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Politics, Religion, and Philosophy

in Al-Farabi’s Book of Religion

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Politics, Religion, and Philosophy

in Al-Farabi’s Book of Religion

by

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To friends, family, and teachers.
This thesis offers an interpretation of Al-Farabi's *Book of Religion*, in which the tenth-century philosopher addresses more directly than in any of his other works the relationship between human and divine wisdom. Believing Farabi to be a philosopher in the full sense of the term, I attempt to approach his writing in the spirit of his own approach to the writings of Plato and Aristotle. I argue that the discussions of religion, philosophy, and political science found in the text constitute a single teaching, through which Farabi addresses some of the most fundamental questions facing man as both a political and spiritual animal.
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Introduction

Historical Context and Motivation

Al-Farabi lived and wrote in a world less radically different from our own than Plato’s. By the dawn of the tenth century, paganism in Europe, Western Asia, and Northern Africa had largely yielded to the spread of Christianity and Islam. These monotheistic faiths brought with them an unprecedented degree of religious universalism, with Muslims and Christians each envisioning a world in which their respective faiths had spread to every corner, uniting human beings across cultural, national, and imperial boundaries.

Furthermore, unlike the chief deities of ancient pantheons, whose tremendous power and wisdom were nevertheless limited, the monotheistic God was and is believed to be truly omniscient and omnipotent, the source and maintainer of all that exists as well as the infallible upholder of justice and morality. In Islam particularly, God’s just commands take the form of the Shari'a, a comprehensive code of law that teaches correct belief while simultaneously regulating behavior. The transmission of divine law to mankind occurs solely through the person of the Prophet, who thus serves as a link between the human and divine realms. Muhammad was therefore a lawgiver and political founder as well as a prophet, and indeed these two aspects of his career are inseparable. In each of these ways—the ubiquity of monotheism, the universality of religious aspirations, and the immediate importance of divine law—the historical environment in which Farabi wrote resembles our own world more closely than it does that of Plato, his teacher and predecessor by thirteen centuries.

Nevertheless, nearly as much time has passed since the death of Farabi, and though no less than half the world is now monotheistic, the modern age has witnessed new spiritual
developments that place it in stark contrast with both the ancient and medieval eras. Chief among these is the wide adoption of secularism, both as an individual belief and a political ideology. Never before in human history have so many people abjured religious belief of any kind, nor have so many regimes adopted a stance of neutrality with respect to competing religious claims. Aggressively anti-religious policies, such as those implemented in Revolutionary France and the Soviet Union, are also a distinct feature of the modern age. Neither Plato nor Farabi could have condoned state atheism, since both men understood much too well the essential social role played by religion. But beyond merely recognizing that common religious beliefs are conducive to political health, Plato and Farabi shared a view of the human soul according to which man naturally possesses certain longings that form a fertile soil for religious beliefs. In light of this view, political atheism is dangerously arrogant, insisting as it does that the regime itself can fulfill man’s most fundamental desires. Finally, displaying a degree of intellectual probity that is lacking in those who carelessly dismiss the case for piety, both Plato and Farabi recognize that claims of divine inspiration represent a massive challenge to the authority of human wisdom, one that cannot easily be overcome. If the words spoken by prophets truly have their origin in God or the gods, then philosophy, as the cultivation of merely human wisdom, serves no clear purpose, except perhaps to better understand these divine commands. Far from constituting an independent investigation into the meaning of human existence, philosophy would in this case be merely the handmaiden of theology.

Thus, despite vast differences in their historical circumstances, Farabi is unmistakably concerned throughout his corpus with many of the same themes addressed by Plato in his
dialogues. Of primary interest to us is the proper relationship between human wisdom and
divine law. Whether or not Farabi arrives at the same conclusions as his ancient Greek
predecessor with respect to this all-important question requires not only a thorough
understanding of Plato—no modest endeavor—but, in addition, a careful study of Farabi’s
works. This essay seeks only to begin the second of these tasks through an investigation of
the Book of Religion. Of the writings of Farabi that have made their way to us, this text deals
most directly with bringing to light the philosophic puzzles raised by religion. And although
increasingly large segments of the industrialized world claim no religious affiliation, the Book
of Religion is not merely a historical curiosity, a relic from a distant past in which men had yet
to overcome religious superstition in favor of enlightened secularism. Due to his insights
about the nature of religion—its social utility, psychological deep-seatedness, and the
theoretical challenge it presents to the exercise of human wisdom—Farabi poses a timeless
challenge to those who would claim a premature victory over revelation. But neither is he in
simple agreement with those believers who would seek to impose their religious law
unconditionally upon their political societies or indeed upon the whole world, as even a
cursory reading of the present text will demonstrate. In fact, the Book of Religion is largely an
attempt to vindicate the political virtue of prudence in the face of a comprehensive divine
law that threatens to suffocate it. Thus, the effort to understand Farabi’s teaching in the
present text is driven in large part by the hope that it will shed some light on the perennial
conflict between unyielding supporters of divine law on the one hand and staunch
secularists on the other. Farabi may even show a possible path toward communication
between these two camps who appear for the most part to talk past one another. If, in
addition, we can learn how to better orient our own lives amidst the competing claims of reason and revelation, we will have benefited all the more.

**Farabi as a Writer**

Before turning to the text itself, it is necessary to consider Farabi’s own remarks, scattered through certain of his works, on the craft of writing. Without taking such a step, we are in danger of underestimating Farabi’s great subtlety as a writer, and thereby mistaking the surface impression offered by the *Book of Religion* for its ultimate teaching.

In his *Plato’s “Laws,*” Farabi offers the following account of Plato’s manner of writing:

> the wise Plato did not feel free to reveal and uncover every kind of knowledge for all people. Therefore he followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty, so that knowledge would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed, or fall into the hands of someone who does not know its worth or who uses it improperly. In this he was right.1

Although the passage cited falls short of an explicit confession that Farabi himself practices esoteric writing, his concluding remark that Plato was correct to engage in such practices leaves little doubt that Farabi followed in the footsteps of his predecessor in this regard. Furthermore, even a superficial reading of the *Book of Religion* confirms that Farabi does not view full public enlightenment as a possible or desirable goal. Therefore, with respect to the need for esoteric writing, Farabi believed his environment to be essentially the same as Plato’s.

Nor did Farabi consider Plato to be alone in adopting this peculiar method of

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presentation. In *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*, Farabi attempts to show that, despite the apparent differences between the two Greek philosophers with respect to matters of doctrine as well as presentation, they were in fact in agreement regarding all of the most fundamental questions. Thus, it is only apparently the case that, in contrast to Plato, “[Aristotle’s procedure is to clarify, elucidate, put in writing, order, communicate, uncover, and explain, making full use of any of these he finds an approach to.”2 In fact, Aristotle’s writing is characterized by a level of “abstruseness, obscurity, and complexity”3 sufficient to belie the assumption that he seeks merely to clarify complex issues for all readers. As evidence for the claim that Aristotle’s writings are deceptive in this way, Farabi cites a letter purportedly written by Aristotle to Plato. The latter had apparently reproached his pupil for “putting books in writing, ordering the sciences, and bringing this out in complete and exhaustive compositions.”4 In response, Aristotle writes, “Although I have put these sciences and their well-guarded and sparingly-revealed maxims in writing, I have nevertheless ordered them in such a manner that only those suited for them will get them, and I expressed them in an idiom that only those adept in them will comprehend.”5 Aristotle therefore appears to be in complete agreement with his teacher regarding the need to insulate scientific knowledge from the many. In short, the two thinkers whom Farabi held in the highest regard both appeared to him to engage in esoteric writing, designed to guard the secrets of science from those unworthy or incapable of their

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Title and Structure

As mentioned above, and as indicated by its title, the Book of Religion addresses more directly than Farabi’s other works the relationship between human wisdom and divine law. In other words, we find in the Book of Religion Farabi’s most direct statements regarding the competing claims of reason and revelation on human life. But the title is in a way misleading, since in this work Farabi treats the themes of philosophy and political science with as much care as he does religion. Indeed, the inclusion of such themes in a book primarily about religion leaves the reader with the distinct impression that, for Farabi, each of these aspects of human life is inextricably tied to the others.

The Book of Religion is divided by Farabi into 27 subsections, the 14th and central of which is further divided into five subsections. Although Farabi does not group these divisions into larger sections, certain broad movements of the text are easily noticeable. Sections 1 through 6 are an attempt to define religion, and here Farabi begins to describe its relationship with philosophy. Sections 7 through 10 address the more political matters of jurisprudence and succession of rule. Sections 11 through 14d offer Farabi’s exposition of political science, while Sections 15 through 27 treat an explicitly philosophic political science, in contrast to political science simply. The final nine sections of the work, part of the treatment of philosophic political science, are undoubtedly the most striking feature of the Book of Religion. Here, Farabi launches into a sweeping account of the entire cosmos, describing its several parts and their hierarchical organization, as well as the relationship between human and divine governance. The tone of these sections stands in marked
contrast to the reserved language that precedes them. Indeed, the cosmological account begins so suddenly and dramatically that ascertaining the precise relationship of these reflections to the rest of the text is one of the major obstacles to any thoughtful interpretation of the work. In the analysis that follows, I intend to show that the various sections of the *Book of Religion* do indeed form a coherent whole, through which Farabi addresses some of the most fundamental questions facing man as a political and spiritual animal.
The Book of Religion

Part I: Religion and Philosophy (Sections 1-6)

The Book of Religion opens with a definition of its titular subject. Al-Farabi asserts that “religion is opinions and actions, determined and restricted with stipulations and prescribed for a community by their first ruler, who seeks to obtain through their practicing it a specific purpose with respect to them or by means of them” (43). Several features of this definition are worth noting in greater detail. Religion first comes to sight as political; it is the comprehensive collection of beliefs and behaviors bestowed upon a community by its first ruler. The size of the community is not limited; it “may be a tribe, a city or district, a great nation, or many nations” (43). Traditional mythologies that develop over time and are passed down through generations are excluded by this definition; the religion spoken of by Farabi is emphatically the product of a single mind that seeks a specific purpose. Religion necessarily involves both opinions and actions; thus, legislation concerning actions that does not prescribe particular beliefs cannot be religious, nor can prescribed beliefs that are not accompanied by rules of action.

Farabi distinguishes four classes of rulers, distinguished on the basis of the kind of good they seek. First, the virtuous ruler “seeks only to obtain, for himself and for everyone under his rulership, the ultimate happiness that is truly happiness; and that religion will be virtuous religion” (43). Although Farabi is completely silent for now about what constitutes

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6 The first ruler is not necessarily the first chronological ruler of a community, but is in all cases first in importance due to his role as religious founder.

ultimate happiness, he immediately goes on, in discussing the next type of ruler, to offer a list of goods that fall short.

The second class of ruler identified by Farabi is the ignorant ruler, who “seeks to obtain, for himself by means of [the ruled], one of the ignorant goods—either necessary good, that is, health and bodily well-being; or wealth; or pleasure; or honor and glory; or conquest” (43). However, the ignorant ruler is not necessarily so selfish; “the most virtuous of the ignorant rulers” (43) seeks one of the ignorant goods exclusively for the ruled or for both himself and the ruled in common. By calling these ignorant rulers “most virtuous,” Farabi indicates that both the pursuit of common goods as well as pure sacrifice are more virtuous than seeking one's own good at the expense of others. Though he makes no explicit comment about the relative ranking of sacrifice on the one hand and pursuit of the common good on the other, it must be remembered that the virtuous ruler exhibits the latter aim. Whatever the relationship of the ignorant ruler to his subjects, he is so called because the goods he seeks are not conducive to ultimate happiness. But after excluding the ignorant goods, what is left for the city to pursue? Perhaps ultimate happiness must regard the well-being of the soul, a subject about which Farabi will say very little throughout the work.

Third, the errant ruler “presumes himself to have virtue and wisdom and those under his rulership presume and believe that of him without him being like that” (43). Furthermore, such a ruler “seeks that he and those under his rulership obtain something presumed to be ultimate happiness without it being truly so” (44). Like the virtuous ruler, the errant ruler necessarily seeks his own good in common with the good of the ruled. However, the errant ruler is distinguished from the virtuous ruler in that the former is only
believed to possess that virtue which the latter possesses in fact. But while the errant ruler is explicitly said to lack wisdom, Farabi does not say that the virtuous ruler is wise.

