Prophetic Politics:

Islamic Readings of Plato's *Republic*

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between the Islamic and Platonic philosophical traditions through the lens of medieval receptions of *The Republic*. By constructing a comparative analysis between the source materials, the Quran and *The Republic*, the paper identifies the traditions as not only compatible but also in active conversation. This active conversation dates back to the beginning of the Islamic tradition and plays a central role in the political thinking of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd. Considering the nature and structure of the ruler, citizen, and society as a whole through the eyes of these philosophers, this paper presents medieval Islamic Platonism as a coherent philosophical worldview, connecting the issues raised in Plato's dialogues with the Islamic philosophical substrate. By presenting medieval Islam as a valid school of political philosophy, this paper seems to broaden the general conception of Neoplatonic thought and highlight the contributions of Muslim thinkers in the Western Hellenic-derived philosophical canon.

Keywords: *Plato, The Republic, Political Theory, Islamic Philosophy, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd*

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1. Platonic and Islamic Traditions

1.1 Introduction

To consider the Platonism of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, or any other Islamic philosopher, it is first necessary to establish the comparative background between the Islamic and Platonic philosophical traditions. Naturally, these schools of thought come from different origins and cultural substrates.

Plato, for which the Platonic school of thought is named, was a philosopher living in Athens in the fifth century BCE. A student of the legendary Socrates, the invention of philosophy as a free-standing rigorous discipline is often attributed to Plato. Plato's thought is preserved in his writing, thirty-five dialogues, and twelve letters. These dialogues are considered the central pillar of the Platonic tradition, consisting of conversations between Plato's teacher, Socrates, and various interlocutors, often other philosophers or notable Athenians. Although complex, occasionally disputed, and difficult to summarize, the Platonic worldview denotes the belief in an ultimate, transcendent reality, the immortality of the soul, and the importance of virtue for human life. Drawing on these principles, Platonic philosophy encompasses commentaries on love, politics, economics, language, and mathematics, amongst other things. The most explicitly political of Plato's work is his *Republic*. Divided into ten "books," *The Republic* features Socrates' conversations with several characters, ranging from the aging merchant Cephalus to the pugilistic rhetorician Thrasymachus. In this work, Plato, speaking through Socrates, illuminates his vision of justice, the ideal state, and individuals' role in a virtuous political structure. This work has formed the basis of much of Platonic political thought after Plato's death, cited as a favorite not only by Augustine (d. 430), More (d. 1687), and Hegel (d.1831) but by many of Plato's Islamic readers.[1]

"In this work, *[The Republic]*, Plato, speaking through Socrates, illuminates his vision of justice, the ideal state, and individuals' role in a virtuous political structure."

[1] Richard Kraut, "Plato," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, February 12, 2022.

Islam, by comparison, is a monotheistic religion founded by Muhammad, whom Muslims consider a prophet chosen to spread God's message. Rather than viewing Muhammad as the inventor of Islam, Muslims believe that Muhammad completed the chain of prophets, beginning with Adam, restoring the unaltered traditional monotheism that has always marked the human relationship with God. God's revelation to Muhammad is the Quran. On the Night of Power, the entirety of the Quran was revealed to Muhammad. After that initial revelation, individual chapters, called Surahs, were revealed over 23 years of the Prophet's life. These revealed chapters are sorted broadly into two categories. The Meccan surahs are chronologically earlier in Muhammad's life, detailing the revelations that occurred before the Hijra, the historic movement of the early Muslim community from Mecca to Medinah. Typically, the Meccan surahs trend towards brevity, relay information about previous prophets, and emphasize the role of Muhammad as a communicator. The Medinan surahs, by contrast, tend towards legal and political discussion, are typically addressed to those who have adopted Islam already, and often tend towards more mechanical, less inflammatory rhetoric.[2] Although Quranic analysis is far more complicated than this simple division, this framework offers significant insight into the structure of the text that forms the basis of all Islamic philosophy discussed hereafter.

Although the Platonic and Islamic traditions are unique in kind, substance, and origin, they are far from incompatible. Even at the most basic level, there are multiple areas of overlap between the dialogues of Plato and the text of the Quran. In both content and style, clear parallels exist between both textual canons, allowing scholars like the ones examined in this paper to draw coherent connections.

"Even at the most basic level, there are multiple areas of overlap between the *dialogues of Plato* and the *text of the Quran*."

1.2 Recollection of Memory and the *Surah Al-Anbiya*

The first area of similarity between the Quran and the Platonic worldview is doctrinal. Although these models are unique and fundamentally dissimilar, there are significant areas of agreement. One striking commonality is the role of memory as the mechanism by which truth is ascertained.

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[2] Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

For Plato, all genuine knowledge is already contained in the soul; the role of teachers is to draw this truth out, leading the soul to "remember" what it already knows. Plato calls this *anamnesis*, translated literally as "to call to mind again."[3] In the *Meno*, a dialogue written around the same time as *The Republic*, Plato comments that "learning and inquiry are nothing but recollection."[4] Thus, the Platonic method guiding students to remember the content already present in their souls from the beginning is established.

This teaching is deeply resonant with the text of the Quran. In *Surah al-Anbiya*, a Meccan surah detailing the Prophetic tradition, the Quran itself is described as a "blessed reminder which We have revealed."[5] As God's revelation to man, the Quran reminds man of his natural place, the monotheistic devotion that, according to Muslims, has its roots in the beginning of humanity. In the same Surah, the language of the Quran as a reminder is repeated, and the role of reminder to the faithful is extended to the prophets who were granted "a light and a reminder for the righteous."[6] In the Islamic framework, the role of the Prophet or the Quran is not to teach humanity anything new. Instead, the purpose of revelation is to remind man of the truth he has already known but has since forgotten. Although Plato, in the *Phaedo*, places the origin of this ignorance as the trauma of birth rather than sin, the fundamental principle driving both philosophies is the same.[7] In both cases, the man already possesses moral knowledge; he requires a *prophet* or *philosopher* to remind him of it, drawing his innate knowledge back to the fore.

"In both cases, *[Surah al-Anbiya and Phaedo]*, the man already possesses moral knowledge; he requires a *prophet* or *philosopher* to remind him of it, drawing his innate knowledge back to the fore."

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[3] R.E. Allen, *Anamnesis in Plato's 'Meno and Phaedo'* (The Review of Metaphysics, 1959).

[4] Plato and Benjamin Jowett (trans.), *The Meno* (The Internet Classics Archive,1892).

