

True Happiness: Lessons from Al-Farabi for Developing Countries

Dr. Saima Shafique,

*Associate Professor, Department of Economics,
NUML, Islamabad.*

Email: sshafique@numl.edu.pk

M. Munsoor Ali

*Assistant Professor, Department of Economics,
NUML, Islamabad.*

Email: mmali@numl.edu.pk

Dr. Saif ul Mujahid

Lecturer, Department of Economics, NUML, Islamabad.

Email:

DOI: 10.33195/journal.v4i02.177

Abstract:

The present day political philosophy is mostly influence by the theories and hypotheses about the nature of the material world developed and propagated in western intellectual corridors. The dominant role it plays has influence on the policies governing the global affairs and pushing its enforcement on developing world through either direct interference of strong economic institutions or the military intervention when deemed necessary. The distortion that is created in the last century has left the young researchers in developing world to seek the local solutions with local socio-political philosophies instead of being told by the western institutions to pursue an agenda that is aligned with the structures of these institutions. This relationship has resulted in production of research that is centered on those aspects that fall in this ambit and creation of new knowledge seems to have halted that can actually bring sustainable solutions for developing countries. In this perspective this study is an effort to bring the contributions of Al Farabi in light to identify the differentiating features of his philosophy that can be helpful in adjustments in socio-political-economic philosophy of the developing world to create indigenous solutions to national problems.

Keywords: *P48 Political Institutions; D72 Political Processes; O17 Institutional Arrangements*

1. Introduction:

Al Farabi (A.C. 870-950) was one of the most prominent Islamic philosopher of medieval era that made important contributions in politics and governance of a modern city. Although his description of interaction of humans and the materials is influenced by philosophical and metaphysical thought of Aristotle and Plato, he made remarkable contributions in aligning Islamic theological principles during the medieval era. His contributions opened the new avenues of philosophical thinking in terms of identifying factors that can create an ideal way of collaborative life in a city, and this collaboration may influence the creation of global harmony for the pursuit of true happiness (Kasimjanov, 1982). But the deviation in Farabian writings from the Greek traditions is mainly due to happiness linked with the metaphysical aspects of life that may influence actions of an individual being the citizen of a city. These actions have inward as well as outward manifestations with humane and collaborative intentions to contribute to complete others and let others to contribute in individual's life so that the chain of collaboration and can create an ideal society ensuring attainment of individual and collective happiness (Hayrulaev, 1967). Farabi attributed this collaborative style of living in an organized polity where the actions of material world for attaining happiness to have divine linkage thus giving shape to novelty in the idea of existentialism. This new philosophical dimension of existentialism within the framework of Islamic theology contributed to make it compatible with new emerging trends of city, state, politics and global relations in the medieval era (Al-Allaf, 2006). This important contribution of Farabi has insights that are relevant today and provides the guideline to construct the knowledge for attaining solutions of existing problems - individual as well as collective.

In the subsequent sections, this study explores the basic principles of Farabi and tries to rationalize his contribution in civic living. Then effort is made to understand the philosophical deficiencies in governance thought in Pakistan in particular and developing world in general. Then the study will try to explore the principles of Farabi and establish their relevance to the existing context of Pakistan, and in the end the study will try to present some suggestions to incorporate Farabian thought in governance of the polity.

2. Al Farabi and Classical Political Philosophy

The tradition of finding the resolve of an ideal political system continued in the writings of Al Farabi and extended the philosophical stance of the field by integrating the principles of Islamic political system for creating a policy with internal as well as external influence on organized human living with peace and collective progress. He shared the view of Aristotle to the extent that politics and religions are inseparable and need enforcement from each other for the collective welfare. The political philosophy of the classical thinkers was affected by the incidence of continuous wars for establishing domination over other humans, and the conflicts arising within in struggle for throne. These events shaped the neoliberal thought of installing institutions and creating traditions for attaining sustainable individual and collective behavior (Kasimjanov, 1982). This end is achieved in the writings of Farabi by introducing the separation between state system and divine system which is very clear and establishes links of welfare attainment due to decree of the higher authority that inspires the creation of system of governance by the humans. In doing so he extended the analysis from beyond a community or state and gave it a universal outlook that is capable of endorsing human difference due to beliefs, regions, resources and skin color (Al-Allaf,

2006). His work then extended to "world state theory" that makes him prominent among other classical philosophers.

3. Contribution of Al Farabi in Political Philosophy

Al Farabi followed the ontological tradition to expound on the description of 'true happiness'. For him the true happiness is result of inward as well as outward orientation of one's self, and together it creates the synergy leading to happiness. This inward aspect is the solidarity of one's self with that of the community where as the outward aspect is to indulge in the rituals and practices created by some institutional arrangement to cater for collective needs. The attainment of true happiness is therefore, a collective effort and an individual may not be able to achieve it (Walter, 1968). Farbi made a clear distinction between the ontological and epistemological aspects and stressed on details forming a concept and ways to bring that concept to human actions – individual and collective. The actions of state in shaping the institutions manifesting norms for attainment of collective welfare determine attainment of true happiness for individuals. This poses a challenge for decision makers shaping the institutions to address the meanings of individual happiness (Hayrulaev, 1967). The stress on ontological tradition is very strong in writings of Farabi as falsified description has effects on welfare of individuals and the collective behavior of the society. Therefore, for Farabi stresses on the need for effective political thought that can lead to effective political outcomes for individuals and society alike. The practical side of Farabian philosophy is political aspect of human life where the moral principles inspired from the teachings of Islam that are then assessed and analyzed in governance perspective giving rise to theoretical politics, and consequently shapes into practical politics. For him the theoretical aspect of politics provides the higher grounds from where the

