

ALFARABI, *BOOK OF LETTERS* (KITĀB AL-ḤURŪF), ENGLISH TRANSLATION WITH INTRODUCTION, INTERPRETIVE ESSAY, AND ANNOTATIONS, PLUS MUHSIN MAHDI'S REVISED EDITION OF THE ARABIC TEXT BY CHARLES E. BUTTERWORTH, FOREWORD BY HAMZA YUSUF, ZAYTOUNA COLLEGE, BERKELEY, CA 2024 (THE ZAYTUNA CURRICULUM SERIES), 576 PP., ISBN: 9781733836340.

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In his autobiography, Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037) confesses that he struggled to understand Aristotle's *Metaphysics* until he bought « Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's Book (*kitāb*) on the Objects of the Metaphysics » in the booksellers' quarter of Bukhara. He read Alfarabi's text « and the objects of this book became clear to *him* », leading to his comprehension of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup>

There are at least two possible works that Avicenna might have read. Butterworth thinks – and he has good arguments to believe so – that Alfarabi's succinct *Treatise* (*maqāla*) on the Purposes of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* was this book.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, William Gohlman, the editor and English translator of Avicenna's autobiography, suggests in a footnote: « There is more likelihood of its being the recently [1968] discovered *Kitāb al-ḥurūf*, edited by Muhsin Mahdi as Alfarabi's *Book of Letters* » (p. 122, n. 30).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Ibn Sīnā. A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*, ed. WILLIAM E. GOHLMAN, SUNY, Albany, NY 1974, p. 34 (Arabic), p. 35 (English).

<sup>2</sup> CHARLES E. BUTTERWORTH, « Farabi's Purposes of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Avicenna's 'Eastern' Philosophy », in ALI GHEISSARI, JOHN WALLBRIDGE, AHMED ALWISHAH (eds.), *Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies: Essays in Memory of Hussein Ziai*, Brill, Leiden 2018, p. 365–389.

<sup>3</sup> Here is Gohlman's full quotation: « There are two extant works by al-Fārābī which could be the book Ibn Sīnā bought. The first of these, 'On the Objects of the Philosopher (*al-ḥakīm*) in Each Section of the Book Marked by Letters, Being a Determination of the Object of Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*', was edited by Friedrich Dieterici, *Alfarābī's Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Brill, Leiden 1890), p. 34–38. However, this work is little more than a table of contents of the *Metaphysics* and would hardly be the book which so profoundly impressed Ibn Sina. There is more likelihood of its being the recently discovered *Kitāb al-ḥurūf*, ed. by Muhsin Mahdi as Alfarabi's *Book of Letters* (Dar el-Machreq, Beirut 1969). This is a much longer work – over 160 pages in the edition – in which al-Farabi analyzes the *Metaphysics* in some detail » (*The Life of Ibn Sīnā*, ed. GOHLMAN p. 122, fn. 30).

Upon reading the *Book of Letters*, I am inclined to agree with Gohlman's intuition. Although Mahdi's edition has been available for over half a century, the lack of an English translation and a thorough study – such as the one undertaken by Butterworth – has contributed to the *Kitāb al-ḥurūf* being overshadowed by Alfarabi's more wide-ranging writings, such as the *Book of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, which are clear examples of Neoplatonic political philosophy.

The *Book of Letters* is divided into three sections, which are to some extent independent treatises. Butterworth has translated their headings as «The Particles and the Names of the Categories», «The Origin of Utterances, Philosophy, and Religion», and «Interrogative Particles». It is possible that Avicenna's discovery referred only to the first section. Butterworth's translation is accompanied by an interpretive essay in which he addresses the difficulties of bringing the three sections together.

Mahdi's first and only edition, which is still valid, was based solely on a manuscript from the Central Library of the University of Tehran, but he found two other manuscripts, one from the Baku Institute of Manuscripts and the other from the Ayatollah Mar'ashi Library in Qom, and he prepared a new edition, which Butterworth has printed posthumously in this volume. In contrast to the Qom manuscript, the Tehran and Baku manuscripts usually have common readings. In very few cases, the three manuscripts differ – for instance, in paragraph 251. There, the Qom manuscript reads *al-khissa* ('vileness'), Baku, *juththa* ('corpse'), and Tehran, *al-hissiyah?* (maybe 'sensitive'). There is no doubt that *al-khissa* is the correct reading, which was adopted by Mahdi and followed by Butterworth.