Finally, the deceptive ruler is he who is thought by the ruled to pursue ultimate happiness for both himself and the ruled, when in fact he seeks to “obtain one of the ignorant goods by means of them” (44). Thus, Farabi's classificatory scheme seems, at first glance, to identify four distinct types of rulers. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes increasingly difficult to see exactly how the ignorant ruler constitutes a separate and distinct class. It is not possible for the ignorant ruler to believe that he is attaining true happiness, for then the ignorant ruler who seeks the good of himself and of the ruled would be indistinguishable from the errant ruler. Nor can the ignorant ruler lead a deceived populace, for then he would be indistinguishable from the deceptive ruler. In order to constitute a separate category, the ignorant ruler must knowingly seek ignorant goods without deceiving the population into thinking he is doing anything else. But how would such an arrangement come to be? Will subjects tolerate such a ruler if they are not deceived about his aims? Is it psychologically possible for a ruler to pursue a good he knows to be deficient? The last of these questions applies no less to the deceptive ruler, since he, too, pursues one of the ignorant goods.

It must therefore be the case that ignorant and deceptive rulers share the mistaken opinion that there are no truer goods than health, wealth, pleasure, honor, and conquest, and no ultimate happiness beyond the happiness offered by these. But if this is so, how is the ignorant ruler different from the errant ruler? Would they not both simply be mistaken about the nature of ultimate happiness? Since Farabi presents the errant ruler as a separate
category, the error of such a ruler must not be that he believes one of the ignorant goods to constitute true happiness; this is the error of the other two non-virtuous rulers. Rather, the errant ruler believes in some good beyond these earthly goods, but he is distinguished from the virtuous ruler in that the good he seeks is not truly happiness. Could Farabi mean to indicate by such a category deluded claimants to prophetic revelation? Such men truly believe that they have access to some ultimate good that transcends mere worldly pleasures; they presume themselves to have virtue and wisdom, and they are believed by their followers to possess these qualities. If this is indeed what Farabi means to indicate, then by presenting a typology of rulers that is more complex than it first appears, he would quietly be pointing to the problem of distinguishing between true and false claims to divine inspiration.

This impression is confirmed by the fact that Farabi immediately turns to discuss revelation as that which accompanies the kingly art and thus distinguishes the virtuous ruler from all others: “the craft of the virtuous first ruler is kingly and joined with revelation from God” (44). Earlier, Farabi had explicitly stated that the errant ruler believed himself to possess wisdom, but surprisingly, the virtuous ruler was not said to possess wisdom explicitly. Thus, revelation first comes to light as a substitute for wisdom as the distinguishing feature of the virtuous ruler. Furthermore, it is clear that the specific knowledge that separates virtuous rule is knowledge of true happiness—this is precisely the way in which all other types of rulers fall short. It is, for the moment, not perfectly clear what the relationship among revelation, wisdom, and knowledge of true happiness is in Farabi’s scheme.

For now, Farabi elaborates on the first of these subjects, asserting that the virtuous
first ruler determines the actions and opinions of religion by means of revelation. But this may occur in one of two strikingly different ways: either revelation bestows determined, particular commands directly upon the ruler, or “he determines them by means of the faculty he acquires from revelation and from the Revealer, may He be exalted, so that the stipulations with which he determines the virtuous opinions and actions are disclosed to him by means of it” (44). In the first case, the ruler appears to exert no influence over the content of religious law; he is merely the vessel through which God communicates his will to the community. In the second case, however, Farabi emphasizes the agency of the ruler; God reveals to him a special faculty, through which he determines opinions and actions himself. It is also possible that “some [virtuous opinions and actions] come about in the first way and some in the second way” (44). Farabi therefore leaves open the radical possibility that revelation consists entirely of a divinely bestowed faculty through which a virtuous first ruler is able to determine the proper actions and opinions to legislate for his community. Such a faculty could perhaps also be described as a kind of practical, political wisdom. The first section concludes with the remark that theoretical science has already explained how divine revelation comes about “and how the faculty acquired from revelation and from the Revealer occurs in a human being” (44, emphasis added). Theoretical science therefore confirms that revelation operates, at least in part, in the second way mentioned by Farabi. The alternative extreme possibility, that revelation consists entirely of predetermined particulars, is quietly dismissed.

In Section 2, Farabi begins to offer a more precise account of the content of virtuous religion. Religion consists of actions and opinions, and the latter may in turn be
divided into opinions about theoretical matters and opinions about voluntary matters. Farabi offers a lengthy list of subjects described by theoretical opinions of religion. Some of the items on the list are not surprising; Islam, the religion that permeated Farabi's historical context, certainly provides opinions on God, the spiritual beings, the coming into being of the world, divine justice, the soul, prophecy, and the afterlife. But Farabi also includes subjects that are not so commonly included in traditional religious teaching; thus, he claims that virtuous religion includes opinions about “how the primary bodies were generated and that some of the primary bodies are the sources of all the other bodies that are gradually generated and pass away” (45), as well as opinions about “the intellect, its rank in the world, and its station in relation to God and the spiritual beings” (45). While topics roughly corresponding to these could certainly be located in the Qur'an, certain of Farabi's own works—specifically the *Virtuous City* and the *Political Regime*—address these issues more directly than most religious texts. Furthermore, the *Book of Religion* itself culminates in a sweeping picture of the cosmos, in which Farabi will offer theoretical opinions regarding, for example, “how the things the world encompasses are linked together and organized” (45). In other words, Farabi's enumeration of the theoretical opinions offered by virtuous religion appears to describe, above all else, portions of his own writing. While it would certainly be inaccurate to claim that in such passages Farabi means to legislate his own religion, he clearly indicates in this section that certain of his own writings contain a religious element and are therefore not strictly philosophic.

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8 Compared to the highly parallel metaphysical sections in the *Virtuous City* and the *Political Regime*, which focus on the coming into being of the world and the cosmic status of human intellect, the concluding sections of the *Book of Religion* emphasize to a much greater extent the strict hierarchical order of the universe.
The voluntary opinions of virtuous religion concern examples from the past and present of virtuous and vicious men. Regarding men from the past, Farabi speaks of “the prophets, the most virtuous kings, the righteous rulers, and the leaders of the right way and of truth” (45). As vicious counterparts of these, he mentions “the most depraved kings, the profligate rulers exercising authority over the inhabitants of ignorant communities, and the leaders of the errant way” (45). This section features the only use of the word “prophet” in the entire text, and comparing the two lists makes it clear that there is no vicious counterpart of the prophet. This is unsurprising, since presumably it is revelation that distinguishes prophets from the other virtuous types mentioned. However, this would seem to imply that not all virtuous kings experience revelation, apparently undermining the claim in Section 1 that the virtuous first ruler is necessarily accompanied by revelation. Farabi therefore draws the reader’s attention to the distinction between first rulership as religious founding on the one hand and kingly rule on the other; there is no necessity that the latter involve revelation.

Although Farabi has made clear that religious opinions have their source in revelation, they may be revealed in one of two different ways, as noted previously. The theoretical and voluntary opinions described here could be revealed as predetermined; this would explain how the first ruler has such astounding knowledge of the cosmos and of historical figures that preceded his own lifetime. But what if, as the alternative account states, revelation is a faculty by which the first ruler determines these opinions himself? By what possible faculty would the first ruler be able to determine the structure of the cosmos? Is such knowledge accessible to man as man, or is divine revelation, understood conventionally, understood conventionally,

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9 As indicated above in connection with Section 1, the category of errant ruler seems to refer primarily to false claimants to revelation, who would not be prophets in the true sense.
necessary if the community is to have any confidence in the truth of its opinions about
divine matters? Strikingly, Farabi has not explicitly said that the opinions in virtuous religion
need to be true, only that the virtuous ruler must seek that which is truly happiness for
himself and for the ruled. He furthermore concludes Section 2 by departing from the purely
descriptive tone employed so far and offering the following prescription for religion: “The
descriptions of the things comprised by the opinions of religion ought to be such as to bring
the citizens to imagine everything in the city … so that what is described will be likenesses the
citizens will follow in their ranks and actions” (45, emphasis added). Whether the city is in
fact such as it is described by religious opinions is less important than the effects those
opinions have on the citizenry. The guiding principle for the theoretical and voluntary
opinions of religion is therefore political expedience. But is it not possible that the demands
of political expedience conflict with the demands of truth? In the case of such a conflict,
what is the virtuous first ruler to do?

Farabi will soon treat the relationship between truth and religion explicitly. But
before this discussion takes place, he offers an account of the actions of virtuous religion in
Section 3. Just as religious opinions are divided into theoretical and voluntary, so too can
actions be divided into two categories. First, Farabi speaks of “actions and speeches” (46) by
which God, the spiritual beings, prophets, kings, rulers, and leaders are praised and by which
vicious rulers are blamed. Second, “after all this” (46), there are those actions by which the
members of cities deal with one another and with themselves. Farabi's transition from the
first type of action to the second makes it clear that speeches of praise and blame are in
some sense prior to or more fundamental than the actions by which citizens deal with one
another. He thereby emphasizes the extent to which a ruler cannot expect to regulate human
action except in the context of opinions about the highest things. This being the case, a strict
separation of theoretical and voluntary matters would seem to be impossible, since the
former influence the latter. Indeed, Farabi stresses this fact through his unnecessarily
complex presentation of religious opinions and actions. Some religious opinions describe
those who should be praised or blamed, while some religious actions prescribe speeches by
which they are praised or blamed. These largely overlapping divisions emphasize the
difficulty of envisioning a purely theoretical science that would have no substantial impact
on the daily political life of citizens.\(^\text{10}\)

This point is further supported in Section 4, where Farabi turns to consider a set of
related terms. “Religion” and “creed” are near synonyms, as are “law” and “tradition” (46).
The former pair seems to represent the aspect of religion that deals with opinions, while the
latter pair regards actions. However, “law” may also refer to the determined opinions, such
that law, religion, and creed would all be synonymous. Again, no clean division between the
actions and beliefs inculcated by religion is possible.

In the latter half of Section 4, Farabi gives the first account in the text of the
relationship between truth and the theoretical opinions contained within religion. Virtuous
religion contains determined opinions that “are either the truth or a likeness of the truth”
(46). The truth is that which can be ascertained either through “primary knowledge, or by
demonstration” (46). Thus, any theoretical opinion contained in virtuous religion that is not

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\(^{10}\) Both here and in the previous section, Farabi has given a special emphasis to the ruled as members of cities. Although the virtuous religions community may expand over many nations, the opinions and actions of religion are primarily directed at regulating the daily life of citizens, which takes place in cities.
a first principle or demonstrable on the basis of first principles must be a likeness of the truth, rather than the truth simply. However, while the account so far has made it seem as though virtuous religion contains only opinions that are either strictly true or likenesses of the truth, Farabi immediately goes on to say, “any religion in which the first type of opinions does not comprise what a human being can ascertain either from himself or by demonstration and in which there is no likeness of anything he can ascertain in one of these two ways is an errant religion” (46). This is a convoluted construction, which is more radical than it first appears. Clearly, virtuous religion must include theoretical opinions that are either true or likenesses of the truth. But shockingly, Farabi leaves open the possibility that virtuous religion will contain untrue opinions in addition to these; that is, he does not make the stronger statement that a religion containing even one untrue theoretical opinion is an errant religion. According to Farabi's standard, a religion that includes some false theoretical opinions might still be virtuous, provided it contains, in addition, likenesses of demonstrable truths.

Farabi's use of the word “errant” to describe religions that have no basis in truth whatsoever recalls the errant ruler of Section 1. It seemed then that, as a ruler who believes himself to be wise and to possess knowledge of true happiness beyond worldly happiness, the errant ruler was primarily a deluded claimant to divine inspiration. By using the same word to denote religions that have no basis in truth, Farabi confirms this suspicion. But is the difference between virtuous and errant religion merely one of degree, given that even the former may include some untrue theoretical opinions? The essential distinction—one of

11 That is, theoretical opinions, rather than those that describe virtuous and vicious leaders.
kind and not merely degree—stems from the fact that the founder of virtuous religion apprehends the truth, though he may choose to temper it through likenesses or adulterate it with a degree of untruth. The errant ruler, in contrast, is simply ignorant of the truth. Farabi has so far given no explanation for why the virtuous religious founder would not legislate simply true theoretical opinions to the exclusion of all else. An explicit answer to this puzzle is never offered in the *Book of Religion*, but it helpful to recall the end of Section 2. There, Farabi indicated that the aim of religious opinions is to provide models that citizens will follow in their actions, presumably for the sake of political health. But if this were the sole desideratum of religious teachings, then why must virtuous religion have any basis in truth at all? Should not the most virtuous religion simply be that which fosters the healthiest political society, regardless of whether its theoretical opinions have a basis in truth?