practical politics can get inspiration to create institutions and the norms they propagate and practice. In this way Farabi advocated indulgence into intellectual activity but not without an action plan to pursue in the real life of individuals and society for attainment of true happiness. Farabi advocated the interdependence of members of social groups on each other for having a contented life. He places a special emphasis on political activity that is necessary for creating harmony between members of the community (Walter, 1968). Ethics and politics complement each other and promote the cause of organized living in a society. Farabi treated ethical values to shape and further the phenomenon that are necessary for an action that can promote true happiness. The dynamic nature of social action also needs dynamic pattern of political action that evolves over time but has a static goal of true happiness. Farabi discussed the stages through which a social group passes through and grows over time by successfully attaining happiness for all the members by enabling the skills of learning and supporting each other. This way Farabi seems to be the first scholar to promote system approach to human problems and attainment of happiness. The system in writings of Farabi has sense of responsibility and is flexible to accommodate the changes occurring due to changing social and economic realities. Therefore, Farabi has acquired a distinctive place among philosophers of classical and medieval era.

4. Role of State and Institutions:

The emergence of state is not incidental as it is outcome of so many incidences – wars, revolutions or natural calamities – but its continuity depends on the happiness of the citizens. Any incidence that affects the life of communities has profound impact on human relations within the community and eventually it impacts the outside relations. This affect is reflected in the way philosophy of existence has evolved over the

centuries. The ancient Greek tradition started to shape the emergence of cities and concept of universal kingdom for extending the principles of happiness from individual to the universe. These scholars perceived the biological needs of humans to initiate the social actions in the form of relationships, needs and dominance, and advocated the universal empire to attain perpetual peace between different groups of humans. These principles of universal happiness create strong cities that are base of a strong empire. These scholars referred to the leader as the brain of the society to control and drive the actions of members of society in a planned and rational way. A universal harmonized leadership can guide the actions of the citizens so that everyone can attain contended life while caring for others around and avoid individual and collective conflicts and wars. Although Farabi also intends to attain true happiness at individual and collective levels but his description of leader and politics is different from the classical thinkers. Farabian tradition resolves around the basic concepts of Islam where this world is for preparation for life hereafter. The meanings of true happiness are not linked only with attainment of highest morals and material well being, instead along with these goals the Islamic theology links these worldly efforts for attainment of true happiness – individual and collective – to be a divine decree and actions of individuals and society impact the relations with the divine. Therefore, the description of Farabi about the leader is not as a brain instead it is the heart of the body that is filled with joy when good deeds are accomplished and the followers are convinced with passion along with logic to adopt to certain ways of life and refrain from the other (Rudolph, 2011). The holistic perspective of Farabi is built from the micro levels to the macro levels where the attainment at micro level are incomplete if these are not reflected in the macro levels. To attain the universal values the structure of

community at family, street, village and district level is not stable and cannot ensure the sustainability of universal values (Walter, 1968). Farabi placed a lot of emphasis on city structure and its institutions that can ensure the sustainability of the values that the leader promotes for attaining true happiness. This then results in attaining the values of true happiness at the universal level. The integrity and collaboration are the two basic concepts around which the Farabian society is built. In this perspective when the contributions of Farabi are compared with those of the classical thinkers the philosophical stance is more practical and based on philosophy that can be practiced with system thinking. Farabi viewed city as a function of collaborative entities that are not incidental instead are capable of generating patterns around which the citizens knit their actions and the outcome of these actions can be predicted in the form of true happiness (Kasimjanov, 1982). The collaborative aspect of collective living synthesizes new structures that are compatible with the human differences due to difference in opinion, profession, tribes, regions, dialect, language, and skin color etc. The role of the leader is to correct for any discrepancy and improve the structures of the institutions. This feedback and realignment of institutions with changing social reality makes it a breathing system that has sympathetic outlook for all the members of the community.

4. Contribution of Divine and Supernatural in Human Efforts

The challenge faced by Farabi was to integrate the divine decree in the universal values of true happiness. The political hierarchy in Islamic theology is beyond the worldly ranks and rise above the human level. The acceptance of divine as supreme and being accountable for every action in front of divine makes leadership role to be reconciling between the ultimate master – the creator - and its creation. This analogy of political

structure has spiritual meanings that drive the actions of humans in the material world (Rudolph, 2011). The word of leader does not have the final authority in Islamic political structure making it open for debate and challenge. Therefore, in order to avoid chaos and antagonism Islamic theology integrates all the segments of the society in the form of a council that has democratic outlook (Hayrulaev, 1967). Although the guiding principles of Islam are not subject to change but the governance aspect to achieve the true happiness can evolve and alter given the conditions of time and space. Therefore, the relation of citizens and leader in Farabian structure is different from that of the classical philosophers that sometime went on the attribute godly abilities to the throne and thus the person occupying it. Farabi gives highest rank to the divine in social, political and economic lives of humans and provides a stable and democratic structure that makes it different from the contributions of his predecessors.