Butterworth's translation is the key to understanding the development of ontological concepts that have been the preoccupation of philosophers for centuries, and I am going to dwell on a few of them. Chapter 1 of the First Section is very significant. Butterworth's translation begins with:

Now then, indeed, the meaning of *inna* [indeed] is firmness, permanence, perfection, and sureness concerning a thing's existence and knowledge of it. That there is a place in all languages for *inna* and *anna*<sup>4</sup> is evident. In Persian it is sometimes *ki* and sometimes *ka*. More apparent than that are *on* and *ôn* in Greek (p. 26).

Alfarabi continues with his personal interpretation, but the terminology used shows that Arabic philosophy in his time had evolved beyond the terms found in Aristotle. The philosophers say, according to Alfarabi, that: «what is the indeedness of the thing», meaning what is its most perfect existence «that is its

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<sup>4</sup> I choose the reading presented by the Baku manuscript.

whatness ». The sentence may seem a puzzle, but its translator helps us to understand it.

At the beginning of *Posterior Analytics* II, Aristotle distinguishes four kinds of questions that we should ask, as « it is in the answers to these questions that our knowledge consists » (*An. Post.* II, 89b23–24) and they are following:

Is this that? *to hoti*,  
Why is this that? *to dioti*,  
Does this or that exist? *ei esti*,  
What is that? *ti esti*.

Since *hoti* is *inna* ('indeed'), *to hoti* is *innīya* ('indeedness'); and since *ti esti* is 'what is that?', and *to ti esti* is found in other passages, the abstract concept is *māhīya* ('whatness').<sup>5</sup>

The term 'existence' is not found in Aristotle, but the Arabs introduced *wujūd*, and Alfarabi examines it below in Part One, Chapter 15. Here, he equates the most perfect existence (*wujūd*) with indeedness and whatness, a way to express that God has the most perfect existence, which means that *innīya* and *māhīya* are both identical in Him.

Whatness in Aristotle is said in a different way: *to ti ēn einai*, 'that which should be', the so-called quiddity of a thing. However, it is not certain that Alfarabi was aware of this possible distinction. On the contrary, *dhāt* is a new concept, not easily traced in Aristotle, which Alfarabi analyzes in detail in Chapter 14, and which Butterworth accurately translates as 'essence'. *Dhāt* appears in pre-Islamic poetry and in the Koran, mostly with the meaning 'endowed with', and the construction *bi-dhāti-hi*, 'by itself', belongs to ordinary language. Alfarabi goes further in analyzing the uses of *bi-dhāti-hi*, and Butterworth has been very cautious in rendering its variants. Alfarabi distinguishes *dhāt* from *māhīya* but the translation is not easy.

Now, unless one is speaking with laxity, it is nonsensical to claim that our saying 'the essence of the thing' is relative to a particular thing, insofar as there is no otherness in any way between the relative and the object to which it is relative. For our saying *nafs al-shay'* [the thing itself] has this meaning as well – namely, the whatness of the thing – and that is precisely the meaning of our saying 'the substance of the thing' (p. 126).

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<sup>5</sup> Shukri Abed and Ilai Alon give 'quiddity'. Cf. *Al-Fārābī's Philosophical Lexicon*, Gibb Memorial Trust, Warminster 2002.

‘The essence of the thing’ translates *dhāt al-shay*, ‘relative’ *muḍāf*, ‘a particular thing’ *shay’ mā*, ‘the whatness of the thing’ *māhīyat al-shay*, and ‘the substance of the thing’ *jawhar al-shay*. Butterworth’s careful use of technical terms helps us to see that Alfarabi distinguishes between the particular essence (*māhīya*, whatness), and the universal essence (*dhāt*).

Aquinas wrote in *De Veritate* q.1, a.1: « But that which the intellect first conceives as the most familiar, and into which it resolves all conceptions, is being, as Avicenna says at the beginning of his metaphysics ». That Avicenna read Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* has been already mentioned. That Aristotle is an antecedent is also known, as for him the principles of being (*to on*) and unity are the most universal of all predicates (*Met.* X.2, 1053b 20). That Alfarabi contributed to the doctrine can be shown through this book.

*To on* is an active participle and *esti* is the corresponding present tense. Although they belong to different roots, as is the case with ‘being’ and ‘is’ in English, the identification is obvious to any speaker. However, the Arabic language does not use any form in the present tense to express predication – only for the past and future tenses.