Clearly, truth and political expedience are not simply opposed; a public teaching that is manifestly false can in no way be efficacious. On the other hand, the theoretical opinions legislated by a religious founder regard topics that do not admit of easy proof or refutation. As long as the opinions are sufficiently plausible—that is, as long as a sufficient number of people can be persuaded of their truth—they may have a salutary political effect regardless of their ultimate truth. Thus, a community that believes in the eternal reward and punishment of individual souls after death on the basis of divine justice could conceivably experience political benefits from such an opinion regardless of its truth. As long as we remain uncertain about the ultimate ontological status of our deepest hopes, we cannot be sure that the truth about theoretical matters will always be conducive to political harmony.

This being the case, should the virtuous religious founder care for the truth of public
teachings at all, beyond what is required for political purposes? There are at least two reasons not to dismiss this possibility entirely. First, Farabi stated in Section 1 that the good sought by the virtuous first ruler—for himself and for the political community—is not bodily health, wealth, pleasure, honor, or conquest. But it is precisely these goods that would seem to be gained by legislating with an eye toward social harmony above all else. Might not some spiritual health be gained when citizens are permitted to partake in the truth to the extent they are capable? Even if such spiritual health comes at the expense of ignorant goods, would not the virtuous first ruler be willing to make such a trade? Second, despite the disguised radicalism of Section 4, the distinction Farabi makes between virtuous and errant religion is not meaningless; the theoretical opinions of the former must include either the truth or likenesses of the truth, even if untrue opinions are present in addition. For now, the principle according to which the virtuous first ruler determines how much truth to reveal through public teaching remains mysterious. All that can be said with certainty is that Farabi does not allow political expedience to eclipse the demands of truth entirely.

Having offered some remarks about the status of truth in virtuous religion, Farabi turns in Section 5 to treat the relationship between religion and philosophy. Just as the latter contains theoretical and practical aspects, so too does the former; in both cases, “the calculative theoretical part is what a human being is not able to do when he knows it, whereas the practical part is what a human being is able to do when he knows it” (46). Purely theoretical knowledge, therefore, is that which cannot be acted upon. But is such knowledge conceivable, or does all knowledge necessarily have some impact on the manner in which one lives? Certainly, some fields of human inquiry seem to have no direct impact on our
perception of the proper way to live, but are rather oriented toward discovering the nature of things—mathematics and astronomy, for example. But to the extent that a science like astronomy uncovers certain mechanisms underlying perceptible phenomena, does it not thereby alter our understanding of humanity’s place in the cosmos? A comprehensive science of planetary motion could perhaps lead one to wonder whether the universe as a whole operates on the basis of some mechanistic necessity. Progress in theoretical philosophy would therefore necessarily seem to exert its influence on practical matters. Indeed, the theoretical opinions explicitly mentioned by Farabi in Section 2—regarding God, divine justice, and the afterlife, among other things—undoubtedly have a extraordinary effect on the actions of one who subscribes to them. Thus, the manner in which Farabi defines theoretical and practical philosophy points to the absurdity of attempting a strict classification of knowledge into one or the other category.

Why, then, does Farabi suggest any such distinction at all? Although knowledge about the nature of things might often or always influence practical matters, there would still seem to be a meaningful distinction to be made between knowledge that is directly addressed to questions of action and knowledge that exerts an indirect influence on how one lives. Thus, while the virtuous first ruler’s apprehension of truth is a matter of theoretical knowledge, his decision about when to include likenesses and untrue opinions in his public teaching is a question of practical reason, though perhaps shaped by his theoretical insights. This must be kept in mind when Farabi turns to offer his own theoretical account of the cosmos in the concluding sections of the work; by choosing to commit to writing—and thus make available to all literate people—a particular view of the universe, a philosopher is
necessarily subject to the demands of practical reason.

Both the practical and theoretical aspects of religion are subordinate to the corresponding aspects of philosophy, but in different ways. The practical injunctions of religion are in fact the universals of practical philosophy, “made determinate by stipulations restricting them” (47). For this reason, “all virtuous laws are subordinate to the universals of practical philosophy” (47). Apparently, the universals of practical philosophy, if they are to be useful, require translation into more specific injunctions fit for a particular time and place. As Farabi will go on to discuss explicitly in a few sections, laws are therefore in need of updating as social circumstances change. Theoretical religious opinions, on the other hand, “have their demonstrative proofs in theoretical philosophy and are taken in religion without demonstrative proofs” (47). Farabi makes no mention of theoretical opinions needing to be made more particular or to be adapted to historical circumstance. Perhaps this aspect of religious legislation is inherently more enduring than practical legislation; while unforeseeable historical change will render many traditional laws obsolete and require new laws where there previously were none, opinions about the highest things may continue to guide a community indefinitely. But if it is indeed the case that some theoretical opinions in religion are capable of demonstrative proof, what reason could the virtuous first ruler possibly have to keep such proofs to himself? Perhaps, in demonstrating the truth of some theoretical opinions, the virtuous ruler would be unable to avoid drawing attention to those opinions which do not permit demonstrative proof, but which are nevertheless necessary for the subjects to believe.

In the latter half of Section 5, Farabi appears to merely recapitulate the foregoing discussion. But this time, in addition to claiming that practical philosophy comprises the
universals that inform the particulars of religious law, he asserts that practical philosophy “gives the demonstrative proof for the determined actions that are in virtuous religion” (47). But while proof of a theoretical opinion is easy to conceive, what could it mean for determined actions to have demonstrative proofs? Perhaps a demonstrative proof of an action would prove that the action is indeed good. Farabi would thus be pointing to the need for a comprehensive account of the human good, such as is not provided within religious legislation itself. Such an account would be necessary if some goods are to be ranked above others, as Farabi does when he criticizes the ignorant goods in Section 1. But if Farabi possesses knowledge of what the greatest good for man is, he does not mention it explicitly at any point in the work.

Section 5 concludes with the remark that the kingly craft, as that which is “responsible for what the virtuous religion consists of” (47) is entirely subordinate to philosophy. Thus, revelation, which in Section 1 was said to accompany the kingly craft of the virtuous first ruler, is dropped from the account when philosophy explicitly enters the picture. But by claiming that religion in its entirety is subordinate to philosophy, Farabi is not simply denigrating the former. Rather, by insisting that virtuous religion has a basis in a philosophic understanding of the truth, he in fact offers a firm, rational basis for religious teachings. But at what cost does establishing religion on such grounds come? Certainly, Farabi has greatly restricted the autonomy of religious legislation; according to the account he offers, theology is necessarily the handmaid of philosophy. In asserting this, is he not committing a most grave oversight? What about the possibility that revelation in fact exists in the first sense mentioned in Section 1; that is, as a collection of predetermined, particular
actions and opinions given to man by God? As long as revelation of this type remains a possibility, Farabi cannot reject outright the need to follow those actions and opinions that do not permit philosophic explanation. As the product of divine wisdom, such laws would have a claim to be obeyed, regardless of their apparent rationality or irrationality. For the moment, Farabi seems to ignore this challenge, rather than confront it directly. And while direct confrontation with the claims of conventional piety never occurs in the Book of Religion, we can only expect that Farabi will not leave the challenge unmet.

In Section 6, Farabi considers two arts that lend support to the ruler as he attempts to establish religious opinions in the souls of his subjects: dialectic and rhetoric. Beginning with the former, Farabi claims that “Dialectic yields strong presumption about all or most of what demonstrative proofs yield certainty about” (47). On the basis of this statement, it is not immediately clear why dialectic is not rendered utterly superfluous by demonstration; not only does dialectic only offer “strong presumption” in place of “certainty,” but it may not even be able to do with this with regard to every subject admitting of demonstration. But as Farabi goes on to state, “virtuous religion is not only for philosophers or only for someone of such a station as to understand what is spoken about only in a philosophic manner” (47). Not everyone is capable of working through demonstrative proofs about religious matters, “either due to nature or because they are occupied with other things” (48). Dialectic would therefore seem to serve the purpose of persuading those who are prevented, either due to intellectual limitations or lack of leisure, from struggling with a rigorous philosophic

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12 The Arabic words translated as “dialectic” and “rhetoric” are جدل (jadal) and خطاب (kitaba), respectively. Farabi therefore avoids explicit reference to the art of الكلام (kalâm), dialectical theology which had already become highly controversial in his day.
education that would presumably culminate in demonstrations about religious matters. Rhetoric, on the other hand, “persuades about most of what is not such as to be proven by demonstration or looked into by dialectic” (48). This second art is therefore unnecessary for those religious teachings that are capable of demonstrative proof, as well as for those teachings that may be arrived at through dialectic. As opposed to dialectic, which only aids in the establishment of demonstrably true opinions, rhetoric is only needed to the extent that virtuous religion teaches that which is not demonstrably true. When he asserts that “both dialectic and rhetoric are of major value for verifying the opinions of religion for the citizens and for defending, supporting, and establishing those opinions in their souls” (48), Farabi obscures the critically different ways in which these two arts buttress religion, thus disguising the fact that not all opinions legislated by a virtuous religious founder will be equally true.

Nevertheless, virtuous religion appears to be, above all else, a presentation of philosophy that is acceptable to subjects who are for various reasons incapable of grasping the unadulterated truth. But in claiming that “virtuous religion is not only for philosophers” (47), Farabi makes it clear that philosophers, too, derive some benefit from its implementation. Thus, the reader is reminded of the opening section of the Book of Religion, in which Farabi asserted that the virtuous first ruler seeks ultimate happiness both for himself and for the ruled. In the intervening sections, Farabi has shown how subjects of virtuous religion would benefit; the selective inculcation of truth by a virtuous first ruler has the potential to foster social harmony as well as guide non-philosophers some distance along the path to truth. But we have yet to see what rewards await the first ruler himself.

Furthermore, in this section Farabi has given us some reason to doubt the existence
of a simple common good between ruler and ruled. In discussing the need for religious, rather than philosophic, instruction of the public, Farabi had asserted that the many are prevented from reaching the station of philosophy by one of two factors: natural limitations or lack of leisure. Thus, it is possible that some philosophically capable individuals are held back by nothing more than their occupation with other tasks. By strongly emphasizing the importance of leisure for philosophic reflection, Farabi provokes the reader to consider what sort of occupations would most seriously inhibit philosophy, and why, if philosophers are by nature rare, those who are capable should not be encouraged to pursue it. But beyond these mere indications, Farabi is silent, and he certainly does not draw further attention to the looming problem that is only now becoming apparent: the philosopher is the only man capable of legislating a virtuous religion, and yet political rule, perhaps more than any other task, would allow no time for leisurely reflection. It is conceivable that a philosopher could begin ruling only after reaching a sufficient level of insight, but the daily activity of ruling would undoubtedly come at the cost of further reflection. If ultimate happiness consists in partaking of the joys of contemplation to the extent one is capable, the one qualified for virtuous rule would seemingly be better off avoiding rulership altogether. However, as was glimpsed in Section 2 by Farabi's separation of prophets and kings, there is a meaningful distinction to be made between the founder of a virtuous religion and the king who actively rules in accordance with its principles. While it is difficult to conceive of a philosopher undertaking the latter task uncompelled, perhaps the act of founding is less antithetical to the demands of philosophy. While we cannot yet be sure this is the case, the distinction between founder and successive ruler will be a central theme in the following sections.
Part II: Succession and Jurisprudence (Sections 7-10)

Having raised the reader’s expectations for the possibility of a religious rule based on philosophic truth, Farabi turns in Section 7 to consider practical limitations that constrain the first ruler’s political project. For several reasons, it is unlikely that the first ruler will be able to offer a comprehensive account of human action. Death may cut his career short, or political demands such as war will prevent him from devoting his full attention to legislation. Furthermore, if the ruler restricts himself to offering guidance only on those topics which present themselves in his time and place, much will be left undetermined, “Since not everything that can occur does occur in his time or in his country” (48). While practical legislation is therefore necessarily contingent upon the particular historical circumstances in which a first ruler finds himself, this is apparently not the case for theoretical religious opinions—at no point in this section does Farabi speak of theoretical opinions being left undetermined. This offers further support for a hypothesis first hinted at in Section 5. There, Farabi had stated that practical stipulations of religion are subordinate to practical philosophy because the latter contains the universals that inform the former. Theoretical religious opinions, on the other hand, were said to be subordinate to theoretical philosophy only in the sense that the latter contains demonstrative proofs for the former. Taken together, these two sections suggest that the same opinions about the highest things can guide men across time and location, despite historical changes that may necessitate an extrapolation or alteration of the first ruler’s practical legislation.