[5] M. Abdul Haleem Eliyasee and Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an* (Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2005), 21:50.

[6] Ibid, 21:48.

[7] Allen, *Anamnesis in Plato's 'Meno and Phaedo'.*

1.3 Allegory of the Cave and the *Surah Ya-Sin*

Beyond sharing philosophical perspectives, the Quran also features scenes closely mirrored in the Platonic corpus. Although this does not necessarily denote direct influence from one body of text on the other, it does highlight fundamental similarities in the structure of both models. In *The Republic*'s sixth book, Plato introduces the Allegory of the Cave, one of the most iconic scenes from the text. This allegory features prisoners shackled in a cave facing forward since childhood, prevented from turning their heads. Puppeteers carry objects past a fire behind the prisoners, casting shadows on the wall.

Since the prisoners do not know that the shadows are artifices, they believe them to be real, returning to the shadows if released, blinded by the brightness of the fire. However, Plato argues that if a man were brought out of the cave and made to see the sun, he would initially be blinded and dazed. After realizing that the sun is authentically natural and the shadows cast by the puppeteers are deceptions, Plato proposes that this enlightened man would "consider himself happy for the change and pity the others."[8] Despite this prisoner's gratitude for his freedom and genuine understanding of the world, his fellow prisoners would not receive him well, instead "most certainly" trying to kill him.[9]

A similar narrative is relayed in the Quran. God describes a particular type of irredeemable unbeliever in Surah *Ya-Sin*, an early Meccan surah. These unbelievers bear "shackles around their necks up to their chins, so their heads are forced up"[10] and are surrounded by all sides by a barrier. Thus, these unbelievers cannot see the truth revealed to the faithful. Shortly after relaying this allegory, God describes how stubborn unbelievers treat the bearers of revelation. Rather than accepting the truth, they insist that "if [the messenger] does not desist, we will certainly stone [him] to death"[11]. The parallels between both allegories are striking. Both feature prisoners bound by their necks in an enclosed space who fail to see the truth, responding violently to those who do.

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[8] Plato and D. J. Allan (ed.), *Republic* (Methuen, 1965), 516c.

[9] Ibid, 519a.

[10] Eliyasee and Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an*, 36:8.

[11] Ibid, 36:18.

“The parallels between both allegories, *[Allegory of the Cave and Surah Ya-Sin]*, are striking. Both feature prisoners bound by their necks in an enclosed space who fail to see the truth, responding violently to those who do.”

Furthermore, the specific imagery of both accounts is unique. The fetter preventing the movement of the head is a wholesale invention of Plato; it is not found elsewhere in his dialogues or the works of his contemporaries. Thus, the fact that *The Republic* gives the same account of a fetter fixing the head as the Quran when none existed at Plato’s time strongly supports the fundamental commensurability of the Platonic and Islamic frameworks.[12]

1.4 The Language of Dyeing and the *Surah al-Baqarah*

The parallels between the Quran and Plato’s work transcend conceptual and allegorical similarities; they are apparent even in the specific language of both texts. In the Surah *al-Baqarah*, a Medinan surah that focuses on elaborating precepts of Islamic law and underscoring the need for conversion, God is described as a dye that believers are steeped in. As Abdel Haleem translates, “Our life takes its colour from God, and who gives a better colour than God?”[13] The word he translates as “colour” is *ṣibgha*, which is etymologically connected to the Arabic words for dyer, tinge, and condiment.[14] More antiquated translations often prefer “baptize” for *ṣibgha*, which, although now considered erroneous, evokes a sensation of the believer’s dunking or dipping in God, a relevant insight when this verse is considered alongside its Platonic analog.

In the fourth book of *The Republic*, Socrates presents a drawn-out analogy between the dyeing process and the education of the political class of his model city, whom he calls *guardians*. Through their education, Socrates argues, the guardians must be dyed such that no pollutant or detergent could fade or alter the hue imbued by the educator.

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[12] Victoria Rowe Holbrook, *Plato, Fetters Round the Neck, and the Quran* (Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia, 2021).

[13] M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an / A New Translation* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 2:138.

[14] Juan Cole, *Dyed in Virtue: The Qur’ān and Plato’s Republic* (Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies, 2021).

"In the fourth book of *The Republic*, Socrates presents a drawn-out analogy between the dyeing process and the education of the political class of his model city, whom he calls *guardians*."

Plato writes that the guardians must be educated so "they should be convinced and receive our laws like a dye as it were so that their belief and faith might be fast-colored both about the things that are to be feared and all other things."[15] Thus, the guardians must be dyed in the virtues of political leadership. From youth, they must be submerged in that virtue so that the hue of virtue takes hold in a way that cannot be disturbed. The Greek word translated here is *bapto* (βάπτω), which means both to dye and to dip; it also is the root of the English word "baptize." Referring to the Quran, *ṣibgha* carries the same connotations of dyeing and dipping. Thus, the profound similarity of the dyeing metaphor in both works is apparent. In the Quran, believers are dipped or dyed in God, and in Plato, the guardians experience the same process, being dyed in the virtues of political rule. In both cases, strikingly similar language is employed in remarkably similar ways, bringing the closeness of the Platonic and Islamic traditions into sharp focus.

2. The Role and Nature of the Philosopher-King

2.1 Introduction

The idea of the *philosopher-king* is the most iconic product of Platonic political philosophy. The concept is introduced in a broader discussion on the ideal city in *The Republic*'s fifth book, in which Socrates highlights the necessity of an elite class he calls guardians. The guardians, understood broadly, are those destined towards political rulership of the city, positioned above the auxiliary soldier class and the productive classes. Socrates underscores that this class must be the best and brightest in society, capable of political leadership. Due to these figures' outsized role in the city's good governance, Socrates argues that they must live in a particular way.

[15] Plato and D. J. Allan (ed.), *Republic*, 430a.

"The *guardians*, understood broadly, are those destined towards political rulership of the city, positioned above the auxiliary soldier class and the productive classes."

Socrates emphasizes that these guardians must be preserved from greed, as "none of them should have any property of his own beyond what is necessary" and "they alone of all the citizens may not touch or handle silver or gold."[16] He also, more ambitiously, argues that the guardians must breed according to the state's best interest, share their wives and husbands in common, and believe that they are members of a golden race born directly from the earth.

