

**Ключевые слова:** Фараби, существование, эпистемическая непривязанность, греческая традиция, Аристотель.

### **Existence as the Core Philosophical Theme in Farabi:**

Farabi's concentration on existence is different from Aristotelian perspective. Farabi has chosen existence as the basis of his philosophical reflections and offered an a priori categorization of existence which was not either of any background by Greeks or did not represent the key theme for philosophical reflections in Greece. The difference that Farabi has noticed between existence and quiddity, moreover, does not have any background in Greece at all. This type of reflections led to a new understanding

of existence and invention of theory of hierarchy of existence and analogical gradation. Existence forms the very foundation of Farabi's philosophy. There is no such foundation or basis in Greece. By his innovative question of existence, Farabi formed a new horizon in philosophy and this is exactly why he is known to us as the founder of this philosophy. Farabi's groundbreaking philosophical reflections on existence appear in "*Al Huruf*" (Letters) and "*Fusus Al Hikmah*" (Gems of Wisdom). It is needless to say that this innovativeness can only be shown through comparison of Farabi's ideas with Plato

and Aristotle. The study of other works by Farabi like "*Al Taliqaat*" (Annotations), "*Aghraz Ma ba'd al Tabiah*" (Intentions of Aristotle's Metaphysics), "*Fi Maa'ni AL 'Aql*" (On Senses of Reason), "*Sharh Al 'Ebarah*" (A Commentary of Aristotle's Analytics) and Farabi's Collected Essays, can be of help and influence in clarification of this approach and philosophy. However, examination of the role and influence of religious teachings and Ancient Persia's wisdom better known as "Khosrowani" or "Imperial" knowledge can be a creative problem in the formation of Farabi's specific thoughts in ontology. In Book IV (Γ) of Metaphysics, Aristotle begins the first chapter as follows:

*"There is a science which studies Being qua Being, and the properties inherent in it in virtue of its own nature"* (Aristotle, Fifth Edition, 2010:86). Aristotle continues to argue that "no other science is responsible for studying the being qua being as a whole".

Farabi's difference with Aristotle can be sought for in the former's attention to existence as the core theme and the latter's omission of Existence because of being concerned with the existent. Reduction of existence into substance, accidents, qualities and privation in second chapter of Book IV can be clearly seen. Anyway, in this regard, we have to discuss Farabi's perspective of existence as compared with the ideas of such philosophers as Plato and Aristotle in order to discern their differences.

Farabi's effort for grounding philosophy on existence is also an indication of his delicate and precise understanding of this science as well as his knowledge of the fundamental significance of existence. It is far too clear that Farabi is struggling to establish Islamic philosophy. Those who consider him to be a follower of Plato or Aristotle do not have a substantial knowledge of Farabi's philosophy. Many orientalist (despite their valuable efforts) have accepted Farabi's being an Aristotelian or neo-Platonist without a precise study of his philosophy as a presupposition.

#### **Question on Meaning of Existence:**

Farabi's concentration on the truth of existence has exerted fundamental impacts on Islamic philosophy. As Professor Nasr has demonstrated it in his many works, existence in its genuine sense should be used to designate the true content of Islamic ontology instead of turning it to a brand of a humanist philosophy. Achievements of Avicenna, Sohrewardi and Mulla Sadra concerning existence despite their differences with Farabi's viewpoint are influenced by Farabi's main approach. Farabi has laid the very

basis of philosophy upon the meaning of existence and considered it to be the true foundation of philosophy. One can see the importance of existence in Mulla Sadra's Kitab Al Masha'er who stipulates that existence is the pole and axis of philosophy, science of monotheism and resurrection and one's ignorance of existence would be tantamount to ignorance of the major pillars of divine knowledge. Without existence one cannot speak of existents (Mulla Sadra).

Perhaps among Muslim philosophers, the search for the meaning of existence is considered to be the most fundamental theme due to the pivotal role of the problem of divine emanation and levels of existence, but it is still Farabi who has highlighted the importance of this question. In his question of the meaning of being, Farabi returns to Khosrowani Wisdom and Sophia Iranica and of course, he is also devoted to Sharia. Oriental Wisdom believes that the genuine encounter with existence is intuitive not verbal, conceptual and definitional. For Muslim philosophers, truth of existence is merely understandable through intuition and esoteric perception not by definition or proof and words. In the essay entitled "*Al Da'awi al Qalbiyah*" [Cordial Claims] he argues that existence is a truth which is perceived without the mediation of any notion (Farabi, First Edition, 2008:117).

It is an important issue that got flourished and highlighted in the philosophy of Avicenna and Sohrewardi. Upon reflection on oriental thinking of Avicenna and Sohrewardi, we can better understand the significance of Farabi's effort and approach.

Farabi pioneered a method in philosophy that turned to the intellectual approach of the philosophers after him. He begins with linguistic analysis and then proceeds to discuss epistemology and finally he ends by ontology. Basically no Muslim philosopher can turn to ontological debates without certain linguistic and epistemological reflections.