Furthermore, Section 7 concludes with the remark that if the first ruler begins by legislating those actions that are of greatest benefit to the city, it is possible that “someone
else—a contemporary or a successor—can extrapolate them by following in his footsteps” (49, emphasis added). Thus, the one responsible for extrapolating from the first ruler's basic principles may begin to do so even while the first ruler is still alive! It would therefore be possible to have a regime in which a philosophic founder operates alongside a more active, but subordinate, executive officer who applies the law to particular circumstances as they arise. In such an arrangement, the first ruler would presumably focus his attention on providing a healthy theoretical framework that will guide his community far into the future. To the extent that the first ruler makes practical determinations, he does so with full knowledge that they are contingent on current circumstances and may be subject to change at a later date or in another place. Farabi therefore emphasizes the distinction between the first ruler as a founder and successive rulers who actively apply the former's legislative principles to particular cases.

Even if a sufficiently skilled contemporary exists, it will necessarily be the case that not all possible determinations are made in the lifetime of the first ruler. Thus, the first possible cause of an incomplete legacy of practical determinations mentioned by Farabi is the death of the ruler. Death first comes to sight in the Book of Religion as that which terminates a founder's career prematurely. But in pointing to this possibility, Farabi seems to be overlooking the fundamental alternative to his view of religious founding. According to the ordinary, pious view, the virtuous first ruler is not merely a philosopher with special access to theoretical knowledge, but a prophet chosen by God to convey the latter's message to humanity. If God wills that his teaching be conveyed in its entirety, then what reason do we have to fear that our only line of communication to the divine be cut off prematurely?
Farabi has been frustratingly silent so far about the theological alternative to the rationalist account that he favors. Once again, we can only expect that a response awaits us in the rest of the work.

In Section 8, Farabi considers the possibility that the virtuous first ruler is succeeded after his death by someone “who is like him in all respects” (49). In this case, the responsibility for filling in lacunae from the first ruler’s legislative determinations will fall to such a man. But the task of the virtuous successor is not limited to making determinations in cases where the first ruler was silent; in addition, “it is also up to him to alter much of what the first had legislated and to determine it in another way, when he knows that this is best for his time” (49). Such an alteration would in fact be undertaken by the first ruler himself, if only he were alive to see how circumstances had changed.13 Farabi thus makes it clear that, in the absence of a succession of rulers whose virtue matches that of the founder, the particular actions legislated in religion will necessarily become outdated. The mortality of the virtuous founder is deeply problematic for political society because, in the absence of living wisdom, laws cannot be properly updated to maintain their original intention.

Furthermore, even if a community is fortunate enough to experience a succession of virtuous rulers, we cannot expect the ruled to accurately determine the virtue of any particular successor; such a judgment can only be made by someone sufficiently wise. By remaining silent about the actual process by which a successor ascends to power, Farabi hides the enormous difficulty involved in ensuring that the best men rule. If, by some further fortune, the wisest man is chosen to rule, will the ruled stand by passively as he overturns the

13 As expected, Farabi does not claim that the successor should alter the theoretical opinions legislated by the first ruler.
now obsolete determinations of his predecessor? A wise successor has no choice but to present himself as a restorer and updater of the founder's will, but it is not at all clear that he will be permitted by his subjects to do anything more than slavishly follow the letter of the established law. Despite these severe practical limitations, Farabi seems to be achieving an important goal in this section of the text: by making the theoretical point that law will necessarily deteriorate with time, he attempts to temper the often violent attachment that the many have to ancestral religious determinations. Writing in a context of religious devotion, Farabi wishes to illustrate the utopian circumstances that are needed if such deterioration is to be avoided.

But in making his point, Farabi completely ignores the possibility that the law of the founder is meant to apply, unchanged, to all times and places. If the law of the founder is nothing other than the commands of God, what possible grounds does Farabi have to suggest that these commands be altered when their goodness is no longer apparent? His assertion that religious law be altered in the face of changing historical circumstance forcefully opposes the view of conventional piety, according to which man must submit himself unquestioningly to the orders of his creator. Section 8 therefore offers a glimpse of Farabi's ultimate strategy for dealing with the theological alternative to his rationalist account. By showing that no law can possibly continue to apply perfectly through changing circumstances, Farabi forces his reader to consider if God would require adherence to unchanging commandments. While it could certainly be replied that divine law must be followed even when it appears ill-suited to a particular circumstance, Farabi perhaps expects that even pious readers will make the reasonable concession that God would not demand
slavish obedience to obsolete laws. This is by no means a decisive refutation of the opposing position; the response to the challenge of conventional piety clearly remains incomplete at this point in the text.

While pointing to the problem of obsolescence necessarily lowers the status of divine law, Farabi nevertheless prudently avoids fully undermining the high esteem in which the founder is held. Thus, Section 9 considers the more likely scenario in which there is no successor who matches the founder with respect to virtue. In such a case, it is necessary “for the successor to follow in the footsteps of the predecessor with respect to what he determines” (50). In the case that extrapolations are required, they must be made on the basis of “the things the first [ruler] determined by declaring them” (50). Farabi thus articulates a conservative defense of traditional law by taking advantage of his immediate historical context. Farabi’s environment is one in which no man thought himself capable of matching the virtue of Muhammad, or at least would not publicly admit to such pretensions. Despite the immediately preceding claim that law will deteriorate over time, Farabi is careful not to encourage reckless innovation.

As pointed to in the previous section, any successive ruler of sufficient virtue who does believe that an alteration to the original law must be made will be greatly constrained by public resistance to his project of reform. Farabi gives an indication of how moderate reform might be feasible in the face of such resistance when he turns to the art of jurisprudence, which “enables a human being to make a sound determination of each thing the lawgiver did not declare specifically by extrapolating it or inferring it from the things he determined” (50). Farabi claims that the jurist’s task is only possible if “his belief in the
opinions of that religion is correct and he possesses the virtues that are virtues in that
religion” (50). Since it is not necessarily the case that all of the opinions legislated by the
virtuous first ruler are true, what does it mean for a jurist to have a correct belief in those
opinions? Farabi’s choice of language is ambiguous; the word “صحيح” may mean true,
correct, or sound, but can also mean healthy, proper, and lawful. Since jurists are defined by
their lack of virtue relative to the founder, it seems unlikely that they possess the capacity to
distinguish between the founder’s true and untrue theoretical statements. Thus, Farabi points
to the necessary result of jurisprudence undertaken by men who lack the virtue of the
founder; unable to distinguish between true and untrue opinions, they will simply accept the
teachings of the founder on trust and work to extrapolate what they can from his recorded
commands. Our suspicion that the jurist does not recognize the possibility of the founder’s
untruth is strengthened when we examine Farabi’s second criteria for a jurist, that “he
possesses the virtues that are virtues in that religion” (50). Nowhere previously in the Book
of Religion has virtue been qualified in this way. By provoking the reader to contrast religious
virtues with virtue simply, Farabi points to the existence of trans-religious virtue, possessed
by the founder but perhaps not by most of his followers.

But given the possibility that a man with virtue to rival the founder does appear, and
given the certain resistance such a man would face in attempting to reform the
determinations of his predecessor, is the situation for religious reform at the hands of a wise
successor simply hopeless? Or can such a successor, who is either unwilling or incapable of
presenting himself as a new prophet, disguise himself as a mere jurist, thus exerting a more
subtle but still meaningful influence on religion? In Section 10, Farabi offers reasons to
believe the latter possibility. In addition to possessing thorough knowledge of the actions and statements of the lawgiver and knowledge of the lawgiver's language, “the jurist must be quite clever at recognizing the meaning intended by an equivocal name in the context in which it is used, as well as at recognizing equivocalness in speech” (51). It may therefore be the case that the literal and intended meanings of the lawgiver's statements diverge. But a jurist who is able to distinguish between literal and intended meaning might also be able to distinguish between demonstrably true and metaphorically true theoretical opinions. What, then, distinguishes the most capable jurist from the founding lawgiver? Of course, Farabi does not go so far as to say that the jurist should be able to recognize when the lawgiver includes untrue opinions. Nevertheless, by bringing the jurist closer in terms of virtue to the founder, Farabi intimates to the careful reader the necessity of disguising religious reform under the acceptable shroud of jurisprudence. In the face of practical limitations, perhaps the best a virtuous successor can do is claim that the founder was being equivocal when making a particularly problematic statement. Furthermore, by sketching an image of the ideal jurist, Farabi shows how high a standard would have to be met if religious legislation is to be protected from decay. To the extent that jurists are unable to peer into the mind of the lawgiver, the latter's intention will necessarily be frustrated as his determinations become increasingly obsolete with the passage of time.

Just as there are two parts of philosophy and of religion—opinions and actions—so, too, must there be two parts of jurisprudence. We have seen in a few foregoing passages that the voluntary determinations of a founder are in need of updating as historical

14 By claiming that the lawgiver may need to employ equivocal writing, Farabi causes the reader to wonder if he does not use similar methods himself.
circumstances change, while the founder's theoretical determinations are not. This being the case, what possible need could there be for a “jurist concerned with the opinions determined in religion” (52)? Farabi goes into no detail about the theoretical jurist, simply asserting that he “ought already to know what the jurist concerned with practices knows” (52). Perhaps this section represents a recognition by Farabi that, although theoretical opinions are less contingent upon time and place than laws concerning voluntary matters, they may nevertheless require updating, as humanity’s scientific understanding of the world progresses to such an extent that certain theoretical opinions are rendered unbelievable. For this reason, virtuous religion must allow some space for a jurist who can claim that certain theoretical opinions are merely likenesses of the truth, rather than the truth simply, should the need arise.

Section 10 concludes in a manner reminiscent of the latter half of Section 5, where Farabi spoke of the subordination of religion to philosophy. Here, he asserts that since practical jurisprudence “comprises only things that are particulars of the universals encompassed by political science” (52), it is subordinate to practical philosophy. This is the first mention in the text of political science, and it marks the transition to the next section of the work, in which this will be the primary focus. And although religion will not be mentioned again until the text’s final section, political science will turn out to share key similarities with religion as defined by Farabi in the opening lines of the work.

Part III: Political Science (Sections 11-14d)

Farabi defines political science by pointing out the various objects of inquiry it pursues, asserting that “Political science investigates happiness first of all” (52). According to
the typology of rulers offered in Section 1, the virtuous ruler is distinguished from all others in that only he aims at “the ultimate happiness that is truly happiness” (43). Thus, Farabi makes clear that the virtuous ruler must possess political science, since only in this way will he know what goods must be pursued. Political science allows its possessor to distinguish between true happiness and that which is merely presumed to be happiness. Farabi has hitherto been frustratingly silent about the nature of the former, and while he does not give a definition in this section, he does offer some characteristics. True happiness “is the one sought for its own sake; at no time is it sought in order to obtain something else by it; indeed, all other things are sought in order to obtain this one, and when it is obtained, the search is given up” (52). The happiness sought by the virtuous first ruler, both for himself and for the ruled, is therefore emphatically not instrumental. Somehow, the art of religious legislation is meant to achieve a state of fulfillment for all, or at least takes its bearings by such a standard.

While this is strange enough, Farabi continues by claiming that true happiness “does not come about in this life, but rather in the next life which is after this one” (52). The virtuous kingly craft therefore aims at a happiness that can only be attained through death! Conventional piety, of course, can easily make sense of this statement; ultimate happiness may only come about in the afterlife, in which individual souls are judged by God and sentenced to eternal reward or punishment. In light of this fact, anyone who would focus on the attainment of worldly goods, such as “affluence, pleasures, honor and being glorified, or anything else sought and acquired in this life” (52) is foolish. Even the acts of virtue undertaken by the pious man do not constitute ultimate happiness, since they are undertaken
for the sake of eternal bliss and are therefore merely instrumental. The virtuous ruler guides himself and his community toward divine favor by ordering the regime in accordance with the commands of God.