Citing the untenability of these proposals for the lifestyle of the guardians, Socrates attempts to identify why precisely these reforms are not possible under the current political order. To this end, Socrates argues for the necessity of philosophy in combination with political leadership, "Unless... either philosophers become kings in our states or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power, and philosophic intelligence... there can be no cessation of troubles... for our states."[17] In order to accomplish the radical restructuring of society, Socrates found the unification of political rule and philosophical understanding necessary.

In the Platonic account, the philosopher-king need not rule alone; he remains a member of the political elite, guiding them and maintaining the previously articulated ideal social system. Socrates connects the philosopher-king's role to that of a ship's helmsman. As Socrates puts it, rowers are not the best helmsmen of ships; stargazers are. Despite the rowers' physical strength and numerical superiority, only the stargazer has access to higher knowledge, an elevated perspective that transcends the short-sightedness of the rowers. Applying this to political life, only the philosopher king has access to the higher knowledge imparted by philosophy, placing him as the perfect ruler for a well-governed city. Plato calls this knowledge the sight of *The Good*, with *The Good* here being understood as a transcendent and eternal goodness.

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[16] *Republic*, 417b.

[17] Ibid. 473d.

"Applying this to political life, only the *philosopher-king* has access to the higher knowledge imparted by philosophy, placing him as the perfect ruler for a well-governed city."

This basic framework, central to *The Republic*, provided a jumping-off point for Plato's medieval Islamic readers to theorize about the perfect governor of the political state. The *Prophet* is the archetypical political and spiritual leader in the Islamic tradition. In the Quran, Allah says that His messengers have been sent "with clear proofs, and with them, We sent down the Scripture and the balance."[18] This passage demonstrates the fundamental role of the Prophet towards humanity. Allah sends the Prophet to demonstrate Allah's existence, to promulgate the Quran, and to dispense justice. The Prophet has a unique knowledge of Allah's will. Thus, He is "neither misguided nor astray."[19] This allows the Prophet to be an impartial political arbiter, communicating directly with Allah to lead the community best.

This notion of leadership is also inherent in the very structure of the Quran. Muhammad received the entire revelation of the Quran at once on the *Laylat al-Qadr*, but each individual Surah was revealed again later to suit the needs of the early Muslim community, the *ummah*.[20] Muhammad was entrusted by Allah to relay individual revelatory aspects to the community, cementing his role as the ideal political ruler, the unpolluted transmitter of divine truth to the people. However, Muhammad was the last Prophet sent by Allah in the Islamic tradition, leaving the ummah without a living Prophet upon Muhammad's death in 632 AD. Successors would lead the ummah to Muhammad, called caliphs, after the Prophet's death. The caliph's authority is derived from strict observance of the teachings of Muhammad. The term caliph itself is often translated as deputy, who are intended to be Muhammad's deputies after his death, preserving the ummah in his absence.[21]

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[18] Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 57:25.

[19] Ibid, 53:2.

[20] Manzooruddin Ahmed, *Umma: The Idea of a Universal Community* (Islamic Studies, 1975).

[21] John Woods and Alexander Barna, *Muhammad and the First Muslim Ummah: The Beginning of a New Society and Culture* (Teaching the Middle East, 2019).

"The caliph's authority is derived from strict observance of the teachings of Muhammad. ... *[The caliphs]* are intended to be Muhammad's deputies after his death, preserving the *ummah* in his absence."

2.1.1 Al-Farabi (*Alpharabius*, 870-950 CE)

Very little is known about the early life of Abu Nasr al-Farabi, often called *Alpharabius* in the Latin West. He is believed to have been born in a Turkic, Sogdian, or Persian family around 870 CE in modern-day Kazakhstan. Most of al-Farabi's intellectual work was done in Baghdad, although he also spent considerable time in Syria and Egypt in the years preceding his death in 950 CE. Al-Farabi was a polymath who wrote influential works on science, language, and physics. However, his product in these fields is dwarfed by his influence on philosophy and music. Al-Farabi was heralded as such a philosophical genius that later writers called him the "Second Teacher," rivaled only by Aristotle in brilliance.[22]

Much of al-Farabi's philosophy was grounded in Aristotle, although al-Farabi greatly transcends Aristotle's work, striking out on his own in innovative ways. Mainly, al-Farabi's emphasis on methodology is seen as highly forward-thinking for his time, merging the study of theory and practice as few others had done. This focus also animated al-Farabi's study of music. Music, for al-Farabi, could be traced back to mathematics, but the quality of musical output must be determined by performance.

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Thus, both the mathematical theory of music and the human practice of playing music are vital to a composition's value, a framework that reflects al-Farabi's broader philosophical outlook. Al-Farabi is also remembered for his contributions to political philosophy, which he constructed by referring to Plato.

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[22] Nadja Germann, *Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Society and Religion* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021).

Aristotle's political works were not available in Arabic at al-Farabi's time, so al-Farabi relied heavily on Plato's *The Laws* and *The Republic*. Al-Farabi wrote prolifically on politics, penning *Political Regime*, *Political Writings*, and the *Summary of Plato's Laws* to harmonize Plato's political prescriptions with al-Farabi's worldview.[23] Through these contributions, al-Farabi is often considered the originator of Islamic political philosophy as a field of inquiry. Al-Farabi's political philosophy was massively influential on his Islamic and Western contemporaries and sparked the continued study of politics in the Muslim world through his reception of Hellenic philosophy.

2.1.2 Ibn Sina (*Avicenna*, 980-1037 CE)

Abu' Ali al-Husayn ibn Sina, considered the preeminent philosopher of his day, was born in 980 CE in modern-day Uzbekistan. Being born close to the Silk Road tradeposts in Transoxania, the young Ibn Sina could quickly absorb an unusually high volume of philosophical, medical, and religious treatises from the Greek and Islamic worlds. This multicultural experience would color the rest of his intellectual life.[24]

Trained as a physician, Ibn Sina would serve at a young age as a court physician to a local noble, from which he would launch a career as a healer, advisor, or business manager to various political figures. This diverse skillset allowed Ibn Sina to engage with many thinkers around Samanid Persia. Ibn Sina's contributions to Islamic thought are primarily centered around medicine and philosophy. Ibn Sina's medical works, the *Canon of Medicine* and the *Book of Healing* are considered pioneering texts, arguably establishing that all disease has a material cause. This idea was not widely accepted until the Enlightenment. Ibn Sina's philosophy was so influential that he is often termed the first Islamic philosopher, a coinage that underscores his immense role in the history of Islamic thought. His unique harmonization of religion and philosophy broadly laid the groundwork for Islamic and medieval philosophical thought. The influence of Ibn Sina on the Latin West was so staggering that the period immediately following his life is sometimes referred to as the "Avicennan pandemic," highlighting the central role of Ibn Sina in Western thought as well.[25]

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[23] Germann, *Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Society and Religion.*

[24] Dimitri Gutas, *Ibn Sina [Avicenna]* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016).

