

### Al-Fārābī, *The Book of Letters*

108. The capacities for dialectic, sophistry, and for the uncertain or dubious philosophy<sup>1</sup> must precede the capacity for the certain philosophy, which is demonstrative philosophy, since one becomes aware of demonstrations after these others [i.e. dialectic and sophistry]. Religion, if rendered human, comes after philosophy, in general, since it aims simply to instruct the multitude in theoretical and practical matters that have been inferred in philosophy, in such a way as to enable the multitude to understand them by persuasion or imaginative representation, or both.<sup>2</sup>

109. The arts of theology and jurisprudence come after philosophy in time and are dependent upon it. If a religion is dependent upon an uncertain or dubious ancient philosophy, the theology and jurisprudence that are dependent upon it will be in accordance with it. Or rather, they will be of a lower [standard], especially if the religion had corrupted the things it took from either or both of these philosophies, substituting images and similes for them. In this case, the art of theology takes these similes and images for certain truth and seeks to verify them with arguments. It sometimes happens that in legislating theoretical matters, a more recent [religious] lawgiver has imitated one who preceded him, who took these theoretical matters from an uncertain or dubious philosophy. If the more recent lawgiver takes the similes and images imaginatively represented by

<sup>1</sup> The uncertain philosophy (*al-falsafah al-mazmūnah*) is what Fārābī later calls dialectical philosophy, while the dubious philosophy (*al-falsafah al-mumawwahah*) is what he later calls sophistical philosophy (see section 110).

<sup>2</sup> Fārābī later acknowledges that religion can precede philosophy if a nation imports religion from another nation (see section 148).

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the first lawgiver, which were in turn taken from that philosophy, to be the truth rather than similes, he will seek to represent them imaginatively using similes. Then, the theologian in his religion will take these similes for the truth. Thus, what is studied by the art of theology in this religion is further from the truth than the first religion, since it seeks merely to verify each simile of a thing that it assumes to be the truth, or that is falsely represented as the truth.

110. It is clear that the arts of theology and jurisprudence come after religion, and that religion comes after philosophy. Also, the capacities for dialectic and sophistry precede philosophy, and dialectical philosophy and sophistical philosophy precede demonstrative philosophy. Philosophy as a whole precedes religion, just as the user of tools precedes the tools. Dialectic and sophistry precede philosophy, just as the nourishment of the tree precedes the fruit, or the flower of the tree precedes the fruit. Religion precedes theology and jurisprudence just as the master who uses the servant precedes the servant and the user of tools precedes the tools.

111. Since religion teaches theoretical things only by imaginative representation and persuasion, and since its followers are acquainted with these two methods of instruction to the exclusion of others, it is clear that the art of theology, which is dependent upon religion, is only aware of the persuasive things and verifies religion only by persuasive methods and arguments, in particular if it seeks to verify the similes of truth as though they were true. Persuasion proceeds either by premises that are effective and commonly held as preliminary opinions,<sup>3</sup> or by semblances<sup>4</sup> and similes; in general, by rhetorical methods, whether arguments or matters that follow from them. Thus, the theologian limits himself to the theoretical matters that he verifies using shared preliminary opinions. He shares this with the multitude. He may also revise the preliminary opinion, but he only revises the preliminary opinion using something else that is also preliminary opinion. The utmost justification he attains is in negating an opinion dialectically. In this, he differs from the multitude somewhat. In addition, he makes the purpose of his life what can be of benefit. He also differs from the multitude in that respect. Moreover,

<sup>3</sup> Arabic: *bādi' al-ra'y*, i.e. opinions commonly held rather than demonstratively proven.

<sup>4</sup> Literally, hidden things (*damā'ir*).

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since he is the servant of religion, and since religion has the position that it does with respect to philosophy, the position of theology with respect to philosophy is such that it is in some sense also a servant to it, through the mediation of religion. For it only advocates and seeks for the verification of what has been verified first in philosophy by demonstration, using what is commonly accepted as preliminary opinion among all, so that instruction is common to all. The theologian also differs from the multitude in this respect. That is why it is assumed that he is of the select, not the multitude. It should be known that he is also of the select, but only in comparison to the people of that religion, whereas the philosopher is select in comparison to all people and to the nations.

112. The jurist resembles the man of practical wisdom. They differ merely in the preliminary opinions they use in inferring the correct opinion in the deduction of particulars. Thus, the jurist uses as principles acquired premises transferred from the founder of the religion in the deduction of particulars, whereas the man of practical wisdom uses as principles premises commonly accepted among all and premises drawn from his experience. That is why the jurist is one of the select in relation to a certain specific religion and the man of practical wisdom is one of the select in relation to all.