For Farabi cities represent stable institutions and thus contribute more for the cause of society in terms of integrity, solidarity and collaboration. Farabi has indicated that common interest, threat of the common enemy and geographic proximity enhances the integration and collaboration between the citizens. The willingness of collaboration for attaining true happiness paves the way for political integration and harmony (Walter, 1968). Farabi looked at unequal distribution of wealth between members of the community at micro level and between different regions and states at macro level to be the cause of human conflicts. Thus the conflicts affect the ability of all parties involved to attain universal happiness. Farabi looks at true happiness as the right of every human and therefore, propagates to avoid conflicts and extend collaboration and happiness. He has accepted the differences in humans in terms of nature, geography and language (Rudolph, 2011). He linked national character of the nations to

their geographic position with reference to celestial bodies. Therefore, the concept of supernatural is very strong in Farabian philosophy that then translates into the impact of divine on human lives.

5. Attaining Harmony and Collaboration

Ideal collaboration leads to a harmonious social structure that has a universal outlook. The classical philosophers presented an ideal city that is ruled by a just and intelligent leader and try to create a social structure that has potential for furthering human cause. But their description lacks the holistic universal view which is not the case in Farabian writings. Farabi integrated the human life with the divine command so that true happiness is attained for all the humans regardless of the differences in the culture, regions or language. In order to align human actions with the divine decree Farabi identifies two central factors that can help the humans to attain true happiness despite the individual differences: love and justice (Rudolph, 2011). Farabi describes love as the effort of individual to make efforts to maintain the ideal conditions in society. This ideal condition created by one individual is coordinated with the efforts of the others and this creates a synergy that exudes love throughout the society (Al-Allaf, 2006). The existence of justice in society ensures a stable collaboration in society but Farabi indicated the creation of institutions to achieve it. Institutional arrangements formalize the goal attainment for every member of society that becomes a moral as well as a legal obligation to create a coordination synergy (Rudolph, 2011). Farabi has given important role to politics and politicians in driving forward the movement to attain true happiness. But Farabian political leader is not the ultimate sovereign and acts as servant to the commandments of the divine. Thus the leader is performing a role assigned to it by the divine it invests efforts and resources to create enabling environment for true happiness for every

member of the society. The governance and institutional arrangements are subject to change due to nature of resources, natural environment, educational and military intelligence of the people. But at the same time the universal principles of true happiness cannot be compromised and thus remain the same for different societies and cultures. This unification of universal elements and human actions for true happiness is unique to Farabi (Walter, 1968). The role of politician, institutional setup and education of the masses are the three main factors that can ensure the sustainability of efforts society make for true happiness generation after generation.

6. Conclusion

Ultimate goal of political philosophy is to strive to create an ideal society where pursuit of happiness and contented life for every member of society is easy and attainable. Historically numerous models of political, social and economic life of societies have evolved especially after wars and conflicts resulting in brutalities on humans by fellow humans. Most of these models are attributed to the Greek philosophers that facing numerous wars and conflicts propagated the creation of one universal kingdom that can provide ideal life to its members and provide solution to the human problems. Farabi contributed to this tradition in the light of principles of Islam and demonstrated how the divine decree becomes relevant to the actions and decisions of leaders to create institutions for providing true happiness. As the ultimate sovereign is the divine therefore, the leader and its decisions are subject to debate and modification after due consultation with the stakeholders in the society. This description is in line with the modern day democratic setup that works through institutions to ensure welfare of every voter. Farabi was also the first to introduce the concept of universalism and different institutional arrangements for different cultural

settings. The lesions in writings of Farabi are relevant especially for developing countries to align their institutional arrangement with goals of welfare and ‘true happiness’.

References:

A.H. Kasimjanov. (1982) *Al-Farabi*. – M:Misl, 159

Abu Nas’r al-Farabi. (1985) *On the Perfect State of Al-Farabi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., 19-32.

M.M. Hayrulaev. (1967) *The worldview of al-Farabi and his importance in the history of philosophy*. – Tashkent, 325.

Mashhad Al-Allaf (2006) *The Essential Ideas of Islamic Philosophy: A Brief Survey*, Edwin Mellen Press: 34-56.

R. Walter. (1968) *Arabic Transmission of Greek Thought to Medieval Europe*. “Bulletin of John Raylands Library”. Manchester, 1945, vol. 29, N 1; N. Rescher. *Studies in Arabic Philosophy*. Pittsburgh, 149

Rudolph, “Reflections”. (2011) Cf. Massimo Campanini, “Alfarabi and the Foundation of Political Theology in Islam,” in *Islam, the State, and Political Authority*, ed. Asma Afsaruddin: New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 35.



@ 2017 by the author, Licensee University of Chitral, Journal of Religious Studies. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).