[25] Ibid.

“The influence of Ibn Sina on the Latin West was so staggering that the period immediately following his life is sometimes referred to as the “Avicennan pandemic,”...”

Ibn Sina’s political thought primarily concerns elaborating on the tradition established by previous Islamic thinkers. Islamic thought until Ibn Sina primarily relied on a conflation of Islamic, Platonic, and Aristotelian sources to fashion a coherent vision. Ibn Sina innovatively pulled the threads of this tradition apart, reappraising Islamic thought from the ground up using Aristotelian categories. This systematic approach did not eliminate Plato's influence on Ibn Sina’s worldview. In his works dealing with politics, Ibn Sina directly addresses the issues raised by Plato in works like *The Republic*, indicating the enduring influence of Platonic ideas on the work of even the most orthodox Aristotelian Islamic philosophers.

2.1.3. Ibn Rushd (*Averroes*, 1126-1198 CE)

Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd was an Andalusian jurist and philosopher considered the last of the great Islamic philosophers of the post-classical period. Born in 1126 in Spain, then part of the Almoravid Caliphate, Ibn Rushd proved a natural expert in theology, consorting with poets, theologians, and scientists in the court of the caliph.

When the Almohads replaced the Almoravids, Ibn Rushd was hired by the caliph as an advisor and tasked with writing commentaries on Aristotle. Ibn Rushd was later appointed chief *qadi* at Cordoba, a position that kept him close to the caliph. Ibn Rushd’s relationship with the caliphate was complex, at times engaging in open criticism of caliphal authority and at other times loyally serving the caliph. While in the court, Ibn Rushd wrote prolifically on religion, law, and philosophy. Ibn Rushd’s philosophy work, particularly on Aristotle, was widely read by his contemporaries and cited by Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas.[26] Ibn Rushd, like Ibn Sina to an extent, defended the role of philosophy from criticism by orthodox theologians who saw philosophy as a distraction from the revealed truth of the Quran.

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[26] Fouad Ben Ahmed and Robert Pasnau, *Ibn Rushd [Averroes]* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021).

"Ibn Rushd, like Ibn Sina to an extent, defended the role of philosophy from *criticism* by orthodox theologians who saw philosophy as a *distraction* from the revealed truth of the Quran."

Ibn Rushd's unflinching commitment to the seamless integration of Greek philosophy into the Islamic tradition is the most relevant feature of his philosophy. It is why Ibn Rushd remained relevant across cultures into the Middle Ages. Ibn Rushd's political philosophy is deeply bound up with *The Republic*. In his commentary on *The Republic*, Ibn Rushd draws back to the previous Islamic tradition of Platonic political philosophy, alternatively challenging and affirming the readings of his predecessors. Ibn Rushd's closeness to political authority makes his political philosophy particularly interesting. As a courtier, he used his political treatises to critique the established authority for their deviance from the ideal state articulated in Hellenic political philosophy. This marriage of political critique and philosophical commentary is central to Ibn Rushd's Platonism, animating his work.

2.2 Al-Farabi's *Imamate*

Al-Farabi, often considered the father of Islamic Platonism, provides a significant assessment of the philosopher-king in his Plato-inspired treatise on political philosophy, the *Perfect State*. Al-Farabi's elaboration on Plato's idea of the philosopher-king ultimately traces back to Plato's emphasis on the sight of *The Good*. For Plato, *The Good* is the font from which all knowledge flows and exists beyond time and space. In *The Republic*, he describes *The Good* as "the one form of sameness and difference that was relevant to the particular ways of life themselves," highlighting *The Good's* fundamental unity and relevance to human life. In al-Farabi's Islamic reading, this *Good* is identified with God, whom al-Farabi tends to call the First Existent.[27] For al-Farabi, the *First Existent* is marked by unity *(tawhid)*, power, immateriality, unchangingness, and thought. Al-Farabi places familiarity with these attributes of God as a prerequisite of knowledge.

[27] Daniel H. Arioli, *The First Ruler and the Prophet: On the Identity-in-Difference of Politics, Religion, and Philosophy in the Thought of Alfarabi and Ibn Sina* (Polity, 2014).

Plato would seem to concur, writing that *The Good*, while being the "cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge."[28] Despite the virtual harmony of Plato and al-Farabi on the necessity of knowledge of the transcendent for human life, al-Farabi complicates Plato's understanding of what qualities the viewer of the eternal must possess, adding a prophetic dimension to Plato's articulation. Rather than viewing the philosopher-king as the ideal political ruler, al-Farabi instead offers the *Imam*.

"For al-Farabi, the *First Existent* is marked by unity *(tawhid)*, power, immateriality, unchangingness, and thought."

Many scholars attribute al-Farabi's use of the *Imam* to his sympathy with Shiism. This tradition places the Imams as direct descendants and heirs of the Prophet's authority. The relationship between al-Farabi and Shiism is complex, but at least in this area, he concurs with the Shia position. Where Plato places his ruler as the first of a class of elites, al-Farabi places the Imam as ruling alone, uniquely capable of governance.[29] Al-Farabi writes that "in the same way the ruler of this city must come to be in the first instance, and will subsequently be the cause of the rise of the city and its parts and the causer of the presence of the voluntary habits of its parts and of their arrangement in the ranks proper to them; and when one part of out of order he provides it with the means to remove its disorder."[30]

Not only does the Imam rule the city, as Plato's philosopher-king does, but he is the cause of the city's most basic functions. This position as the first cause of public life is afforded to the Imam because of his direct relationship with God. On the Imam, al-Farabi holds that "God almighty grants him Revelation through the mediation of the Active Intellect, so that the emanation from God Almighty to the Active Intellect is passed on to his Passive Intellect through the mediation of the Acquired Intellect, and then to the faculty of representation."[31]

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[28] Plato and D. J. Allan (ed.), *Republic*, 508e.

[29] Patrick Freebuddy Titigah, *Plato's Philosopher-King and Avicenna's Philosopher-Prophet* (California State University, 2020).

[30] Mahmood N. Khoshnaw, *Alfarabi's Conversion of Plato's Republic* (Advances in Literary Study, 2014).

[31] Ibid.