Alfarabi admits the absence of an utterance to express the connection between subject and predicate in ordinary language « yet this utterance is definitely needed for the theoretical sciences » (p. 140, §83). He gives two utterances in Arabic to fill this absence: *huwa*, the pronominal ‘it/he’, and *mawjūd* the participial ‘found/findable’. Alfarabi has no preference for one term over the other, but he generally uses *mawjūd*, which Butterworth consistently translates as ‘existent’.

That *mawjūd* is the first known is no longer a matter of debate, and the richness of its meanings becomes central. Butterworth chooses to translate *ishtirāk al-ism* as ‘ambiguity’, but one could use the terms ‘homonymy’, or ‘equivocity’ instead: ‘Existent’ is an ambiguous utterance said of all categories (p. 146, §88) and ‘whatness’ (‘quiddity’) intervenes in defining and explaining the categories. Alfarabi laid the groundwork for Avicenna’s ontology and Butterworth provides us with a translation that accompanies the process.

The three sections are apparently independent works, but Butterworth has written an Interpretive essay that shows the connection between them. The connection between « The Particles and the Names of the Categories » and « Interrogative Particles » is strong, as we can show.

The chosen example concerns *māhīya* and *mā*, the interrogative particle ‘what’ that we examined. Alfarabi investigates the various uses of ‘what’ that correspond to different levels of knowledge. The translator confronts many difficulties, and the case of ‘substance’ comes out as exemplary.

The ancients call the ultimate subject and the universal conditions predicated of it by way of what is ‘substance’ unqualifiedly. And they call the

rest of the predicates of the ultimate subject that are predicated of it NOT by the way of what is [...] ‘accidents’, that is, when they are predicate of substance, for they are predicated of it not by the way of what is (p. 304, §181).

Alfarabi was using technical terms provided by the Arabic translation of the *Metaphysics*: *mawḍūʿ* (subject), *jawhar* (substance), *ʿalā al-itḥāq* (unqualified), *maḥmūl* (predicate), *aʿrāḍ* (accidents), and *mā huwa* (what is). However, some terms are post-Aristotelian, and *kullīyāt*, which Butterworth has translated as ‘universal conditions’, is one of them.

In Aristotle we find *katholou* and *to katholou*, which in Arabic is *al-kullī*, for example, in *Met.* 1071a17–24, and in the phrase: « ‘man’ in general (*bi-l-kullīya*) is the principle of ‘man’ in general, but there is no such person as *man* ». However, this is not the sense in which some Medieval philosophers understood *al-kullīyāt*, i.e. as mental entities, so that they became the subject of a long discussion. Alain de Libera’s monograph, *L’art des généralités*, explores this discussion and highlights the contribution of Alexander of Aphrodisia. De Libera even includes the translation of an important passage attributed to Alexander, made by the late Marc Geoffroy from the extant Arabic.<sup>6</sup>

By adopting the expression ‘universal conditions’, Butterworth offers the reader the opportunity to remain faithful to Aristotle’s doctrine, insofar as we understand *al-kullīyāt* as universal, common attributes of a thing. Then, and by posing the question ‘What?’ in a variety of contexts and identifying adequate responses, we can ascertain the essence of substance and its primacy in all forms of being.

« The Origin of Utterances, Philosophy, and Religion » is placed between the two examined sections. It is not immediately apparent how the initial section, entitled « The Particles and the Names of the Categories », connects with it, but Alfarabi provides explanations that help clarify the link.

Alfarabi opposes the damage caused by dialectical theology and jurisprudence in Islam. He searches for the causes and finds them in the instruments used for their development – namely, dialectical, sophistical, and poetic reasoning. These instruments do not provide the required certain knowledge, which can only be achieved through demonstration. In his interpretive section, Butterworth writes:

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<sup>6</sup> MARC GEOFFROY, « Alexandre d’Aphrodise: Deux versions arabes de la *Quaestio* 1.11A, sur le statut de l’universel », in ALAIN DE LIBERA, *L’art des généralités*, Aubier, Paris 1999, p. 639–644.

To prove that certain philosophy based on demonstration represents a stage in human reasoning higher than religion insofar as the latter relies on rhetorical and poetical methods, Alfarabi presents a broad history of intellectual development (p. 488).

And in fact, the greater part of the section is devoted to the evolution of language and logical structures across different nations. By doing so, Alfarabi integrates his analysis of particles and interrogative particles into a broader system, demonstrating that his thinking is highly systematic despite the apparent discordances between its parts. Thanks to Charles E. Butterworth's accurate and precise translation, the English reader can now gain a comprehensive view of Alfarabi's thought.