At no other point in the Book of Religion does Farabi bring himself so close to conventional piety. But given his persistent rationalism throughout the text, it would be worthwhile to consider other, more subtle implications of Farabi's statement that ultimate happiness cannot come about in this life. As an additional motivation to do so, it is worth mentioning that in his introduction to the philosophical allegory Hayy ibn Yaqzan, Ibn Tufayl reports, “in his commentary on Aristotle's Ethics, discussing human happiness, [Farabi] says that it exists only in this life, and on the heels of that has words to the effect that all other claims are senseless ravings and old wives' tales.” Though the text in question has been lost to us, and Ibn Tufayl may be exaggerating in the latter half of the quoted passage, it is nevertheless the case that Farabi's true eschatological views remain mysterious.

At the least, the claim that true happiness cannot be realized in this life would seem to be an accurate observation about the human condition; as long as we exist on this worldly plane, we cannot cease striving for a happiness that we do not possess. Human life sadly never arrives at that station which would allow for an utter contentedness that is stable. Furthermore, as creatures conscious of our own mortality—however much we may distract ourselves from it—it is clear that whatever happiness is available to us in this life must take our ultimate fate into account, if it is not to be mere delusion. Could Farabi perhaps be suggesting to the reader something about the nature of the philosophic life—a life that fully

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understands the utter transience of worldly goods and seeks to fix its gaze on something permanent? Farabi might therefore be indicating in this passage an important common ground between ordinary piety and philosophic insight; neither the pious man nor the philosopher will seek worldly pleasure above all else, though what each seeks differs in critical ways. By pointing toward this common ground, Farabi also provides an example of a public presentation of philosophy that is unlikely to incur the wrath of the many.

We learn in Section 12 that political science not only investigates the nature of true happiness, but also “the voluntary actions, ways of life, moral habits, states of character, and dispositions until it gives an exhaustive account of all of them and covers them in detail” (53). By allowing its possessor to understand the nature of true happiness and by giving an account of all the various ways of life, political science is therefore the precise science that discovers the happiest way of life. If the political scientist discovers that the life of a virtuous first ruler is the happiest, he will presumably undertake such a project, provided he is capable. If, on the other hand, he discovers that a certain kind of private life is happier, this would mean that Farabi’s virtuous founder is highly unlikely to exist, since anyone with the knowledge of true happiness would not seek to rule directly unless compelled. Therefore, either the happiest life is that of the virtuous first ruler, or the virtuous ruler as Farabi describes him is an impossibility. So far, we have only seen slight indications that rulership may come at the cost of private happiness, while the massive surface impression is that such a life represents the perfection of human virtue. The next few sections are of the utmost importance for determining Farabi’s ultimate stance toward the choiceworthiness of undertaking a project of religious founding.
In Section 13, Farabi claims that, after thoroughly investigating the various ways of life, political science “explains that these cannot all be found in one human being nor be done by one human being, but can be done and actually manifest themselves only be being distributed among an association of people” (53). Simply for economic reasons, utter self-sufficiency is impossible; no man can accomplish his task without the assistance of others undertaking their own different tasks. As an example, Farabi points to the farmer, who “cannot complete his task unless a carpenter assists him by preparing wood for the plow, a blacksmith by preparing steel for the plow, and a cowherd by preparing oxen for the yoke” (53). Farabi does not draw any attention to the fact that, in the example given, some of the arts exists for the sake of other arts; that is, the products of carpentry, blacksmithing, and cowherding are the inputs of farming. Presumably, the output of farming itself exists for some higher end, as well. This hierarchical structure of subordinate and superior arts would ultimately terminate in the highest purpose of the city, in light of which all other activities are merely instrumental. Farabi does not tell us what such an activity would be, only that the various groups within a community must “cooperate, through the actions and dispositions in each, to perfect the purpose of the whole association in the same way that the organs of a human being cooperate, through the capacities in each, to perfect the purpose of the whole body” (53).

By failing to describe the highest purpose of the city, Farabi provokes the reader to consider possible candidates. But in doing so, the thoughtful reader comes across a difficulty regarding the prospect of a common good between ruler and ruled. We know from Section 1 that the virtuous city is oriented toward ultimate happiness. Furthermore, we learned in
Section 12 that such happiness is unavailable in this life. But if some regimes are better than others, it must be the case that there exists a certain way of life that either secures ultimate happiness in the next life or approximates it in this life. The virtuous city aiming at ultimate happiness for all must therefore cultivate such a way of life among its citizens. But if the best human life—compared to which all other activities are instrumental—is the life of the ruler, then the ruler attains or approximates true happiness himself while using the ruled as instruments. The typology of rulers in Section 1 did not include a ruler who seeks true happiness in this way; the virtuous ruler necessarily seeks true happiness for the ruled as well as for himself, while the deceptive ruler seeks an ignorant good. Nevertheless, such an arrangement would seem to be necessary, if the life of rulership is indeed the happiest. If, on the other hand, there is some private life happier than the life of ruling, then the ruler’s task is merely instrumental, providing the order necessary for such a pursuit to take place.

Farabi’s image of the virtuous city is, however, not simply a logical impossibility. Two criteria must be met if there is to be a common good between ruler and ruled: the life of the ruler must be happiest, and human capacities must vary so widely across individuals that some members of the city find the greatest happiness available to them in the performance of tasks that are instrumentally useful to the ruler’s project. Given such a set of circumstances, the ruler would attain his truest happiness while guiding each individual member of the community toward whatever happiness they are capable of attaining.

It is necessary at this point to recall the distinction, hinted at by Farabi in several previous passages, between the virtuous first ruler as founder and the more active, but subordinate, executive ruler, who may exist contemporaneously alongside the first ruler or
rule after his death. As described in Section 1, the virtuous first ruler “seeks only to obtain, for himself and for everyone under his rulership, the ultimate happiness that is truly happiness” (43). Might it not be the case that all successive kings are under the rulership, so to speak, of the religious founder and lawgiver? The distinction between these two types of rulers will be made explicit in Section 14, the central section of the text. In addition, Farabi will make clear the high standard that must be met by the kingly craft, if it is to provide for the common good.

Section 14 is the only part of the Book of Religion that is divided by Farabi into subsections. In the first of five such subsections, Farabi states that political science “distinguishes the ways of life, moral habits, and dispositions that, when practiced in cities or nations, make their dwellings prosper and their inhabitants obtain goods in this life here below, and ultimate happiness in the afterlife; and it sets them apart from those not like that” (54). This statement makes more explicit than ever the fact that the virtuous first ruler must be the political scientist _par excellence_. Interestingly, Farabi speaks here as if the same ways of life that are conducive to prosperity in this world also attain ultimate happiness in the next life. But prosperity, according to any conventional definition, would seem to involve the acquisition of what Farabi has repeatedly called “ignorant goods”; that is, physical health, wealth, pleasure, honor, and conquest. Perhaps it is the case that, while such objects by no means constitute man’s ultimate good and should not be treated as though they do, they are not simply opposed to ultimate happiness. Farabi has not ruled out the possibility that such goods are prerequisites along the way to ultimate happiness, or that they are byproducts of the pursuit of ultimate happiness.
In the concluding remark of this subsection, however, Farabi reminds the reader of the singular importance of ultimate happiness, stating that “Only those voluntary actions, ways of life, moral habits, states of character, and dispositions by which ultimate happiness is attained are virtuous; only they are goods; and they are the ones that are truly noble” (54). Virtue, goodness, and nobility can only be defined with respect to ultimate happiness. Furthermore, Farabi seems to indicate that these three concepts are identical, at least with respect to their truest meaning, if not in popular discourse. That which is truly noble or virtuous is therefore nothing other than that which is good; there is no tension among the three, and each concept describes the way of life conducive to ultimate happiness. But since ultimate happiness cannot be attained in this world, to what extent can these qualities be realized in the course of a human life? Of course, even if perfect virtue were not attainable for human beings in this world, there could still be a meaningful standard that individuals could more or less successfully approximate. The most virtuous, best, and noblest man is therefore he who most profoundly recognizes the limits imposed by mortality and who adjusts his pursuits accordingly. Indeed, the repeated association of ultimate happiness with reminders of death seems to be Farabi's method of intimating to the reader that it is mortality above all else that causes ignorant goods to lose their appeal for the wise man.

It is not until Section 14a\textsuperscript{16} that Farabi finally mentions rulership as a subject of political science. This science teaches that rulership is necessary for bringing about “the things such as to be distributed in a city, in cities, in a nation, or in nations so as to be practiced in common” (54). In addition to the initial establishment of these common

\textsuperscript{16} The five subsections into which Section 14 is divided are labeled by Farabi as: 14, 14a, 14b, 14c, and 14d.
practices, rulership also aims at their preservation, “so that they do not disappear or become extinct” (54). Furthermore, rulership is itself a product of the kingly craft. This craft has as its object the regime, and “consists of cognizance of all the actions with which one goes about establishing, first, and preserving afterwards” (54). Cognizance of the actions necessary for founding alone does not constitute the kingly craft, unless one also possesses cognizance of the means by which a founding can be preserved. Farabi therefore repeatedly insists in the space of a few lines that it is the same craft that allows both the initial establishment and the long-term preservation of the proper actions of a political community. The relationship between rulership and the kingly craft clearly involves the subordination of the former to the latter, but why does Farabi require both concepts? Would it not be enough to say that rulership brings about the proper actions in the community and drop the kingly craft altogether? While such an approach would likely yield a clearer picture, Farabi’s inclusion of the kingly craft indicates an important point. In claiming that the kingly craft allows rulership to come about, Farabi makes it clear that the art that informs rulership is conceptually distinct from rulership itself. It therefore seems entirely possible that the possessor of the kingly craft might not take part in actual rule.

Farabi says nothing more about this at the moment, and instead distinguishes between virtuous and vicious rule. Rulership that establishes the ways of life aimed at ultimate happiness is virtuous rulership. This only comes about by means of the virtuous kingly craft, and the product of this craft is the virtuous regime. Whatever political community is subject to this regime, whether city or nation, is virtuous as well, and the human being who lives in this community is the virtuous human being. The vicious
counterparts of all of these are those that “aim at attaining one of the goods particularly characteristic of this world here below—that is, the ones the multitude presumed to be goods” (55). There are several types of vicious regimes, named according to the particular good sought above all others. Farabi thus evokes the typology of rulers offered in Section 1. But in that account, the virtuous first ruler who aims at true happiness was said to be the recipient of divine revelation. Furthermore, it was only by means of revelation that the first ruler was said to determine the actions and opinions of virtuous religion. Revelation is conspicuously absent from Farabi’s account when political science makes its entrance. It is important to recall that Farabi spoke of revelation in two vastly different ways in Section 1: as the receipt of predetermined particulars on the one hand or of a faculty by means of which the founder determines particulars himself on the other. Since knowledge of true happiness is apparently available through political science, might not the faculty bestowed by revelation be a kind of political prudence, by means of which the founder organizes the community in such a way that they attain the greatest happiness possible?

Although Farabi initially gives the impression that the virtue of an individual is entirely dependent on the virtue of his regime, he goes on to consider the possibility that some human beings may be mismatched with their city; thus, “it is not impossible for a human being who is part of the virtuous city to be living in an ignorant city, voluntarily or involuntarily” (55-56). But the man in such a situation is a kind of monstrous chimera, resembling “an animal that happens to have the legs of an animal belonging to an inferior species” (56). The ignorant man who happens to live in a virtuous city is similarly dual-natured; however, rather than possessing the legs of an inferior species, such a man “may be
likened to an animal that has the head of an animal belonging to a superior species” (56). Thus, Farabi concedes that even the virtuous city may contain ignorant individuals, who are benefited by their presence in a properly governed regime. But under what circumstances would the virtuous man find himself in an ignorant city? Farabi concludes the subsection by claiming that “the most virtuous persons, forced to dwell in ignorant cities due to the non-existence of the virtuous city, need to migrate to the virtuous city, if it happens to come into being at a certain moment” (56). A virtuous man therefore inhabits an ignorant city when the earth is filled with nothing but ignorant regimes, and no alternative is available. But why must “the most virtuous persons” merely wait for the virtuous city to come into being, rather than bringing it into being themselves? Is this not precisely the task of the first ruler—to determine opinions and actions such that the virtuous regime is brought into existence? If even the most virtuous men are sometimes unable to bring about the best regime, it must be the case that virtue is a necessary, but not a sufficient, precondition for the creation of such a regime. Farabi quietly indicates, for the first time in the Book of Religion, the tremendous influence of fortune in allowing or preventing the existence of the best regime.