Beyond the somewhat convoluted discussion of the intellect, al-Farabi highlights the role of the Imam as the recipient of revelation, not just a mere viewer of the divine, as in Plato. Al-Farabi, thus, unites the role of philosopher, ruler, and prophet in his *Imam*, melding Plato's understanding with al-Farabi's belief in the authority established by God.

"...al-Farabi highlights the role of the *Imam* as the recipient of revelation, not just a mere viewer of the divine, as in Plato. Al-Farabi, thus, unites the role of philosopher, ruler, and prophet in his *Imam*, ..."

2.3 Ibn Sina's *Prophet*

Ibn Sina, whose political thought closely follows Aristotle, significantly transgresses Plato's fundamental framework regarding the nature of political rule. Despite concurring with Plato's three-fold division of political society, Ibn Sina disputes the central role of the philosopher in Plato's ideal city. For Ibn Sina, even though philosophers are valid and worthy possessors of knowledge, their lack of practical knowledge renders them subpar political leaders.

For Ibn Sina, the philosopher's intellect and the virtuous man's practical moral habit are necessities for good governance. The consummation of these two values is only possible through the prophet's revelation. Even the wisest philosophers, Ibn Sina argues, yield to the revealed truth possessed only by prophets.[32] Although philosophers can attain much truth through reason, only the prophet can "hear God's speech and see God's angels."[33] There is also a notable shift in rhetoric here, from Plato's focus on the sight of *The Good* to Ibn Sina's focus on hearing God's word. This difference in imagery is connected to Ibn Sina's Islamic orthodoxy, which places a high premium on God's revealed word, the Quran. In Plato's worldview, the transcendent *Good* is best understood by sight; the possibility of receiving direct verbal transmission from *The Good* is not explored.

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[32] Michael E. Marmura, *Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy* (Journal of Near Eastern Studies, 1963).

[33] A. L. Komáromi, *Ibn Sina on the Prophet as Lawgiver* (Philosophy Models, 2023).

The direct verbal transmission of divine truth places the prophets' knowledge as fundamentally superior to the philosophers'. As God's commands are perfect in reason, this revealed truth is infallible, unlike the cognitively discovered reason that marks the work of the philosopher. Thus, the authority of the philosopher to govern society is wholly subordinated to the authority of the *prophet*, a stark break from Plato's understanding.

"As God's commands are perfect in reason, this revealed truth is infallible, unlike the cognitively discovered reason that marks the work of the philosopher. Thus, the authority of the philosopher to govern society is wholly subordinated to the authority of the *prophet*, ..."

Ibn Sina also breaks from Plato, and to an extent al-Farabi, when describing the prophet's role in the governance of society. Plato is somewhat vague but places the philosopher-king as the political force keeping society close to its principles. At the same time, al-Farabi explicitly argues for the centrality of his Imam in society, holding that the Imam must arrange and manage the city directly. Ibn Sina argues for the prophet primarily as the society's founder, deemphasizing the prophet's role in everyday rule. As in the case of the Imam, Ibn Sina's prophet must rule alone, but this is done to avoid the pollution of his established law. As the prophet is in direct contact with God, he lays down the fundamental laws of society, establishing general political forms, taxation policies, and criminal justice policies. Nevertheless, these policies are intended to be flexible, with the prophet able to change them given shifting political circumstances. Ibn Sina also pays considerable attention to the prophet's succession, which was clearly inspired by his knowledge of early Islamic politics. The prophet establishes the fundamentals of organized society but entrusts his successors with the fine details, positioning the prophet as a founder rather than a micromanager. This focus on the prophet as a lawgiver is deeply influenced by Ibn Sina's knowledge of *sharia*, the Islamic legal tradition drawn from the Quran's text, and the prophet's sayings. As the Islamic legal worldview is based on elaborations from revealed text, Ibn Sina carries this understanding into his discussion of the prophet, highlighting the dictation of eternal law as a central duty. This focus on disseminating law and the role of the prophet as a founder is absent in Plato's work. However, it is brought about by introducing Islamic legal thinking into the Platonic intellectual framework.

“As the Islamic legal worldview is based on elaborations from revealed text, Ibn Sina carries this understanding into his discussion of the *prophet*, highlighting the dictation of eternal law as a central duty.”

2.4 Ibn Rushd’s *Imamate*

In his commentaries on *The Republic* and other texts from the Hellenic canon, Ibn Rushd forwards virtually the same idea of the Imam as Al-Farabi. However, his intentions in using the term Imam are more straightforward. Rather than potentially referring to the Shia Imams as al-Farabi did, Ibn Rushd uses the Imam as a deliberate tactic to avoid mentioning the caliph. Ibn Rushd was a harsher political critic than many of his forebearers, leading him to distance his philosophical explorations from potential endorsements of his contemporaries, especially the Almohad caliph. Ibn Rushd also challenges al-Farabi’s focus on the Imam as a prophet. Ibn Rushd holds that revelation, specifically the Quran, is necessary for forming the ideal state, but that revelation need not be ongoing. Thus, Ibn Rushd’s Imam does not need access to prophetic knowledge from God; he only needs to apply the already revealed knowledge faithfully. Ibn Rushd also preserves the value of philosophy in light of revelation, unlike Ibn Sina, who subordinates philosophy to it. In his commentary, the *Decisive Treatise*, Ibn Rushd defends the idea of the philosopher in light of revealed truth.[34]

Ibn Rushd argues that philosophers, in their pursuit of truth, will be drawn back to the revealed truth in the Quran, negating any potential conflict. The divine truth of the Quran and the reasoned truths of philosophy, for Ibn Rushd, is entirely compatible with the philosopher’s reasoning through experientially what the Prophet has revealed divinely. This harmonization allows the Imam to be both obedient to divine revelation and a philosopher in the fullest sense, completely negating the conflict between the Islamic and Platonic notions of intellectual mastery. Ibn Rushd’s most distinct insight compared to Plato’s other Islamic readers is his acceptance of Plato’s radical proposals on gender equality. *The Republic* argues for complete equality of the sexes, and Ibn Rushd imports this argument into his commentary.

[34] Arioli, *The First Ruler and the Prophet*.

At odds with the Platonic society that he envisions, Ibn Rushd decries the station women have been reduced to in Islamic Andalusia, writing that "in these states, the ability of women is not known, only because they are being taken for procreation alone therein."[35] Transcending their roles as mothers and wives, Ibn Rushd imagines women as potentially productive members of society whom the political class has stifled. This vision is at odds with Islamic orthodoxy, which, especially in Ibn Rushd's time, did not conceive of a public role for women. This tension does not represent Ibn Rushd's abandonment of Islam in favor of Platonism; rather, it indicates his attempt to fit the political prescriptions of Platonic philosophy to his contemporary society.