#### **System of Ontology:**

Speaking of system as regards Farabi's Ontology is simultaneously difficult and significant. One needs to ask: whether Farabi has developed a new fundamental ontological perspective contradistinguished from Greek ontology based on his ontological musings upon a basis different from the Greek tradition? What are differences of his understanding of existence with Plato or Aristotle? Are we encountered with different definitions, types of notions, categories or approaches in Farabi? If there were such inventions, have they been so strong and dependable that they would have led to establishing of a system in the sphere of ontology? Our examination of

these questions will show that Farabi in philosophy has a special concern that is different from those of the Greek philosophers. Again I insist that religious doctrines, concentration on the role and influence of oriental wisdom or Iran in philosophical thinking, paying attention to genuine wisdom and separation from Greek notions and finally compilation of a theory of synthesis and reconciliation of religion and philosophy constitute Farabi's main approach. One needs to ask: why do Farabi scholars including the orientologists and Iranian thinkers consider Farabi to be a Platonist or Aristotelian or even Neo-Platonist? There is no doubt that Farabi read their works and knew them well insofar as he tries to refine the errors of the translators. The most prominent example of this can be found in Farabi's treatise entitled "Intentions of Aristotle's Metaphysics". This short essay of five pages simultaneously struggles to refine the perspective of translators and explain the intentions of the work and the subject of wisdom. At the beginning of this essay, Farabi voices his discontent with existing translations and commentaries and writes:

"Our intention in this treatise is to explain the goals and intentions which are pursued by Aristotle's Metaphysics. Many believe that this book discusses God, reason and soul and they think that metaphysics is a divine science and this is why the readers and researchers of this work have become surprised and lost their path while it is primarily concerned with themes that do not have anything to do with the science of divinity and only in Book XI there are some discussions in this regard" (Farabi, 1920:1).

We see that Farabi in this introductory note has excoriated both translators and Al Kindi whom he believed not to have a genuine understanding of philosophy and Aristotle too.

#### **Existence; Foundation of Determination:**

We began our discussion with the meaning of existence in Farabi and we consider his specific achievements in ontological domains including distinction, analogical gradation, hierarchy and primacy of existence. Moreover, we also need to highlight Farabi's views of the determination of quiddities and the touchstone of determination as accepted by all Islamic philosophers under the influence of this very issue. He argues that determination is an essential requirement of existence and quiddities are not of an essential determination and it is under the light of existence that they become determined. This includes a vital discussion of the issue of relationship of existence and quiddity. Farabi stipulates that determination should be sought for not in quiddities or their attachment to each other rather only in existence. It is needless to say that before Farabi, de-

termination was deemed to be for quiddity. They believed that creatures in the outside world are known by means of quiddities and the main cause of this belief was not anything but Aristotle's insistence on the problem of substance or *Ousia*.

One needs to accept that in Aristotle, existence as such seems to be empty. That he denies the general concept of existence and contends that it is not the general sense of existence rather "what-ness" of a thing that matters is itself an indication of his "Ousia"-based thinking. Aristotle's concern is being (existent) not the existence. As Marx Werner notes in his "Introduction to Aristotle's Theory of Being as Being": "Aristotle's question of being is the same as the question of substance, then his onto-logy is nothing but ousio-logy" (Werner, 1977:19-21).

At the beginning of the *Book of Letters* (Kitab Al Huruf), Farabi expresses his view of existence:

"Verily "to be" in Arabic refers to stability, continuation, perfection and strength in existence ... Then in other languages like Persian, Greek, Syriac and Sogdian, this single word is used for referring to the beings as a whole ... In Persian it is "Hast" and in Greek it is "estin" and in Sogdian it is denoted by "Asti" ... and these all are derivative in no one of these languages" (Farabi, 1990:61).

In these sentences, Farabi defines existence in the sense of "to be" or being or Greek *esse* that is an equivalent of *einai*. In this sense, existence refers to the state of being of all entities although from Farbi's point of view, existence can also be of copulative implication in the sense of attribution of an indicative sentence to the entity that is being indicated.

Finally, Farabi traces existence back to determination, objectivity or actuality, personal specification and unity and believes that quiddities owe their determination to existence too:

"A thing's identity, objectivity, unity, determination, feature and individual existence are all the same (Farabi, 2013:42)."

It is in the light of explanation of existence based on determination that Farabi offers the theory of distinction. In these annotations, Farabi has considered existence not as the constitutive of quiddity rather one of its requirements. Requirement in this context refers to something that accidentally happens to be another thing's attribute. Meanwhile he strengthens the idea of distinction as regards the contingent entities, because it demonstrates the simplicity and purity of the Necessary Being:

"Existence is one of the essential requirement of the quiddities not one of their constituents. But when it comes to the First Being who does not have any quiddity but existence and in this case the truth

of this Necessary Being will be featured by its existential strength (Farabi, 2013:9).”