However, even more perplexing is the claim that virtuous men may live in an ignorant city “voluntarily or involuntarily” (56). While the latter case clearly refers to the situation just described—in which no virtuous city exists—what could it possibly mean for the virtuous man to voluntarily inhabit an ignorant city? There would seem to be two possible interpretations of this strange statement. Farabi could mean that the virtuous man will prefer living in an ignorant city to having no city at all, if for no other reason than the economic interdependence of man spoken of in Section 13. But could Farabi also mean that
the virtuous man may prefer living in an ignorant city to living in a virtuous city? Since the latter city is, by definition, ruled by a virtuous man, the only possible reason he would prefer an ignorant city is that he would not need to rule. Farabi therefore again raises the question that has been present since the opening section of the text: to what extent is there a common good between ruler and ruled? This is the strongest indication so far that the virtuous man may wish to avoid the life of rulership, even at the cost of his membership in the virtuous city.

After hinting at this massively disappointing teaching, Farabi immediately proceeds, in Section 14b, to reaffirm the enormous capacity of the kingly craft to alter the political environment. Political science distinguishes between two types of rulership: first rulership “establishes the virtuous ways of life and dispositions in the city or nation without their having existed among the people before that, and it converts them from the ignorant ways of life to the virtuous ways of life” (56). The first ruler therefore has the capacity to change an ignorant city into a virtuous city. Farabi seems to imply that ignorance is mankind's original condition, and that it is only through a wise first ruler that virtue comes to exist in cities at all. The other type of rulership discerned by political science is “The rulership dependent on the first,” which “follows in the steps of the first rulership with regard to its actions” (56). Here, in the very center of the Book of Religion, Farabi chooses to emphasize the distinction between the founding king and the subsequent rulers. The first virtuous kingly craft—that is, the craft of the first ruler and not the successor—“consists of cognizance of all the actions that facilitate establishing the virtuous ways of life and dispositions in cities and nations, preserving them for the people, and guarding and keeping
them from the inroad of something from the ignorant ways of life” (56). Again, the kingly craft is that which brings about cognizance of the actions that would be required of a virtuous ruler; it is entirely conceivable that the possessor of the first kingly craft not actually rule.

Section 14b concludes with the introduction of a medical analogy. To the extent that the first virtuous kingly craft protects the virtuous city from ignorant ways of life, it resembles the medical craft, “for the latter consists of cognizance of all the actions that establish health in a human being, preserve it for him, and guard it from any sickness that might occur” (56). The comparison of political rule to medicine raises at least two fundamental questions. First, since the medical craft seems to regard the good of the patient to the exclusion of the physician himself, is it necessarily the case that the ruler of a political community seeks the good of the ruled exclusively? Second, given that a physician works with individual patients, to what extent must the virtuous king cater his rule to the needs of individual subjects with idiosyncratic needs? While Farabi will treat only the second question explicitly in the following subsection, perhaps, in doing so, he will implicitly answer the first, as well.

Farabi begins Section 14c by laying out three medical facts that ought to be known by the physician, each more specific than the last: that opposites combat opposites, that chill combats fever, and that barley-water or tamarind-water combat jaundice. Farabi states that when the physician cures, he necessarily does so with respect to single beings. Even the most particular level of knowledge available through the study of the medical art is insufficiently specific to deal with individual cases. Thus, though it may be true that jaundice can be
combated by barley-water, in the case of a particular individual, it could be that “barley-water will heal the bodily humor, but not let him perspire” (57). The very medical treatment that saves one individual may therefore be capable of killing another; thorough knowledge of individual cases is needed if the physician is to avoid visiting tremendous harm upon his patients. Furthermore, the sort of individualized knowledge needed cannot be acquired from books of medicine, nor from the physician's cognizance of universals of the medical art. Rather, such knowledge is available to the physician only “through another faculty developing from his pursuit of medical practices with respect to the body of one individual after another, from his lengthy observation of the states of sick persons, from the experience acquired by being occupied with curing over a long period of time, and from ministering to each individual” (57-58). The virtuous physician therefore needs two distinct faculties if he is to successfully practice the art of medicine: “one is the ability for unqualified and exhaustive cognizance of the universals that are parts of his art so that nothing escapes him; then there is the faculty that develops in him through the lengthy practice of his art with regard to each individual” (58).

The medical craft requires a combination of universal and particular knowledge because individual human beings are particular variations of a single, species-wide pattern. Particular knowledge is needed because not every human being is identical; universal knowledge is possible because all human beings share certain class characteristics. Thus, the universals of the medical craft apply equally to every human being, including the physician himself. Were the physician exclusively interested in preserving his own health, he would require very little particular knowledge, perhaps only of himself and a small number of
comparison cases. While knowledge of universals is therefore required regardless of whether the physician wishes to tend to his own good or the good of others, the thorough knowledge of various particular cases that Farabi describes is necessary only to the extent that the physician wishes to heal others.

This must be kept in mind as Farabi returns to the political side of the analogy in Section 14d, reiterating that the first kingly craft is like the medical craft. Just as the physician must possess a combination of universal and particular knowledge, “the ruler is not content to have comprehensive cognizance of universal things, or the ability to grasp them, unless he has another faculty as well, one acquired through lengthy experience and observation” (58). Political rule necessarily deals with particulars, and therefore “the actions of the kingly craft are only concerned with particular cities … this city and that city, this nation and that nation, or this human being and that human being” (58). Political science can therefore determine the proper actions and opinions all the way down to the individual level, legislating only that which is most fitting for a given human being. But of course such a level of sensitivity to individual needs is impossible to achieve through lawgiving. The determinations of a founder necessarily order the entire political community, and must therefore overlook critical differences among individual human beings. By presenting political rule as if it were simply comparable to the medical craft, Farabi leads the reader to discover a massive limitation of the lawgiver's art. Just as barley-water may cause grave injury if prescribed to the wrong patient, so too may an otherwise beneficial law cause tremendous harm to exceptional individuals. Of course, just as a physician may stipulate exceptions to general injunctions regarding health, so too may a ruler decree exemptions from established
patterns of policy. But to the extent that the ruler is a lawgiver—and this is primarily true of the founder—he is forced to work with blunt instruments. While law is therefore a practical necessity, it is emphatically inferior to living wisdom.

Why, then, should a virtuous first ruler resort to law at all? Could he not instead offer general injunctions that are open to flexible interpretation and application based on the particular circumstances of each individual case? In previous sections of the text, Farabi has presented us with two reasons to reject this possibility. First, as mentioned in Section 7, the founder is mortal. Given that there can be no guarantee of a succession of virtuous rulers, if the founder cares at all about the welfare of the political community after his death, he will act as a lawgiver, albeit one who fully recognizes the limitations of law as such. Second, Farabi has increasingly begun to hint that the life of active rule may not be the happiest. To the extent that engaging in rulership distracts the founder's attention from matters that are of greater interest to him, he will restrict himself to issuing general injunctions which would ideally be implemented by subordinate executive officers; such an arrangement was briefly hinted at in Section 7. Thus, the two fundamental shortcomings of human rulers that necessitate the imperfect instrument of written law are mortality and the inability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. The perfect political community would therefore require a ruler both immortal and omnipotent. Thus, in the remaining sections of the *Book of Religion*, Farabi gives an account of God's rule over the cosmos and its relation to human rulership. In doing so, he will finally defend his attempted rationalization of religious law against those who would claim that divine law must be followed unquestioningly and unceasingly.
Part IV: Philosophy and Theology (Sections 15-27)

Beginning in Section 15, Farabi turns to consider “political science that is a part of philosophy” (59), which remains his theme for the remainder of the text. In doing so, he implies that the immediately foregoing discussion concerned a political science that was somehow non-philosophic. We can therefore expect to understand more clearly what Farabi considers to be the distinctive characteristic of philosophy by carefully comparing the previous account of political science with what follows.

Farabi's initial remarks about philosophic political science emphasize its generality: this science “is limited—in what it investigates of the voluntary actions, ways of life, and dispositions, and in the rest of what it investigates—to universals and to giving their patterns” (59). Philosophic political science does not concern itself with specific political arrangements, but instead “brings about cognizance of the patterns for determining particulars” (59). The insights of philosophic political science therefore constitute guidelines for political rulers, according to which they can correctly decide about specific matters as they may arise. The determination of particulars itself “belongs to a faculty other than philosophy” (59). Though Farabi does not at present mention this faculty by name, his definition of prudence in the previous section—“the faculty by means of which a human being is able to infer the stipulations with which to determine actions with respect to what he observes” (58)—leaves little doubt that this is what is being discussed. Just as jurisprudence was said to be subordinate to practical philosophy, prudence is therefore subordinate to philosophic political science, since the latter contains the universals that inform the former, one of the types of subordination discussed by Farabi in Section 5.
Farabi concludes the first part of Section 15 by mentioning that philosophy does not determine particulars “perhaps because the circumstances and occurrences with respect to which determination takes place is infinite and without limitation” (59, emphasis added). The conspicuous qualification of this statement leaves open the possibility that there are only a finite number of circumstances that will ever present themselves to political rulers in the course of human history, or at least a finite number of classes into which these circumstances could be categorized. This potential limitation on the variety of political life implies some fixed boundaries within which human political behavior takes place. In this case, philosophic political science, insofar as it offers a thorough understanding of human nature, would contain the timeless knowledge needed by rulers of any era.

In the remainder of Section 15, Farabi begins an account of philosophic political science that runs highly parallel to the previous discussion of political science. He first mentions that philosophic political science examines happiness, distinguishing between true happiness and that which is merely presumed to be happiness. It describes the various voluntary actions that come to exist in cities and nations, distinguishing between the virtuous and non-virtuous. In addition, it “[brings] about cognizance of the actions by which virtuous actions and dispositions are established and ordered among the inhabitants of the cities, as well as of the actions by which what has been established among them is preserved for them” (59). This account, though highly condensed, is perfectly in line with what Farabi had previously stated about political science.

This parallelism continues in Section 16, where Farabi states that philosophic political science enumerates the various forms of non-virtuous kingly craft. The rest of the
section is a further recapitulation of points made in the previous account; specifically, that non-virtuous ways of life are sicknesses that befall virtuous cities and that non-virtuous regimes are similarly “the sicknesses of the virtuous kingly craft” (59). Farabi offers still more similarities between the two versions of political science in Section 17, where he states that philosophic political science enumerates the reasons why virtuous cities are in frequent danger of transformation into non-virtuous cities. This science furthermore teaches actions by which virtuous cities may be prevented from turning into non-virtuous ones, as well as means by which non-virtuous cities may be turned back to health.

The obvious similarity of this account to the foregoing one has the potential effect of lulling the reader into passivity, thereby disguising the divergence that occurs in Section 18. In the previous three sections, Farabi has more or less restated, in condensed form, the account of political science from Section 11 through Section 14b. If the pattern were to continue, we would therefore expect a recapitulation of Farabi's digression on medicine, which forms the subject of Section 14c, and its comparison to the kingly craft, found in Section 14d. However, a mere glance at Section 18 reveals that it is not a restatement of Farabi's earlier medical analogy. But as noted above, comparing kingly rule to the medical art allowed Farabi to implicitly criticize the bluntness of law. It may therefore be the case that Section 18, though lacking any reference to medicine, nevertheless points in its own way to the severe limitations of the rule of law and thus continues Farabi's pattern of recapitulation.