113. Therefore, the select without qualification are those who are philosophers without qualification. All others who are considered of the select are only considered as such because they bear a resemblance to the philosophers. For example, anyone who is granted or undertakes political leadership, or is fit to assume it, or is being prepared to undertake it, renders himself one of the select, since he bears a certain resemblance to philosophy, one of whose parts is the leading practical art.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the skilled person among the practitioners of each practical art renders himself among the select in view of the fact that he goes to great lengths to revise what is taken by the practitioners of that art in its apparent [meaning]. It is not only the skilled person among the practitioners of each art who describes himself as such, but the practitioners of a practical art may also describe themselves as select in comparison to those who are not practitioners of that art, since they speak of and study their

<sup>5</sup> That is, the art of political governance (*al-ṣināʿah al-raʾīṣah al-ʿamalīyyah*).

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art using the things pertaining to that art, while others speak of it and study it using preliminary opinion and what is common to all in every art. In addition, physicians describe themselves as being of the select either because they undertake to manage the ill and diseased, or because their art shares natural science with philosophy, or because they need to go to great lengths to revise the preliminary opinions in their art more so than other arts due to the danger and damage that people may be exposed to from the slightest error that they may commit, or else because the art of medicine uses many other practical arts such as the art of cookery and the art of amulets,<sup>6</sup> and in general all arts that benefit human health. All of the above resemble philosophy in some respect, but none of them should be described as select except metaphorically. For only the philosophers should be taken to be select in the first instance, in point of excellence, and without qualification, followed by the dialecticians and the sophists, then the [religious] lawgivers, and finally the theologians and jurists. The public and the multitude are those we have specified as such, whether or not they include someone who has undertaken political leadership or is fit to assume it.

114. It is clear that the public and the multitude precede the select in time. Likewise, the shared cognitions, which are the preliminary opinions of all, precede the practical arts and the cognitions that pertain to each art, which are collectively the common cognitions. The public and the multitude are the first to originate and come to be. They come to be in a specific abode and country and have by nature specific forms and characters in their bodies. Their bodies have definite qualities and compositions, and their souls are disposed towards and prepared for cognitions, conceptions, and images to specific degrees both quantitatively and qualitatively – making them easier for them. Moreover, their souls are affected by certain affections in specific ways and degrees both qualitatively and quantitatively, and these will also be easier for them. Their organs are disposed to move in specific directions and in certain ways, which will also be easier for them than others.

115. A human being who is left alone at the point at which he acquires his first nature will arise and move towards that which it is easiest to move

<sup>6</sup> Reading *al-hirz* for *al-hird* (a type of animal disease), which makes no sense in this context.

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towards by nature and in the manner that is easiest. His soul undertakes to know, think, conceive, imagine, and intellect whatever he is most intensely disposed towards by nature, for that is what comes most easily to him. He moves his body and organs to whatever position and in whatever manner he is most intensely and perfectly disposed towards by nature, for this too is easiest for him. The first time he acts in this way, he acts through a capacity that is in him by nature and a natural attribute, not by prior habituation nor by art. If he repeats an action of one kind many times he will acquire a habitual attribute, either moral or artificial.

116. If a human being needs to acquaint another with what is in his mind or his intention, he will first use a sign to indicate what he wants from whomever he seeks to make understand, provided the other person is in a position to see his sign; later on he will use sound. The first sounds are calls, for that is how one who is being made to understand realizes that he is intended to the exclusion of others. This takes place when one restricts oneself to signaling to perceptibles in order to indicate what is in one's mind. After that, various sounds are used to indicate each and every thing that had previously been indicated by signaling to that thing and its perceptibles. Each specific thing signified is given some specific sound, which is not used for anything else, and so on.

117. It is clear that these sounds are produced simply by the breath striking a part or parts of the throat or parts of the inside of the nose or lips. These are the organs struck by the breath. The first to strike is the power that causes the breath to be emitted from the lung and the throat cavity, and gradually to the edge of the throat, which lies next to the mouth and nose and what is between the lips. The tongue then receives the breath and pushes it to each part of the inner parts of the mouth and to each part of the base of the teeth and the teeth, striking each of these parts. Each part against which the tongue pushes the breath produces a specific sound when struck by the breath. The tongue moves the sound through the air from one part to another of the base of the mouth, producing many specific successive sounds.

