

Introduction

“I accept this as so,” he [sc. Glaucon] said. “It seems to me extremely hard to accept, however, but in another way hard not to accept. All the same – since it’s not only now that these things must be heard, but they must all be returned to many times in the future – taking for granted that this is as has now been said, let’s proceed to the song itself and go through it just as we went through the prelude. So tell what the character of the power of dialectic is . . .”

Plato, *Republic*, 532d

Alfarabi’s *Kitāb al-Jadal* ends as abruptly as it begins. At the beginning, dialectic connotes:

the art by means of which one acquires the faculty to construct a syllogism out of generally accepted premises in order to refute a thesis whose subject is universal. One comes to accept [this thesis] by questioning a respondent who aims to defend whichever one of the two parts of the contradiction [*al-naqīd*] he happens [to accept], and to defend every thesis whose subject is universal which comes to a questioner who seeks to refute whichever part of the two contradicting parts happens to arise. (1)¹

At the end, Alfarabi says, “the most virtuous and most effective thing in dialectic is that the refutation occurs by means of contradiction, since the refutation by means of contradiction is more true, more firm, and more general than the refutation by the contrary” (135). This sentence concludes his commentary on Aristotle’s *Topics*. Perhaps not surprisingly, both the first and last sentences present summary statements concerning the art of dialectic. Let us return to the beginning. Alfarabi immediately follows his definition of dialectic² with his first reference to Aristotle, and now quotes Aristotle’s own definition: it is “a method by means of which we are prepared to construct syllogisms out of generally accepted

¹ All references to the *Kitāb al-Jadal*, unless otherwise noted, will be to unit number. Therefore, any citations that are merely a number refer to a unit in the translation. References to the *Kitāb al-Jadal* will be in-text citations while other works will be cited in footnotes. The English translation is my own and is based on the Arabic text as edited by Mallet.

² See Alfarabi, *Kitāb al-Hurūf*, Part I, par. 18, Part II, passim, Part III, passim; Alfarabi, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, 64; Alfarabi, *Introductory Risāla on Logic*, 226; Alfarabi, *Kitāb al-Alfāz al-Musta’mala fī al-Manṭiq*, 99; Alfarabi, *Book of Religion*, pt. 6.

premises for every question that is posed so that, if we offer an answer, we shall not present anything in it [that] is contrary [*muḍādd*]” (1). Although Alfarabi does not yet see fit to mention the title of the book from which he is quoting, he indicates the extent to which he is willing to depart from that text: only his definition speaks of the acquisition of a faculty or the universality of the subject. It is Aristotle who “makes this art a method when he defines it” (ibid.). Yet there is one difference towards which Alfarabi draws the reader's attention, and it happens to concern a distinction that is repeated in the very last sentence. Whereas he had, on two separate instances, referred to contradiction [*naqīd*], he had Aristotle refer to contrary [*muḍādd*]: “[His saying] ‘contrary’ [*muḍādd*] instead of ‘opposite’ [*muqābil*], suggests [and] indicates [by it] ‘contradictory’ [*munāqīd*]. Our saying, ‘we shall not present anything in it that is contradictory [*munāqīd*]’ signifies that we do not accept anything that necessarily leads to the contradictory of the thesis we are trying to defend” (ibid.).

The comparison of two sentences would not be particularly instructive unless the respective sections could also be shown to be related. The *Kitāb al-Jadal* (*Book of Dialectic*) is, according to the Mallet edition, composed of 135 numbered units. These units have been collected and organized into 22 Sections which cohere according to subject matter. The Sections, with parenthetical units and conjectural subject headings, are as follows:³