Farabi begins Section 18 by stating that philosophic political science “explains that the actions of the first virtuous kingly craft cannot come about completely except through
cognizance of the universals of this art; that is, by theoretical philosophy being joined to it and prudence being added to it” (60). While this statement closely resembles one made in Section 14d, it differs in one key respect: throughout the section on political science, Farabi had been utterly silent about theoretical philosophy. Farabi’s previous references to universals of the kingly craft seemed to fall strictly within the realm of practical philosophy, which, as we learned in Section 5, regards “what a human being is able to do when he knows it” (47). The sudden reminder at this point in the text that the true king requires theoretical philosophy serves to highlight the topic’s utter absence from Farabi’s foregoing account of political science.

Having recognized this, we are in a better position to appraise that account. It is not immediately clear that political science as described in Sections 11 through 14d is in any way deficient. It describes the various ways of life, distinguishing the virtuous from the vicious, and discovers the means by which virtuous habits may be instilled in a population. What could theoretical philosophy, which concerns “what a human being is not able to do when he knows it” (46), possibly contribute to such an apparently comprehensive science of ruling? Farabi offers a clue to this puzzle in Section 11, when he states that true happiness “does not come about in this life, but rather in the next life which is after this one” (52). Any science of ruling that does not offer a comprehensive picture of man’s place in the cosmos and the ultimate fate of his individual soul is necessarily deficient, since man is a creature whom ultimate happiness eludes during his mortal lifetime. Human beings cannot help but wonder at the fate that awaits them upon death; any attempt to regulate human behavior while remaining silent about this critical issue reflects a lack of sensitivity to the importance
of mortality in human psychology. From the standpoint of a political science that seeks to effectively govern its subjects, it is of less importance whether or not ultimate happiness indeed awaits the virtuous after death, as Farabi suggests it does. As long as any significant number of subjects—and a significant number may be very few—yearn for a more perfect happiness in another world, political science will be ineffectual if it does not offer an account of man's ultimate fate.

Political science that is a part of philosophy, as distinguished from political science simply, must therefore take into account man's spiritual and existential restlessness. What we therefore find in Section 18 is not so much a critique of the rule of law simply, but rather a critique of the rule of law divorced from a larger theoretical framework. It is precisely such a framework that Farabi will sketch beginning in the next section, but not before making a statement on the succession of rulers in a virtuous regime.

What would be best for virtuous cities and nations is to experience a long succession of kings, all of whom “possess the qualifications of the first ruler” (60). Philosophic political science does not leave this critical aspect of the regime to chance, at least not insofar as it can be helped. Rather, it explains “which qualifications are to be sought for in the sons of the city's kings so that if they are found in one of them, it is to be hoped that he will become the same kind of king as the first ruler” (60). Although there were indications previously in the text that Farabi was speaking primarily of a monarchic regime, it is only here that he states the point explicitly. In addition, the kingship described here is apparently hereditary, although not necessarily primogeniture; virtue is sought in all of the king's sons.

17 As further evidence that this consideration was lacking in the previous account of political science, consider that Farabi's last use of the word “opinion” was in Section 10.
For the moment, it is entirely unclear how Farabi's vision for political society would be best served by a monarchy, much less one in which rulership is based on bloodline.\footnote{The suggestion that proper education would yield a succession of rulers equivalent in virtue to the founder is obviously problematic from the point of view of religious orthodoxy, according to which prophets are chosen by God. In such a view, no human institution can possibly secure a lineage of rulers matching the founder.}

Religion, as defined by Farabi in the opening sentence of the text, is necessarily the product of a single mind. The first ruler, as religious founder and lawgiver, must possess such extraordinary virtue that his position with regard to his followers is one of natural kingship. Furthermore, the first ruler has access to revelation, either in the form of determined opinions and actions disclosed him by God or a divine faculty through which he determines them himself. In either case, it is understandable if prophets do not form democracies, possessing as they do such extraordinary gifts. Farabi's continued insistence that the first ruler be a king therefore appears justified. But why, upon the death of the founder, should rule fall to his descendents? Earlier, in Sections 8 and 9, Farabi had discussed successors to the first ruler, but gave no indication that such men would be sought exclusively or even primarily among the founder's descendents. It would be worthwhile to revisit these passages in light of Farabi's most recent remarks on the subject.

In Section 8, Farabi discussed the possibility that the first ruler is succeeded after his death by someone equal to him in every respect. In this case, the successor must be free not only to extrapolate from the rulings of the first, but also to alter them when circumstance demands. If such a man were indeed present upon the founder's death, the desirability of continued kingly rule is clear. But in Section 9, Farabi addresses the much more likely case that there is no successor whose virtue matches that of the founder. In this situation, the
successor ultimately chosen—by what means, we are not told—must faithfully uphold the precedents established by his predecessor. To this end, he must possess the art of jurisprudence, which allows him to apply the will of the founder to cases upon which the latter did not offer judgment during his lifetime. But Farabi immediately goes on to suggest, in Section 10, that the art of jurisprudence will be performed by multiple individuals; this becomes especially clear when he states, “The jurist concerned with the opinions determined in religion ought already to know what the jurist concerned with practices knows” (52). It is therefore ambiguous whether the founder who dies without leaving an equally virtuous heir will be succeeded by a single king, a class of jurists, or even a hybrid regime in which a king is constrained by religious scholars. Whatever the case, by making his most explicit statement regarding the form of the regime apparently supportive of unqualified hereditary monarchy, Farabi disguises the textual basis he previously offered for a more balanced regime in which at least some power resides in the hands of jurists.

To return to our current place in the text, Farabi states in Section 18 that the king following the precedent of a founder “does not by nature need philosophy” (60). Thus, Farabi reiterates a point made in Section 5, that the true distinguishing characteristic of the virtuous first ruler is philosophy. Farabi presumably does not expect philosophic potential to be hereditary; however, given the rarity of a truly philosophic soul, capable of the tremendous virtue that Farabi ascribes to the first ruler, the best practical approximation of philosophic kingly rule may be a royal lineage in which the education of potential heirs is

taken with the utmost seriousness. By suggesting that the eldest son should not automatically inherit his father's throne, Farabi slightly moderates one particularly undesirable aspect of hereditary monarchy. Though such an arrangement hardly guarantees capable rulership, it might be expected to produce better results on the whole than many practicable alternatives.

“The king of tradition” (56), who follows in the footsteps of a virtuous predecessor, is not the only ruler who does not by nature require philosophy; such is also the case for “the kings whose rulerships are ignorant” (60). It is to these men that Farabi turns his attention in the last part of Section 18. The ignorant ruler, in order to pursue one of the ignorant goods enumerated in Section 1—“health and bodily well-being; or wealth; or pleasure; or honor and glory; or conquest” (43)—requires “a thoroughly deceitful genius capable of inferring what he needs for determining the actions he is to perform and for determining the actions in which he will employ the inhabitants of the city” (61). Thus, the ignorant ruler must possess a kind of deficient counterpart of the virtuous ruler's prudence, similar in its determination of the best means toward a chosen end but divorced from knowledge of man's proper end.

In the typology of rulers offered in Section 1, it had seemed as though Farabi was drawing special attention to the problem pointed to by the errant ruler, namely, the difficulty of distinguishing between true and false claims of divine inspiration. This suspicion was bolstered by Farabi's description of misguided religions as “errant” in Section 4. Now, Farabi chooses to highlight ignorant rulers, or those who focus exclusively on some deficient, worldly good as if it constituted man's ultimate happiness.\(^\text{20}\) Farabi has therefore shifted over

\(^{20}\) The ignorant ruler was similarly singled out for reproach in Section 14.
the course of the text, from contrasting the virtuous ruler primarily with the errant ruler in the earlier sections, to now contrasting the virtuous ruler with the ignorant ruler. We can better appreciate the meaning of this shift by recalling the particular deficiency of Farabi’s first account of political science; namely, that it in no way addressed man’s place in the whole of being. An ignorant ruler, possessing the necessary genius to achieve physical well-being, wealth, or pleasure for himself and his subjects,21 is not so clearly deficient, just as the first account of political science was not clearly deficient at first glance. Nevertheless, Farabi claims that such a ruler is necessarily “deceitful” (61). But as we saw in Section 1, the ignorant ruler cannot rule over a deceived citizenry, for he would then be indistinguishable from the deceptive ruler. Perhaps it is therefore the case that ignorant rulers, bereft of philosophy as they are, are primarily guilty of self-deception, pursuing worldly goods that cannot be the source of true happiness.

In Section 19, Farabi begins the cosmic account that most clearly separates political science that is a part of philosophy from political science simply. This account takes up the remaining nine sections of the Book of Religion, and in it, Farabi will offer an image of a universe in which all things are related to one another and in which there exists a special connection between the human and divine realms. The remaining sections therefore contain sweeping claims about the ultimate nature of all that exists. Before turning to consider the account itself, we must remind ourselves of comments made previously by Farabi that will influence our understanding of what follows. In Section 2, Farabi had listed the subjects of theoretical religious opinions, which included those describing “the world, its parts, and the

21 As Farabi pointed out in Section 1, ignorant rulers may seek the goods they desire desired for both themselves and the ruled.
ranks of its parts” (44), “how the things the world encompasses are linked together and organized” (45), and “the intellect, its rank in the world, and its station in relation to God” (45). Each of these subjects will feature heavily in the closing sections of the Book of Religion, indicating that Farabi is perhaps offering an account more religious than it is strictly philosophic. Furthermore, in Section 4, Farabi had left open the possibility that virtuous religion will include some untrue theoretical opinions. Though we were not told on what basis the virtuous first ruler would decide how strictly to adhere to the truth, presumably such a decision is made on the basis of political prudence. This would make sense of the claim made in Section 18 that “the first virtuous kingly craft cannot come about completely except … by theoretical philosophy being joined to it and prudence being added to it” (60). It is precisely the conjunction of theoretical philosophy and prudence that characterizes the virtuous first ruler—not theoretical philosophy alone. Finally, in Section 5, Farabi had defined practical philosophy as that which concerns “what a human being is able to do when he knows it” (47). The choice of what theoretical opinions to commit to writing is therefore a matter of practical philosophy. Only by keeping these earlier statements in mind can we hope to understand Farabi’s purpose in the remaining sections of the text.

Section 19 comprises a breathtaking ascent, beginning from “the parts of the world that are most inferior” (61) and terminating only upon reaching that being of whom Farabi says, “It is not possible for there to be any deficiency in him … nor is it possible for there to be any perfection more complete than his perfection, nor any existence more excellent than

22 Farabi offers a further indication that he means to point to his own activity as a writer when, also in Section 5, he illustrates the concept of particularity by stating, “our saying ‘the human being who is writing’ is more particular than our saying ‘the human being’” (47).
his existence” (62-63). Farabi's language in this section is emphatically political; the inferior parts of the world are such precisely because they “have no rulership over anything at all and … give rise only to actions used for serving, not to actions used for ruling” (61). The primary characteristic of the perfect being—at this point unnamed—is that he “rules everything below him” (62). The various classes of intermediate beings rule those below them while being ruled in turn by those above. At each stage of ascent, philosophic political science discovers that the higher class of beings comprises fewer members; furthermore, each individual member of a class contains “greater unity in itself and less multiplicity” (62) than members of the immediately preceding, inferior class. Thus, at the highest level, beyond which there is no possible ascent, there exists a class of only one being, “one in number and one in every aspect of oneness” (62). At no point in the text does Farabi offer arguments on behalf of these assertions, but instead merely declares them to be discoveries of philosophic political science.23 The Book of Religion is clearly not intended to serve as a textbook for students of metaphysics. Rather, Farabi aims to illustrate, with characteristic terseness, what the product of an exceptional combination of prudence and theoretical philosophic might look like.

In Section 20, Farabi offers a mirror image of the preceding ascent. Philosophic political science descends from the most perfect beings to the more deficient, noting that at each successive level of inferiority, the individual members of the class display more multiplicity and less unity. This descent terminates in “the last beings, namely, the ones that perform servile actions” (63). Having discovered the various classes of being and their vast

23 Nor are such arguments impossible to imagine. Ibn Sina makes a compelling case for increasing unity in each higher class of being in the metaphysical portion of the Healing.
differences with regard to unity and perfection, philosophic political science then “brings about cognizance of their harmony, of how they are linked together, how they are organized, how their actions are organized, and how they mutually support one another so that despite their multiplicity they might be like one thing” (63). The mutual cooperation of such vastly different beings is made possible through the governance of the perfect, ruling being. His rule over the cosmic order is in no way deficient; each being is governed in a way “commensurate with its rank and in accordance with the amount of natural worth a being at that level of existence must have” (63).