"Ibn Rushd's most distinct insight compared to Plato's other Islamic readers is his acceptance of Plato's *radical proposals* on *gender equality*."

In Plato's conception of the guardians, he argues for women's inclusion as a way to optimize the productivity of society. To this end, Ibn Rushd agrees. This agreement does not directly challenge the religious obligations placed on women; it merely argues for the softening of women's social limitations in order for them to better serve society. Thus, as in the case of Imam, Ibn Rushd harmonizes the political demands of Platonism with the facts of Islamic civilization, demonstrating the synthetic quality of his thought.

3. Citizens and their Role in Society

3.1 Introduction to Platonic and Islamic Conceptions of Citizenship

Beyond the nature of just leadership, the role of every citizen in society is principal in both the Hellenic and Islamic philosophical outlooks. For Plato, the citizen plays a minor role in the political success of society. Each citizen only needs to do what he has been preordained to do well; there is no need for collective work, class mobility, or occupational change. Plato writes that while considering the harmonization of social roles in society,

[35] Tineke Melkebeek, *The Medieval Islamic Commentary on Plato's Republic: Ibn Rushd's Perspective on the Position and Potential of Women* (Islamology, 2021).

> "And is that not the reason why a city like this is the only one where we shall find the shoemaker being a shoemaker and not being a helmsman as well as making shoes, and the farmer being a farmer and not being a juror as well as farming his land, and the soldier being a soldier and not being a businessman as well as acting as a soldier, and so on for everything else?"[36]

"For Plato, the citizen plays a minor role in the political success of society. Each citizen only needs to do what he has been preordained to do well; there is no need for collective work, class mobility, or occupational change."

Thus, we can understand the Platonic vision of citizenship as working according to one's nature, with craftsmen leaving governance to the helmsmen and helmsmen leaving crafting to the craftsmen. The Islamic view is sharply distinct from the Platonic one, as Islamic thought has a long tradition of placing a significant premium on the work of every member of the community. In the Charter of Medina, the formalized document establishing the relationship between Muhammad, his followers, and the residents of Medina, the Prophet places much political authority in the *ummah* as a collective body. When concerned with the prevention of crime, for example, the Charter states that the ummah's "hands shall be raised all together."[37]

Further highlighting the centrality of cooperation, the Charter holds that "the Believers are allies to the exclusion of other people."[38] Hence, the Islamic view of citizenship is not merely a situation in which each member ought to do as he has been instructed but a collective work towards maintaining social order and good governance. This distinction between the Platonic and Islamic models of citizenship is central to the discourses around the role of citizens in their societies in the thought of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and Islamic political philosophers more broadly.

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[36] Plato and D. J. Allan (ed.), *Republic*, 397e.

[37] Yetkin Yildirim, *The Medina Charter: A Historical Case of Conflict Resolution* (Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 2010).

[38] Ibid.

In medieval Islamic Platonism, the most robust account of citizenship is provided by al-Farabi in his commentary on democracy. Responding to the description of the democratic state in *The Republic*, al-Farabi presents his more sympathetic view of democratic society. For Plato, democratic societies are marked by freedom of choice and diversity, which through state action eventually lead to equality between citizens, the top-down smoothing out of differences. For al-Farabi, equality is a natural quality of democracy, as the law of democratic society does not ascribe power to one man to rule over another. This society, where many kinds of people may live together without subjugating or being subjugated, al-Farabi argues, is bound to be a hotbed of wisdom, art, and poetry.[39] Al-Farabi's democracy, thus, has an inherently pluralistic and cooperative character, a critical elaboration on the democratic model of Plato. Further underscoring this, al-Farabi describes the democratic state as the *madina jama'iyya*, literally the "associative city."[40] This focus on association and cooperation is vital to Islamic reinterpretations of Plato's political prescriptions.

"In medieval Islamic Platonism, the most robust account of citizenship is provided by al-Farabi in his commentary on democracy. Responding to the description of the democratic state in *The Republic*, al-Farabi presents his more sympathetic view of democratic society."

On the question of citizenship, Ibn Rushd defers to the Platonic model but provides a uniquely Islamic rationale that well situates his account in the broader Islamic Platonist discourse. In his *Commentary*, Ibn Rushd parrots Plato's focus on the duty of each citizen to complete his preordained task but links this duty with the brilliance of Shari'a. Ibn Rushd argues that due to the diversity of human life, divine law offers persons of each sort the opportunity to be fulfilled in the unique circumstances of their lives.[41] Hence, a shoemaker cannot merely be an excellent shoemaker, as in Plato; he can be both an excellent and a happy shoemaker, having fulfilled his duty to his community and his God.

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[39] Alexander I. Orwin, *Democracy under the Caliphs: Alfarabi's Unusual Understanding of Popular Rule* (The Review of Politics, 2015).

[40] Ibid.

[41] Erwin I.J. Rosenthal, *The Place of Politics in the Philosophy of Ibn Rushd* (Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 1953).

Although far closer to Plato than al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd's account still highlights the plural nature of the citizen's role. It offers a singular focus on happiness and fulfillment, otherwise absent from Plato. By cooperating in society by completing one's task well, each person can not only provide necessary resources but enhance the ability of his peers to be fulfilled, a significant insight offered by Ibn Sina brought about by his attention to Islamic law.

"Although far closer to Plato than al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd's account still highlights the plural nature of the citizen's role. It offers a singular focus on happiness and fulfillment, otherwise absent from Plato."

Ibn Sina minimizes the emphasis on collective contribution to social order but maintains the focus on happiness provided by Ibn Rushd. For Ibn Sina, the role of law is to impose a uniform harmony on the citizens of society, preventing disruptive behavior from significantly impairing normal day-to-day function. However, critical to the everyday function of society is what Ibn Sina calls internal ritual, the personal spiritual relationship every citizen must cultivate for their moral betterment.[42] The law, thus, must eradicate disruptions to this private devotion and maximize opportunities for man's moral perfection. Contrary to Plato, Ibn Sina sees the state's role as maximizing the spiritual excellence of each citizen rather than simply providing for the abstract common good. Ibn Rushd's focus on happiness parallels Ibn Sina's attentiveness to individual spiritual fulfillment. Although somewhat different than the collective work model found in the Charter of Madinah and al-Farabi's work, Ibn Sina's model still provides a cooperative space, one in which each citizen obeys the law to further the spiritual development of themselves and their countrymen, a novel synthesis of the classically Islamic and Platonic objectives.