- Part One: The Definition and Activity of the Dialectical Art
 - A Section One (1–4.2): *Definition of the Art of Dialectic*
- Part Two: A Pre-History of the Development of the Theoretical Arts
 - A Section Two (5–12): *Dialectical Premises*
 - B Section Three (13–19.2): *Contradiction from the Outset*
 - C Section Four (20.1–31): *The Uses of Dialectic for Philosophy*
 - D Section Five (32–35): *The Perfection in the Art of Dialectic*
 - 1 Section Five (a) (34–35): “Art” subsection
- Part Three: Education
 - A Section Six (36–41): *Scientific, Dialectical, and Investigative Interrogation*
 - B Section Seven (42–44): *The Particles of Interrogation*
 - C Section Eight (45–54): *Teaching and Education*
 - 1 Section Eight (a) (50.1–51): “Other Syllogisms” subsection
 - D Section Nine (55–62): *Proof and Refutation*
 - E Section Ten (63–70): *Emergence of the Composite Arts*

³ The section divisions are my own; in a few cases I have borrowed Mallet's language to describe the contents, but generally speaking the section headings are mine as well.

Part Four: Premises and Problems

- A Section Eleven (71–75): *Premises and Problems*
- B Section Twelve (76.1–78): *The Dialectical Premises*
- C Section Thirteen (79–81): *Topoi and Species*
- D Section Fourteen (82–90): *The Dialectical Problems and Dialectical Theses*
- E Section Fifteen (91–98): *Generally Accepted Premises Concerning Moral Characteristics*
- F Section Sixteen (99.1–101): *The Determination of the Dialectical Theses*
- G Section Seventeen (102–111): *The Universals*
 - 1 Section Seventeen (a) (109–111): “*The Identical*” subsection
- H Section Eighteen (112.1–115): *The Genera of Problems and Topoi*
 - 1 Section Eighteen (a) (114.1–114.3): “*Establishment and Refutation*” subsection
- I Section Nineteen (116–119): *Categories and Universals*

Part Five: Nature and Necessity

- A Section Twenty (120–127): *Induction and Example*
 - 1 Section Twenty (a) (123): “*Hypothetical Syllogisms*” subsection
 - 2 Section Twenty (b) (124.1–124.2): “*Example Rhetoric*” subsection
- B Section Twenty-One (128.1–129.2): *The Conditional and Absurd Syllogism*
 - 1 Section Twenty-One (a) (129.1–129.2): “*Absurd Syllogisms*” subsection
- C Section Twenty-Two (130–135): *Opposition and Criticism*

What is immediately apparent in the architecture of Alfarabi’s commentary is that it possesses a rigorous organization⁴ whose rough outline may be

⁴ The remarks that follow hope to offer a handy and useful means of making sense of the whole and the manner in which sections form intelligible parts of the whole (because the “why” of the whole is less clear at the beginning than the “what”); see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1095b5–7; hereafter *E.N.* On Alfarabi’s manner of writing, see Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De Hominis Dignitate*, trans. Bruno Cicognani (Florence: Le Monnier, 1943), 62: “Est apud Arabes in Averroee firmum et inconcussum; in Avempace, cum in Alfarabio grave et meditaturn; in Avicenna divinum atque platonicum”; cf. also Paul Kraus, “Plotin Chez Les Arabes,” in *Alchimie, Ketzerei, Apokryphen im frühen Islam. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Rémi Brague (Hildesheim and New York: G. Olms Verlag, 1994), 320, note 3: “. . . la sobriété et la précision qu’on reconnaît être un des traits caractéristiques du style fārābien.” And *ibid.*, “Dans son effort pour restaurer,

gathered from the various linguistic markers that populate the text. For example, although the work is ostensibly a commentary on Aristotle's *Topics*, Alfarabi refers to the *Topics* by name merely four times in the course of his commentary, as many times as the *Posterior Analytics* is mentioned. Still, the references to the *Topics* are telling and their placement indicates something about Alfarabi's designs. The first instance is in the middle of Section Five, where it stands at the peak of an argumentative development that began in Section Two and thereby signals the break between Part Two and Part Three. The second reference occurs at the beginning of Section Eleven (and therefore Part Four). The particular manner in which Alfarabi introduces the *Topics* here calls attention to its place at the head of the longest Part of the commentary: "Aristotle said at the beginning of the first chapter of the *Book of Dialectic* . . ." (72).