In most of his essays, Farabi before turning to the demonstration of the First Origin and Divine Attributes discusses the problem of distinction and attribution to existence unto quiddity in contingent entities as well as the lack of such attribution in the Necessary Being. In his commentary of Zeno’s treatise, in first three chapters, Farabi struggles to prove Necessary Being and its unity in addition to other characteristics but in the same first chapter, he discusses both important problems of distinction and determination in his explanation of contingent being’s need of a *cause*. It is here that Farabi argues that contingent being needs a cause for its existence as it is preceded by nothingness. Then, existence of a contingent being is based on the Necessary Being. Accordingly, one can discern that something’s quiddity cannot be the existential cause of something to which a quiddity has occurred, because it is the cause’s existence that gives rise to the existence of the effect (Farabi,2008:107-108).

*Fusus Al Hikmah* (Gems of Wisdom) begins with a discussion of distinction of existence and quiddity in contingent beings and additionality of existence and then it shows that in Necessary Being there is neither any quiddity nor any distinction and attribution:

*“All entities to which we are exposed are combined of a quiddity and an identity. No one’s quiddity is equal to its identity and the former is not part of the latter ... The same is the case with identity as it is not an essential part of the quiddity in these things otherwise it would turn to a constituent and quiddity cannot be perceived without it and we would not be able to think of a quiddity without identity (actuality, existence) in our mind ... Then, it seems that existence and identity of entities are not essential part of the latter that would be associated them after their coming into being (Farabi,2010:5).”*

This sentence is a new beginning in philosophy. Before Farabi, we do not find such a sentence regarding existence and quiddity. In this text, Farabi has offered a clear exposition of the theory of distinction and occurrence. None of Greek and Alexandrian philosophers had managed to identify such a relationship. The above sentence was later indicated by all Islamic philosophers as well as the western philosophers after Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. Regardless of the questions that this theory has given rise to in Islamic philosophy, it has secured the very foundation of the new approach as regards existence and quiddity. It may appear that Farabi has not offered any deep thought but this is

not the case at all. Since we live within a Sadraean tradition and we are informed of the fundamental importance of existential thought in philosophy, we make such a judgement. If we contemplate on this text well, we are witness to Farabi’s epistemic revolution in the face of Greek tradition. Greek thought in general and Aristotelian thinking in particular, is a quiddity-based thinking but Farabi established the foundation of thinking based on existence.

Secondly, although Farabi in most of his works, discusses or explains the theory of distinction of existence and quiddity and as a result, he explicates the problem of occurrence and determination, he also offers a clear exposition of distinction. A correct interpretation of this problem requires a precise review of Farabi’s perspective of several problems including the meaning of essence, quiddity, accident and distinction and question of “what is?” For Farabi, quiddity and essence are in one sense just as the existence and identity are co-extensive. Although Farabi mentions three aspects of quiddity, these three aspects have the same meaning.

### **Conclusion:**

Farabi’s fundamental question is that of existence. Farabi owes his ontological system not to Greeks rather wholly to Quranic and religious teachings. Farabi’s effort for grounding philosophy in existence is also an expression of his deep and precise understanding of this knowledge and he is also conscious of fundamental significance of existence. It is needless to say that Farabi struggles to establish Islamic philosophy. Those who consider him to be a follower of Plato or Aristotle, they do not really know anything of Farabi’s philosophy. Many orientalist (despite their valuable efforts) have taken for granted Farabi’s being an Aristotelian or Neo-Platonist without any precise study of his philosophy. Farabi has devoted himself to existence in a distinct way from Aristotelian way. Farabi has taken existence as the point of departure of his philosophy, and offered an a priori classification of existence. This had no background by Greeks. Moreover, distinction that Farabi has made between existence and quiddity does not have any background in Greece. This type of reflections led to a new understanding of existence and invention of the theory of hierarchy and analogical gradation. Existence forms the very foundation of Farabi’s philosophy. There is no such foundation in Greece. With his novel question of existence, Farabi forms a new horizon in philosophy and it is exactly for this reason that we consider him to be the founder of this philosophy. Farabi’s new

thought of existence emerges in *Kitab Al Huruf* and *Fusus Al Hikmah*.

Farabi should be relocated as a philosopher who thinks within the paradigm of philosophy and not metaphysics because he has distanced himself from Aristotelian logical, definitional and argumentative understanding. Revelation or uncovered-ness of existence is concerned with thinking. Wherever there is no

thinking, the existence will remain hidden. Farabi in his search for the meaning of existence does not ask of its quiddity. Question of quiddity of existence is basically wrong and leads it to the swamp of words and objectification of existence. Existence is not separated from thinking. Existence is not an object in the outside world so that we could ask of its nature. Existence is of uncovered-ness only in the horizon of thinking.

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