118. Clearly, the tongue moves first only to the part to which movement is easiest. Those who are in one abode and have similar characters in their organs will have tongues that naturally move to the exact same parts inside

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the mouth, and these species of movements will be easier for them than to other parts. The people of another abode and country, who have organs with different characters and compositions, will be naturally suited to have their tongues move to some parts inside the mouth more easily than to others, which are different from the parts to which the tongues of the people of the first abode had moved. Hence, the sounds that they use as signs to indicate to each other what is in their minds will differ, which were originally signified by pointing to things and their perceptibles. This is the first reason for the variation in languages among the nations. These first sounds are the letters of the alphabet.

119. Since these letters, which are the first to be made into signs, are limited in number, they are insufficient to indicate everything that happens to be in their minds. Thus, they are required to combine them by putting some of them together in succession, letter by letter. This results in expressions made up of two or more letters, which are then also used as signs for other things. The first letters and expressions are signs for perceptibles that can be pointed to and to intelligibles derived from<sup>7</sup> perceptibles that can be pointed to. For each universal intelligible has particulars that differ from the particulars of another intelligible. Thus, many different sounds originate, some of which are signs for perceptibles, which are labels, and others of which indicate universal intelligibles that have perceptible particulars. Each sound is only understood to indicate a certain intelligible when one and the same sound is repeatedly applied to a particular that is being pointed to and to everything that resembles it with respect to that intelligible. Then a certain other sound will also be used for another particular falling under a different universal and to everything resembling it with respect to that intelligible.

120. That is how the letters of that nation and the expressions arising from those letters first originate. They originate first among some group or another. It so happens that one of them uses a sound or expression to indicate something when addressing someone else and the hearer memorizes it. Then the hearer uses the same expression when addressing the first inventor of that expression. In this case, the first hearer will have followed the example [of the inventor] and will have fallen in with it, in

<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, dependent upon (*tastamīd ilā*).

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such a way that they will have agreed upon that expression and acted in concert. They then use it to address others until it spreads through a certain group. Then whenever something originates in the mind of one of them, which he needs to convey to one of his neighbors, he invents a sound and indicates the thing to his friend. The friend hears it from him and then each of them memorizes it and they make it a sound indicating that thing. Sounds continue to originate one after another among some group or another of the people of that country, until someone begins to manage their affairs and to bring into being what they need in terms of sounds for the remaining things, for which indicative sounds have not yet happened to have been invented. Such a person is the author of the language of that nation. From that point on, he manages their affairs until expressions are laid down for all the things they need in the exigencies of life.

121. The first of these expressions are those of the common preliminary opinions that they have cognized and what is perceived of the common perceptibles pertaining to theoretical matters, such as the sky, planets, earth, and what is on it. These are followed by the things they inferred from these, then the actions resulting from the capacities that are theirs by nature, then the attributes resulting from habituation to these actions, both moral and artificial, and the actions resulting from them once they have become attributes by habituation. After that, they invent expressions for what they have cognized from experience step by step, then expressions for what is inferred from what is cognized from experiences common to all of them, then expressions for those things that pertain to each practical art, including tools and other things, and then expressions for what is derived from and is present in each art. In this way, expressions are provided for whatever the nation needs.

122. If the natures of the people of that nation are balanced and the nation tends towards intelligence<sup>8</sup> and knowledge, they naturally demand from those expressions – without intending to – that they imitate the meanings they are made to indicate. They make them so that they most closely resemble meanings and what exists. Their souls naturally<sup>9</sup> endeavor to

<sup>8</sup> In the sense of cleverness rather than intellect (*dhakā*).

<sup>9</sup> Literally, their souls will rise with their natures (*nahaḍat anfusuhum bi-ḥīrahā*).

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order these expressions according to the order of the meanings, as far as this is possible with expressions. Efforts are made so that their cases are inflected similarly to the cases of the meanings. If no one else happens to do so, those who manage their affairs in legislating their expressions will do so.

123. It will be clear from the outset that there are certain perceptibles apprehended by sense perception that contain similarities and differences. The similar perceptibles are in fact similar to one another with respect to a single intelligible meaning that they have in common, which is held in common by all things that they are similar to; and what is intelligible in one is intelligible in the other. This intelligible, which is predicable of many, is called the “universal” and the “general meaning.” As for the perceptible itself, each meaning that is [applicable to] one and is not a common adjective for many things and is not similar to any other thing, is called a “particular” and “individual.”<sup>10</sup> All universals are called “genera” and “species.” Hence, some expressions are expressions indicating genera and species – in general, universals – and others indicate particulars and individuals. Meanings differ in generality and specificity. If expressions are to be made similar to meanings, the articulation of one meaning that generalizes over numerous things would be through one single expression that generalizes over those numerous things. Meanings differing in generality and particularity would have expressions differing in generality and particularity, and disparate meanings would have disparate expressions. Just as, among meanings, there are meanings that remain exactly the same while accidents succeed one another, so also among expressions there are fixed letters and letters that act as though they were changing accidents occurring in the same expression, with each changing letter corresponding to a changing accident. If a single meaning remains fixed, while accidents change in succession, it is articulated by means of a single expression that remains fixed while letters change, with each letter indicating each change. If meanings are similar in terms of a certain accident or disposition<sup>11</sup> which they hold in common, they are articulated using expressions of a similar shape and having similar endings and beginnings. Each of its endings or beginnings is a single letter and is made to indicate