Alfarabi waits until almost the center of his own work to mention the very beginning of the text he elucidates. Aristotle's starting point is evidently not the same as Alfarabi's starting point, nor is it immediately evident for what purpose Alfarabi employs Aristotle's starting point. The final two explicit references to the *Topics* occur in the same Section (Section Twenty) and in the same unit (123). As in the case of the second reference, the *Topics* stands at the head of both a Section and a Part, this time the final Part of the commentary. However telling this is, it is a mere suggestion of the care with which the work is constructed. For such markers to be ultimately persuasive, however, it would have to be demonstrated that they reveal something of the "why" of the work in addition to the "what," that is, that these linguistic devices are not only intentional, but that such formal indicators are intended to reveal something about the content of the work. Demonstrating that the structure of the work was intended to reveal something about the content of the work is necessary for such markers to be persuasive. In order to begin the process of bringing that to light, let us return to the contrast with which we began, between the very beginning and the very end of the *Jadal*.⁵

At the outset Alfarabi emphasizes the difference between "contrary" [*muḍādd*] and "contradictory" [*munāqid*], just as he asserts the superiority of the latter to the former in dialectical discourse. Following this, he appeals to the authority of the Ancients, according to whom the method and approach and way "[consist of] every habitual capacity, by which

sur le plan de la *République* et des *Lois*, la véritable pensée de Platon, Fārābī dévoile une tendance anti-'mystique' et foncièrement critique . . ."

⁵ For further evidence that Part One and Part Five are related, note that the last sentence of Part One speaks of what is "the most *successful* [method] in dialectic" (4.2, my emphasis), while the last sentence of Part Five (the last sentence of the *Kitāb al-Jadal*) considers "the most *virtuous and most effective* thing in dialectic" (135, my emphasis).

[one] strives for some objective in an orderly manner,” and then adds that this is “a genus that comprises all five syllogistic arts” (1). Alfarabi does not explain why the particular appeal was made or why he mentions the importance of habit, nor does he list the five syllogistic arts. He admits, however, that the activity of “this art” is debate [*al-mujādala*] and dialectic [*al-jadal*], and that it is a discourse [*mukhāṭaba*] with which a questioner may refute, or a respondent preserve, whatever part of a contradiction that arises in the course of a discussion between two interlocutors. In the remainder of Section One, he elaborates and clarifies the manner in which both the questioner and respondent seek after victory. Curiously, the specific number of subjects that emerge in this Part as components of the dialectical art are the very same ones that reappear in Part Five (Sections Twenty through Twenty-Two) as the focus of Alfarabi’s meticulous attention at the conclusion of the *Jadal*. These subjects are: rhetoric, hiding, criticism, nature, and necessity.

The reader has just been told that dialectic is a discourse. Discourse and rhetoric [*khaṭāba*] both share the same linguistic root (*kh-ṭ-b*) and so one might expect some similarity between the two. Alfarabi confirms such a suspicion, for as soon as he says that “there is no need in this discourse for more than two [individuals],” he also admits that, because of this, “[t]he condition here is unlike the condition in rhetorical discourse, for there [sc. in rhetoric] a judge [*hākim*] is needed in addition, whereas it is sufficient [in dialectic] to have one questioner and one respondent” (2). Rhetoric, its parts, its use of examples, and the manner in which it is to be distinguished from dialectic now stands at the very head of Section Twenty, and therefore Part Five. In fact, it is here where Alfarabi mentions for the first and only time Aristotle’s *Book of Rhetoric* (124). An entire subsection (124.1–124.2) is devoted to rhetoric and the manner in which it employs examples, where he argues that “it is not blameworthy to use this [rhetorical] method for the primary investigation of the thing” and that “[i]t appears that this species of investigation is common to science and dialectic together” (124.1).