Sections 21 through 23, comprising a single sentence each, indicate that philosophic political science points to a corresponding order in the human soul, the human body, and the virtuous city.

Thus, although the soul, the body, and the city do not possess perfect unity, they may nevertheless be governed in such a way that their constituent parts cooperate and thereby approximate true unity. A soul, body, or city is therefore healthy to the extent that it emulates the cosmic order. When speaking of the virtuous city in Section 23, Farabi furthermore states that philosophic political science “[places] the king and the first ruler in the same station as the deity who is the first governor of the beings and of the world” (63). The virtuous founder is therefore the earthly counterpart of the cosmic governor, whose rule over the world takes perfect account of the natural worth of every being.

The comparison of the virtuous first ruler to the divine ruler is by this point fully expected, but precisely by preparing the ground for this claim in the previous few sections, Farabi allows many readers to overlook its central importance in the teaching of the Book of

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24 In doing so, Farabi succinctly states a point made with far greater elaboration in the Virtuous City, Political Regime, and Selected Aphorisms.
Religion. As Farabi had mentioned in Section 14d, the practitioner of the first kingly craft cannot rest satisfied with knowledge of universals; in addition, he must possess a prudential faculty that arises through experience with individual cases. Furthermore, as was discussed above in connection with that section, this would seem to mean that the first ruler must view law as a particularly clumsy tool for governance, unable as it is to cater to exceptional individuals. However, due above all else to his mortality as well as his interest in activities other than politics, the first ruler may nevertheless resort to lawgiving as an encapsulation of his political prudence, albeit one that will necessarily deteriorate with the passage of time. But these limitations presumably do not apply to the most perfect being. Farabi has already stated in Section 20 that the perfect being is “the sempiternal one, to whom nothing can be prior” (63). And while he has not explicitly said that this being is omnipotent, he claimed in Section 19 that “It is not possible for there to be any deficiency in him, not in any way at all” (62-63). It is therefore entirely unclear why the deity, as Farabi now calls him in Section 23, would choose to rule human beings through divine law, rather than by catering his rule to the needs of each particular individual. Indeed, the deity’s governance of the cosmic, as opposed to the human, realm does not appear to suffer from this shortcoming, since it takes into account the “natural worth” (63) of each being at every level of existence. Why, then, does the divine will, as it has been communicated to human beings through prophets, take the shape of divine law, thereby displaying such bluntness as law requires?

Clearly, the human world would need to be radically different than it is if the shortcomings inherent in law were to be overcome. The very diversity of human beings and the constant flux of political circumstances prevent a single code of law from applying to all
people at all times, no matter how wise its authorship. But are not such characteristics of the human world well within the power of the deity to alter? Alternatively, the deity could leave the world as it is and yet do away with the need for law entirely, if only he would minister to each of us individually, making the path to happiness clear for every man. The question of why divine will takes the shape of a static divine law therefore quickly turns into a more basic one: why has man been created in such a way that leaves him isolated in his individuality and unsure of the path to happiness? And although Farabi offers no answer here—it is not clear that such a question can be answered—his comparison of human and divine governance has not been without purpose. Rather, by provoking defenders of static divine law to consider why the deity does not act like the perfect physician, he initiates a dialogue between rationalism and piety, one that will perhaps moderate the latter's tendency to adhere unreflectively to religious tradition.

An advocate of divine law may reasonably claim that in providing human beings with an imperfect instrument with which to regulate political life, the deity wishes to encourage the development of prudence, such as would be impossible if he ministered to each individual as the physician does to his patients. In other words, perhaps the shortcomings inherent in law are the necessary soil for the development of that faculty by which human beings are distinguished from all other creatures. But if this is the case, then Farabi has been correct throughout the Book of Religion in asserting that the founder's laws must be subject to revision by prudential successors when they are rendered obsolete by the passage of time. Farabi has left those who insist on slavish obedience to unchanging laws with an uncomfortable choice: either obedience to laws that appear harmful is, in some mysterious
way, good for us, or the divine ruler does not care about the well-being of man. The former option is the more attractive of the two, and furthermore seems quite plausible; measured against the wisdom of a perfect being who is in no way deficient, human wisdom appears to be mere hubris.

Farabi’s case is somewhat strengthened by his continual reference to the problem of obsolescence. He is not criticizing laws whose purpose has been unknown since their inception, but rather those whose original intention has apparently been subverted by the passage of time. It is a far more difficult task to defend a law that produces dramatically inconsistent effects over time than one whose purpose has always been mysterious. Nevertheless, the pious believer may reply that the deity possesses perfect knowledge of the future such that the ultimate purpose of religious law is known only to him. Thus, a law that produces varying effects over time may simply be part of a divine plan that no human being can hope to comprehend. But once Farabi has pushed the defender of static divine law this far, forcing him to concede so much to the incomprehensibility of the deity, he has accomplished one of his primary aims in the *Book of Religion*. There is no attempt in the text to disprove the hypothesis that a wholly mysterious deity issues entirely arbitrary commands; indeed, Farabi may not believe such a hypothesis can be disproved. However, Farabi is aware that arguments relying upon divine mystery, when taken too far, threaten to sever entirely the connection between religion and human happiness. And although the pious believer may not agree with Farabi’s declaration in Section 1 that the sole aim of virtuous religion is ultimate happiness for man, he may nevertheless come to realize that any religion that does not contribute to the happiness of man here in this world cannot be expected to survive.
In Section 24, the pattern of ascent and descent begun in Section 19 continues. After indicating the correspondence of the first ruler with the deity, philosophic political science moves down through the ranks of the city, ultimately arriving at those “whose actions are such that it is not possible for them to rule by means of them, but only to serve” (63). Just as the intermediate beings in the cosmos rule those below them while being ruled in turn by those above, so too do the intermediate ranks in the city rule and serve appropriately. The kingly craft occupies the upper extreme of this chain, since “it is a craft and a disposition only for ruling” (64). Section 25 makes the account of the cosmos and the city symmetrical, ascending from the most servile ranks in the city until reaching the level of the king, “who rules and does not serve” (64).

In Section 26, Farabi goes beyond merely indicating the correspondence between the human and divine realms, introducing a being who acts as a bridge between the two worlds. Philosophic political science teaches the existence of “the spiritual being governing the king who is the first ruler of the virtuous city, namely, the one set down as the trustworthy spirit” (64). This title is a Qur’anic epithet for Gabriel, the angel responsible for communicating the words of the Qur’an to Muhammad. So, too, in Farabi’s account, this spiritual being “is the one through which God, may He be exalted, communicates the revelation to the first ruler of the city” (64). Here, as revelation makes its first explicit appearance in the text since Section 2, Farabi refers to the perfect being by the name “God” for the first time in his cosmological account. Regarding revelation and the manner in which it ties human and divine governance together, Farabi will have more to say soon. Section 26 concludes by

25 The phrase “trustworthy spirit” occurs in Qur’an 26:193.
noting that philosophic political science examines the rank of the trustworthy spirit, placing in its proper place among the other spiritual beings.

Section 27, the final section of the Book of Religion, begins with an ascent from these spiritual beings toward the deity. Philosophic political science explains “how revelation descends from Him level by level until it reaches the first ruler” (64, emphasis added). Communication between God and the first ruler is therefore not direct, nor does it take place through the sole mediation of the trustworthy spirit. Rather, revelation must descend through an unspecified number of levels before reaching the first ruler. The benefits of revelation are then dispersed through the ranks of the city in the form of divinely inspired governance, which “extends to every one of the divisions of the city in an orderly manner until it finally reaches the last divisions” (64). In this way, God is responsible for the successful administration of the virtuous city, and Farabi is therefore justified in claiming “that God, may He be exalted, is also the governor of the virtuous city, just as He is the governor of the world” (64). However, as noted above, there appears to be a qualitative difference between God’s rule over the cosmos and his rule over human affairs. Farabi confirms this impression, stating that while “His … governance of the world takes place in one way, … His governance of the virtuous city takes place in another way; there is, however, a relation between the two kinds of governing” (65). The essential characteristic of God’s rule over the cosmos was mentioned in Section 20, where the natural worth of every being was said to be taken into account. For reasons that remain unknown to us, God’s governance of the human realm, mediated through the virtuous first ruler, must remain, at best, an approximation of that standard.
In Section 1, Farabi had claimed that “It has already been explained in theoretical science how the revelation of God, may He be exalted, to the human being receiving the revelation comes about” (44). But now, Farabi presents the process of revelation as being explained by political science that is a part of philosophy. If the cosmological account that concludes the Book of Religion is the product of both theoretical philosophy and prudence, it remains an open question what an unadulterated theoretical account of revelation, free from prudential considerations, would consist of. Farabi offers no such account here, and has furthermore given several indications that theoretical science must never be presented to the public without an admixture of politically salutary doctrines.

Philosophic political science teaches that just as the various beings in the world, “despite their multiplicity and the multiplicity of their actions, … become like a single thing performing a single action for a single purpose” (65), so, too, must the various divisions and ranks of the city and nation be brought together in mutual support by the first ruler. An example of such unity of purpose arising out of multiplicity of being is available “to anyone who contemplates the organs of the human body” (65).

In addition to implanting “the natural constitutions and instincts” (65) into the various beings that make up the world, God ensures that “the world and its divisions persevere and continue in the way He constituted it for very long periods of time” (65). Farabi noticeably refrains from claiming that God ensures the eternal existence of the world as it currently is. Two alternative possibilities therefore seem to be left open: first, that the

26 Farabi does not ask the reader to consider the faculties of the soul, although they were mentioned in Section 21 as a similar example. Perhaps the soul, with its numerous, often conflicting, appetites, less clearly constitutes a harmonious whole than does the body.
world will eventually cease to exist at all, or second, that it will continue to exist, but in some way fundamentally different from its current state. The extent to which the ordered, harmonious arrangement of the various natural beings is eternal and stable is therefore called radically into question by Farabi at a very late point in the text. However, Farabi draws no further attention to the topic and instead proceeds to suggest that the human governor ought to similarly ensure the long-term preservation of “the virtuous traits and dispositions that he prescribes” (65).

God’s provision for the various natural beings is such that “the naturally good things are fully realized in each of the realms according to its level as well as in the totality of the beings” (66). But the realization of good things in the human realm seems to depend entirely on the existence of the virtuous first ruler. This figure must follow the pattern provided by God’s governance of the cosmos “so that the voluntary good things might be fully realized in every single city and nation to the extent that its rank and worth permit” (66, emphasis added). The raw materials with which the virtuous founder must work—the city or cities he rules and their inhabitants—therefore have certain inherent limitations that are not necessarily within the power of the first ruler to alter. This moderates an earlier statement made in Section 14b, where Farabi claimed that “First rulership is the one that first establishes the virtuous ways of life and dispositions in the city or nation without their having existed among the people before that, and it converts them from the ignorant ways of life to the virtuous ways of life” (56). It now appears as though a full conversion from utter ignorance to complete virtue may not always be possible. On the issue of whether God, too, must work with beings that have inherent, unalterable characteristics, Farabi is silent.
The first ruler’s successful emulation of God requires that he “already have thorough
cognizance of theoretical philosophy; for he cannot understand anything pertaining to
God’s, may He be exalted, governance of the world so as to follow it except from that source”
(66, emphasis added). In making this claim, Farabi dramatically undermines revelation’s claim
to be the only source of knowledge regarding the most important things. Theoretical
philosophy is not merely an alternative path to understanding God’s rule of the universe; it is
the only path. To the extent that a revealed teaching contains doctrines regarding God’s
governance of the world, these must be either invented by the first ruler or the product of
genuine theoretical insight.

Having offered in the final nine sections of the text a moving vision of a wondrous
universal order, in which beings of vastly different rank each move toward a single purpose
in dynamic harmony, Farabi chooses to end the Book of Religion with a word of caution: no
earthly regime can ever hope to approximate such cosmic splendor in the absence of a
common religion among all virtuous cities. His closing remarks are worth quoting in full:

It is clear, in addition, that all of this is impossible unless there is a common
religion in the cities that brings together their opinions, beliefs, and actions;
that renders their divisions harmonious, linked together, and well ordered;
and at that point they will support one another in their actions and assist one
another to reach the purpose that is sought after, namely, ultimate happiness
(66).
Bibliography


Vita

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