<sup>10</sup> These two expressions have been translated in the singular rather than the plural (*ashkās* and *a’yān*) for the sake of agreement with the rest of the sentence.

<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, state or condition (*ḥāl*).



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that accident. Thus, an order of expressions is needed that takes care to articulate meanings using expressions that resemble those meanings.<sup>12</sup>

124. Such great pains are taken to demand order and to make expressions resemble meanings that a single expression is [sometimes] made to indicate meanings with different essences when they are similar in some other respect and in their effects,<sup>13</sup> albeit very distant. This results in ambiguous expressions.

125. Then the resemblance of expressions to meanings becomes clear to us and we invent expressions to imitate the meanings that are not being articulated. It is required that expressions be invented that generalize over numerous things *qua* expressions, just as among meanings there are meanings that generalize over things with numerous meanings. This results in homonymous expressions. These homonymous expressions are such that they do not each indicate a common meaning. Similarly, expressions are invented that are different *qua* expressions, just as there are different meanings. This results in synonymous expressions.

126. The same thing occurs in the combination of expressions, for the act of combining expressions is similar to the combination of composite meanings, which are indicated by these composite expressions. Composite expressions are given things enabling them to connect with one another when these expressions indicate composite meanings that connect to one another. Care is taken that the arrangement of expressions is equivalent to the arrangement of meanings in the soul.

127. At some point expressions settle on the meanings that they have been made to signify, such that there are one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-one [relations] between them. After expressions have become affixed to the meanings whose essences they indicate, people then proceed to abrogate rules in expressing themselves and to use their expressions figuratively.

<sup>12</sup> This passage is somewhat obscure, but one possibility is that Fārābī is setting up an analogy between words and meanings, whereby words are composed of essential letters and accidental letters, just as meanings can include essences and accidents. A near English equivalent would be words such as “glow,” “gleam,” “glisten,” “glimmer,” and so on, all of which contain the “fixed letters” “gl,” which may be said to correspond to the “essential” meaning (to shine or sparkle), as well as “changing letters,” which may be said to correspond to various accidents.

<sup>13</sup> Literally, realization or manifestation (*adā'ihā*).

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Meanings are articulated in words other than those first assigned to them. A word that was once fixed to a meaning and indicated its essence is now made to articulate something else, so long as there is some relation between them, however slight, whether due to a distant resemblance or some other thing, and without that word being fixed to that second meaning and indicating its essence. This marks the origin of metaphors, figurative language, and the substitution of an expression for one meaning for declaration of the expression of another meaning that follows it, when the second can be understood from the first. This is also the origin of the expressions for many meanings that are used to declare the expressions for other meanings, if they are such as to be associated with the first meanings when the second are understood whenever the first are. Moreover, articulation expands by the multiplication of expressions and their substitution for one another, as well as their arrangement, and enhancement. That is the point at which the rhetorical [capacity] first originates, followed gradually by the poetical.

128. Eventually, there are those who grow up among them habituated to utter their letters, the words made up of those letters, and the statements composed of those words, in such a way that they cannot overcome their habituation and such that nothing is uttered other than what they have been accustomed to use. This is made possible by their habituation to them in their souls and on their tongues, so that they cannot cognize anything else, to the point that their tongues are incapable of uttering any other expression, any formation of expressions other than the one that has established itself in them, and any order of statements other than the ones they have been habituated to. This is what has established itself on their tongues and in their souls by habit, based on what they have taken from their predecessors, who in turn took it from their predecessors, and so on up to those who first set it down for them by perfecting what all these predecessors had laid down for them. This is what is eloquent and correct in their expressions, and these expressions are the language of this nation, and whatever diverges from them is foreign<sup>14</sup> and incorrect.

129. Clearly, the intelligible meanings of this nation are entirely rhetorical, since they are all arrived at by preliminary opinion. Their premises,

<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, incorrect Arabic (*afjam*).