Alfarabi here distinguishes a method that employs examples from a method that proceeds inductively. While the former is used in rhetorical discourses, the latter is peculiar to dialectic. When speaking of induction in this context, Alfarabi uses the formulation “by hiding” or “that which is hidden” [*bi-l-ḍamīr* or *fī al-ḍamīr*] on a number of occasions.⁶ Although these references occur at the end of Alfarabi’s commentary, this is not the first time that he suggested a connection between dialectic and “hiding.” In fact, a sentence at the end of Section One of Part One marks Alfarabi’s decision to conclude his introductory statement regarding the dialectical art:

⁶ See, for instance, its use at 122.

Rather the most successful [method] in dialectic is the use of the method with which the questioner receives each and every premise individually, and then combines from them what produces [*yuntij*] the contradiction [*naqīd*] and opposite [*muqābil*] of the method [*madhhab*] of the one who is questioned; and hiding during his questioning the place of opposition and veiling it lest the one questioned be aware of it. (4.2)

The least that may be said is that the dialectician is willing (or even required) to employ duplicitous methods or tricks to achieve his end. At 4.1, for example, the questioner is described as someone who is willing to act as if agreed-to premises bring about the opposition of the respondent's thesis. Indeed, the questioner may go so far as to falsify (*harrafa*) what the respondent accepted; that is, he may actively seek to deceive the respondent in order to emerge victorious in the conversation.⁷ This revelation is not altogether comforting, though another return to Part Five explains something more about its necessary utility.

At the end of Section Twenty-One and in the middle of Part Five, the reader is informed of the fact that “[t]he scientific absurd syllogism [*qiyās al-khulf al-ilmī*] is that which leads to the absurd [*al-muhāl*], and the dialectical absurd syllogism is that which leads to the ignominious because the ignominious in dialectic occupies the place of the absurd in the sciences” (129.2). This sentence is somewhat confusing and not particularly shocking. Confusion and shock emerge a few sentences later, when Alfarabi explains that “the ignominious opinion, as we already said, may be attached to some whose skill in the sciences is well known,” or that we may “find an eminent opinion attached to [the ignominious]” (*ibid.*). It is not important whether or not he alludes to previous discussions of the opinions of Parmenides and Zeno, who are mentioned along with references to “a number of people of renown as well as those celebrated for their skill in the sciences” (88).⁸ What is important is the connection between science and “the ignominious.” Although the matter is further elaborated in the next and final Section of the commentary, the difficulties raised are not fully resolved in it.

Section Twenty-Two is concerned with “opposition” and “criticism” and this alone relates it explicitly with Section One.⁹ The activity of opposing and criticizing lies at the very heart of the dialectical enterprise, and Alfarabi introduces this at the beginning of his commentary in the context of the “way of the questioner” (3).¹⁰ Here, criticism connotes

⁷ Cf. also 125. ⁸ Cf. 88. ⁹ See, e.g., 3.

¹⁰ Alfarabi from the outset and throughout appears to be more concerned with “the way of the questioner” than the “way of the respondent.” Cf. Xenophon, “Oeconomicus,” in *The Shorter Socratic Writings*, ed. Robert C. Bartlett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 19.15: “Is it the case, then, Ischomachus,” I [sc. Socrates] said, ‘that questioning

“the syllogism from which the questioner produces [*yuntij*] a certain contradiction from among opinions and theses the respondent is trying to defend” (3). The later discussion, and most especially 20.1–20.3, is evocative of the wrestling match or *gymnasium*. Here, in Section One, hints of that abound in the repeated references to the set of rules by which a contestant faces his opponent and challenges him in an attempt to criticize and thereby destroy him. The final condition of the respondent resembles a defeated fighter. With regard to the issue of opposition and criticism the simple fact of its utility in the dialectical art as well as a simple sketch of it in action is recorded at the outset, without any real attempt on Alfarabi’s part to explain the reason for the phenomenon in any great detail. As regards some concerns such as opposition and criticism, the adequate explication is provided not only much later, but in the last Part of the *Jadal*. As a point of fact, the very last Section of the *Jadal* provides the only thoroughgoing elaboration of opposition and criticism in the commentary.