[42] Vittorio Cotesta, *Chapter 30 Avicenna II. Man, Society and Governance* (Brill, 2021).

3.2 The State and Deception

Plato describes deception as a critical aspect of the state's relationship with its citizens. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that good governance requires "a contrivance for one of those falsehoods that come into being in case of need", a method by which the state can lie to its citizens to improve social cohesion.[43] In *The Republic*, a vital example of this is the myth of the origins of the citizenry. In Plato's ideal state, the state would propagate the myth that its citizens were born directly out of the ground, fostering the idea of brotherhood between them. Further, these earthborn citizens would have either a gold, silver, or bronze soul, stratifying society into metallurgical castes composed of workers, craftspeople, and guardians.

"In Plato's *ideal state*, the state would propagate the myth that its citizens were born directly out of the ground, fostering the idea of brotherhood between them."

Plato argues for censoring poets and artists to ensure adherence to patriotic ideals to enhance social cohesion further. Myths detailing fratricide, for example, would need to be excised from public life to ensure that such subversive ideas do not influence the citizenry. The ethics of this kind of political deception is central to the model of citizenship presented by Plato and has had varied reception in Islamic scholarship.

Al-Farabi connects the necessity of state deception to the demands of religion. Al-Farabi defines philosophy as the contents of the "soul of the legislator" and religion as the contents of the "souls of the multitude." Thus, subterfuge is the mechanism by which the general public can be made aware of the truth the legislature understands.[44]The legislator's duty, al-Farabi holds, is to use persuasion and "images" to convince the citizenry to obey the dictates of his philosophical inquiry.[45] This does not imply any error in the guidance of the legislator but points to an inherent resistance of the masses to their fulfillment. Although this focus on human intransigence is unique to al-Farabi, his elaboration on Plato's thought is apparent.

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[43] Plato and D. J. Allan (ed.), *Republic*, 414b.

[44] Ishraq Ali and Mingli Qin, *Distinguishing the Virtuous City of Alfarabi from That of Plato in Light of His Unique Historical Context* (HTS Theological Studies, 2019).

[45] Ibid.

Rather than deceiving and censoring for social cohesion, al-Farabi places salvation at the center of his political calculation, a key innovation that Islamic Platonists explore further. Ibn Rushd's perspective on the ethics of political deception is similar to al-Farabi's, but he was deeply connected to the political intrigues of his time. Ibn Rushd finds Plato's prescriptions on telling myths entirely permissible, excluding the Myth of Er, Plato's closing account of the afterlife.

For Plato, death is followed by *reincarnation* (μετεμψύχωσις), an ontological precept contrary to Ibn Rushd's Islamic orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Ibn Rushd finds myths permissible as long as they point the public towards the truth. Philosophers come to know truth via inquiry, whereas the masses know truth through persuasion. Thus, it is reasonable for those who have already rationally acquired knowledge to transmit it to the masses via rhetoric. This position is staked out in opposition to al-Ghazali (c.1056–1111), one of Ibn Rushd's philosophical and political rivals, who argued that all mythmaking and storytelling are in fundamental opposition to the revelation of the Prophet. For al-Ghazali, any attempt to reframe, analogize, or transmit the Prophet's word is inherently corrupting. Thus, the Platonic model of political deception is unacceptable in al-Ghazali's worldview.[46] Established in contrast to al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd's perspective offers a singularly Islamic defense of Platonic statecraft, unique even amongst his contemporaries.

"Philosophers come to know truth via *inquiry*, whereas the masses know truth through *persuasion*. Thus, it is reasonable for those who have already rationally acquired *knowledge* to transmit it to the masses via *rhetoric*."

Ibn Sina presents an elitist response to the ethical quandary raised by Plato. Rather than viewing deception as a mechanism by which the citizenry can be convinced of the truth, following al-Farabi, Ibn Sina understands the citizenry as incapable of understanding the truth. Thus, political deception aims to communicate the essential features of religion and maintain social cohesion.

[46] Miriam Galston, *Realism and Idealism in Avicenna's Political Philosophy* (The Review of Politics, 1979).

Ibn Sina argues that complex theological precepts should be obscured from ordinary people to avoid disrupting their simple faith, the most basic understanding of God they possess, which may be disturbed by complex religious discourses.[47] This may seem like a wholesale capitulation to the Platonic model of political deception, but it still maintains a kernel of Islamic influence. The focus on preserving the faith of the masses is a uniquely Islamic perspective raised by Ibn Sina, which he seamlessly introduces into the framework established by Plato.

4. The Origin and Destination of Political Life

4.1 Luxury, Desire, and the Beginning of Politics

In *The Republic*, Plato offers his perspective on human society's origin and ultimate destination. In his discourse with Adeimantus, one of the work's main interlocutors, Socrates presents his "city in speech," a rustic ideal city emphasizing collective work, moderation, and social stability. Socrates notes that this society cannot be considered just or unjust, as this idyllic city's social harmony does not necessitate legal litigation.[48] Nevertheless, this city is considered an Edenic paradise of piety, joy, and satisfaction. This vision of the primitive city is disrupted by Glaucon, who objects that the city lacks ὄψᾰ, a phrase alternatively translated as "delicacies," "relishes," or, perhaps most literally, "condiments." Socrates accepts the inclusion of the relishes, along with other material luxuries, transforming the simple, rustic state into one described as "fevered."[49] In the fevered state, courtesans, jewelry, and delicate garments beget classes of servants, actors, and doctors. The feverish nature of this state also leads to war, as competing desires over finite resources will inevitably end in violence. For Plato, this competition of desires necessitates forming a governmental structure. Neutral and impartial arbiters can justly mediate between disputing parties, led by those with a virtuous and just disposition, the previously exhibited guardians.[50]

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[47] Galston, *Realism and Idealism in Avicenna's Political Philosophy.*

[48] Plato and D. J. Allan (ed.), *Republic*, 371e.

[49] Ibid, 372e.

[50] Ibid, 374e.

Thus, for Plato, society does not have an inherent need for law or government; political life only emerges to cope with human desire, the enterprising appetite for goods beyond absolute needs.

"...for Plato, society does not have an inherent need for *law* or *government*; political life only emerges to cope with human desire, the enterprising appetite for goods beyond absolute needs."