Section Twenty-Two brings to light the ways in which the “false” or “ignominious” is produced. Alfarabi calls attention to the similarities and differences between demonstrative science and dialectic. What is of particular interest is the last unit of the commentary, whose subject matter introduces that which “it is necessary to know”: “It is necessary to know that the opposition of the universal premise by means of its opposite is *either* in demonstrations and in the sciences (where it is true and as powerful as possible) *or* in dialectic, where it is not impossible that they [sc. two contrary universals] are both false and both ignominious” (135). As disturbing as the continued association of the ignominious and dialectic is, the reader is comforted to hear that science or demonstration is free of such a negative association. This comforted condition, however, quickly evaporates, for Alfarabi says, “it is not impossible that they [sc. dialectical premises] are both ignominious, such as our saying, ‘everything moves itself’ and, ‘no existing thing moves itself,’ both of which are contrary and false and ignominious” (*ibid.*). Is the question of movement, or the question as to whether or not there exists a Being that moves itself, not of fundamental importance to the natural scientist? Indeed, this is true throughout the course of the commentary. Alfarabi even associates this question with the pre-Socratic natural scientist Zeno. This confirms our suspicion that Alfarabi alludes to this figure when speaking of the

is teaching? For I just now understand how you questioned me: by leading me through what I know, you display to me that what I didn’t know is similar to it and persuade me, I suppose, that I know that too.”

manner in which “the ignominious opinion” could be tied to scientists or those renowned for their skill in the sciences.

Now, it suffices to mention the fact that scientists such as Zeno break the consensus among people and oppose their generally accepted opinions.¹¹ The fourth and last of those topics connects the first and last Parts of the *Kitāb al-Jadal*, namely, science and necessity. Having alluded to rhetoric, hiding, and criticism, it appears that this last concern is given a weight and importance that surpasses the others. It differs from the others in this context to the extent that its connection with Section One of Part One is implicit rather than explicit. Because science and necessity only become the objects of Alfarabi's special concern when he discusses conditional syllogisms in Section Twenty-One, the issue regarding what it is to know something with certainty is the theme of the fifth and final Part of the *Book of Dialectic*.

The first reference occurs at 123, a subsection on hypothetical syllogisms that is noteworthy for containing the third and fourth (or last two) named references to the *Topics* in the commentary. It also happens to follow the only reference to “a struggle between dialecticians” in 122, and precedes the subsection on rhetoric at 124.1–124.2. Alfarabi explains that hypothetical syllogisms are “conditional premises that verify *the necessity* of the consequence to the antecedent by means of the concession of the respondent to it” (123, my emphasis). Of the three examples of existing objects that he uses to explain this point, all three concern the sphericity of the sun, moon, and planets. For instance, “if the moon is spherical, then the sun, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn are spherical, since all are planets” (*ibid.*).

Nature and necessity become objects of thematic attention at 128.1 where “nature” is expressly distinguished from “chance.” Alfarabi says, “Among the conjunctive [syllogisms] are those where the conjunction belongs to the consequent of the antecedent by nature and necessarily, as well as what arises at a certain time by chance and institution or convention” (128.1). As regards disjunctive conditional syllogisms, “the disjunction of the consequent of the antecedent may occur by nature and necessarily, or at a certain time by chance and institution or convention” (*ibid.*). It is important to note that “nature” here equates with “necessity,”¹² and that both act as an alternative to that which is “by chance” and institution and convention. In the Arabic language, the word that is translated as “hypothetical” (*waq'iyya*) connotes convention and institution as well. Alfarabi takes advantage of the next unit to point out that, although all conditional syllogisms are also called hypothetical syllogisms,¹³ there exist among conditional syllogisms “those to which the

¹¹ See, e.g., 89. ¹² Cf. also 128.3. ¹³ Cf. 123 and 128.4.

name ‘hypothetical’ properly belongs” (128.2). In the next paragraph, Alfarabi asserts that the ascent “from one part or a few parts to a universal by the categorical method” (128.3) is characteristic of rhetoric and that the ascent by means of the conditional method is characteristic of dialectic.

The reference to rhetoric and its contrast to dialectic calls to mind the place of science or demonstration in the discussion. Although “science” first explicitly appears at 129.2, it is compared with rhetoric and dialectic at 127, where Alfarabi admits that there are scientific examples just as there are rhetorical examples, and so there is scientific induction just as there is dialectical induction. Even beyond explicit references, “science” and the requirements of scientific investigation lie behind the entire discussion. That is, the objects of science are those things that exist “by nature” or “necessarily.” As Alfarabi explains, just as the scientific absurd syllogism leads to the absurd, and the dialectical absurd syllogism leads to the ignominious,¹⁴ “[t]he absurd is the *necessarily* false, or the falsehood that is *always* false and which is not able to change and become true; it is the opposite of the truth that is *always* true” (129.2, my emphasis). When Alfarabi further contrasts this with that whose preference or rejection is merely generally accepted, he then associates “necessity” with “what exists”: “the ignominious is not rejected because it is false and not in accordance with what exists, but rather only because the people opine that it is better to reject it, whether it is true or false” (ibid.).

What, if any, is the connection between natural necessity, science, and ignominious opinion? Might there also exist some relation between nature/necessity and the three other subjects that appear to link Part One with Part Five, namely, rhetoric, hiding, and criticism? That is, if it is more than simply a coincidence that Alfarabi chose those subjects both to begin and to conclude his commentary on Aristotle’s *Topics*, what does this ordering imply about the dialectical art? Is there something about the form of Alfarabi’s text that reveals something important about the content of that text?

The first thing the reader notices is the manner in which Alfarabi manages Aristotle’s text. The title of his work as it has been passed down is *Kitāb al-Jadal* (*Book of Dialectic*) and not, say, *Alfarabi’s Commentary on Aristotle’s Topics* (*Sharḥ al-Fārābī li-Kitāb Aristūṭālīs fī al-Jadal*). Alfarabi, unlike Aristotle, populates his book with a cast of characters that is a veritable “who’s-who” of the pre- and post-Socratic universe: Euclid, Galen, Hippocrates, Parmenides, Plato, Protagoras, Pythagoreans, Socrates, Stoics, Thrasymachus, and Zenon. Alfarabi exercises a remarkably free hand

¹⁴ “The ignominious in dialectic occupies the place of the absurd in the sciences” (129.2; cf. also 10).

also when treating the subject matter of the *Topics*: he stresses some things that Aristotle only alludes to, de-emphasizes things that are stressed by Aristotle, introduces phenomena that are nowhere to be found in the *Topics*, and virtually ignores large parts of Aristotle's own text. At one point, Alfarabi summarizes the last seven Books of the *Topics*, Books Two through Eight, in approximately five lines. Yet his *Book* presents a remarkable consistency and coherence. For instance, throughout the course of his work, Alfarabi repeatedly calls the reader's attention to statements he already made with phrases such as, "that we mentioned many times" (e.g., 63), "in the ways previously mentioned" (e.g., 82), "it has been made clear" (e.g., 97), "it has already been stated previously" (e.g., 118.2). He even alerts the reader to something he will say in the future (note especially the curious, "just as we shall say momentarily in this very book" at 124.1). This rouses the slumbering reader from his or her stupor or further heightens the attentiveness of the alert and wakeful student to see if, in fact, Alfarabi follows through in what he says he will do (or, equally as important, whether he did what he claims to have done). This is not even to mention what is arguably Alfarabi's favorite cautionary marker, "it is necessary that you/we know that . . ." (e.g., 77.1, 105, 113, 116, 135). That is, even the most cursory reading of the entire text convinces the reader that the author composed it with some care. Yet this still begs the question: to what end?