4.1.1 Al-Farabi's Indispensable City

In al-Farabi's commentary on the origin of political life, he presents a vision very similar to Plato's that he calls the "indispensable city."[51] As the name implies, this city only contains absolute necessities and requires citizens to help each other achieve the bare minimum required for human life. Although al-Farabi does not use this term, the indispensable city is a primarily materialistic society. Al-Farabi contrasts this rustic simplicity with the ideal state, where citizenry directs their intention toward "the attainment of the most excellent of things by which are the true existence of man, his continuance, his livelihood, and the preservation of his life."[52] Rather than tracing the evolution of the indispensable city to human concupiscence, al-Farabi understands the primitive city as inherently aberrant, listing it first among deviations from the ideal state. Al-Farabi's disdain for the rustic city's materialism sharply contrasts him with Plato, who seems at least exoterically in favor of the communal life of the "city in speech." Al-Farabi concedes that virtue can independently develop in the indispensable city; he invariably cites the primitive city as a fundamentally erroneous social state.

"Al-Farabi's disdain for the *rustic city's* materialism sharply contrasts him with Plato, who seems at least exoterically in favor of the communal life of the 'city in speech.'"

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[51] Ali and Qin, *Distinguishing the Virtuous City of Alfarabi*.

[52] Farouk A. Sankari *Plato and Alfarabi: A Comparison of Some Aspects of Their Political Philosophies* (Vivarium, 1970).

4.1.2 Ibn Sina's Prophet-as-Arbiter

For Ibn Sina, the city-in-speech articulated by Plato is only made possible through the presence of a prophet. Ibn Sina explains that human life requires cooperation and is only possible under a regime of laws. This statement does seem to hint at a tacit acceptance of Plato's note on desire as the disrupter of the rustic state, but Ibn Sina does not spend long on the topic. Instead, Ibn Sina argues that "law and justice demand a lawgiver and dispenser of justice."[53] For Ibn Sina, it seems impossible for purely reciprocal transactions to proceed from human goodwill; a neutral and supremely fair arbiter is needed to legislate. This legislator, for Ibn Sina, must be a prophet, someone different from other men, thus inspiring confidence and allowing for neutrality. This understanding of prophethood as human perfection is profoundly resonant in the Islamic tradition. In Sufi literature, Muhammad is often described as *Al-Insān al-Kāmil*, the "complete person."[54] In this sense, Muhammad, by his prophethood, is understood to be the most authentic representation of human life. Thus, returning to Ibn Sina, the prophet is a perfect man, untainted by the desires that make cooperation otherwise impossible. In Ibn Sina's account, we see the adoption of Plato's rustic city model evolve with the introduction of prophethood, a singularly Islamic response to the issue raised by *The Republic*.

4.2 Political Decay and the Atrophy of Virtue

Beyond the rustic origin of political life, Plato also devotes significant attention to societal decay, the entropic tendency of ideal states to devolve into lower political forms.[55] Much has already been said about the rule of the philosopher-king, a political form that Plato names aristocracy, literally translated as the dominion of the best. The first deviation from this perfect political order arises from a failure in the education of the guardian class. In the deviant model, guardians are not only instructed in virtue but are also attentive to money and other material matters. This leads to a ruling class that no longer values transcendent wisdom but prioritizes courage, cultivating a martial nature.

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[53] Arioli, *The First Ruler and the Prophet*.

[54] Rebekah Zwanzig, *Al-Insan al-Kamil, the Perfect Individual* (Sufi Path of Love, 2019)

[55] Plato and D. J. Allan (ed.), *Republic*, VIII-IX.

This state, the first phase of social decay, is termed the timocracy, the dominion of the worthy, with Sparta serving as the archetypical timocracy. The timocratic government also inevitably faces decline as the ruling class loses its appetite for courage, prioritizing the need for money over the need for honor inherent to the timocratic form. Thus, timocracy devolves into oligarchy, the dominion of the few. The principal virtue of the oligarchic form is prudence, as irrationality and excess harm profitable businesses. The material wealth brought about by oligarchy leads to, to borrow a Marxist formulation, class warfare. The destitute masses, incensed by the splendor of the oligarchs, will eventually revolt, deposing the oligarchy and instituting a democracy, the dominion of the people.

“...the first phase of social decay, is termed the *timocracy*, the dominion of the worthy, with *Sparta* serving as the archetypical timocracy.”

Popular government, due to its mass character, prioritizes freedom above all. The freedom-mindedness of the democratic man inevitably leads to license and, by extension, chaos. The disorganization in late-stage democratic society leads to the final and most dramatic episode of decay, the establishment of tyranny. The tyrant, as an extension of democratic license, is entirely subordinated to his passions, manipulating the populace to satisfy his material wants. Thus, the virtues found in the previous states, wisdom, courage, temperance, and freedom, are utterly absent from tyranny, supplanted by carnal passion. Plato's denigration of democracy and admiration of hierarchical political forms may appear controversial to modern audiences. However, to Plato's medieval rulers, *The Republic*`s political taxonomy provides a helpful analytical framework for theorizing statecraft and constructing incisive political critiques.

4.2.1 Ibn Rushd’s Platonic Polemics

Ibn Rushd used Plato’s categories to construct criticisms of the political leadership of his time. Ibn Rushd’s life began under the Almoravids until they were replaced by the Almohads, at whose court Ibn Rushd would serve most of his intellectual career. This change in political leadership led Ibn Rushd to construct a rough historiography of Islamic regimes in his Commentary on *The Republic*.

Recounting early Islamic history, Ibn Rushd wrote that after the four rightly guided caliphs, the Muslims were "transformed in the days of Mu'awiya into timocratic men."[56] Mu'awiya, the progenitor of the Umayyad dynasty, is considered by Ibn Rushd to be the first architect of decline, introducing the love of money into the framework inherited by Muhammad through the four righteous caliphs. In the Almoravid dynasty, Ibn Rushd saw a further decline; although the state followed timocracy, Ibn Rushd labeled it hedonism.

By the third generation of Almoravids, even the timocratic constitution yielded to decadent hedonism. Perhaps even more confusingly, Ibn Rushd uses timocracy and democracy interchangeably to describe social decline. Nevertheless, Ibn Rushd's understanding of social decay terminates in tyranny, which he says is evident in "men of our own time."[57] As Ibn Rushd's Commentary was written during the time of the Almohads, it seems that the allegation of tyranny is leveled at them, excoriated for deviating from the orthodoxy established by Muhammad. Although Ibn Rushd's political formulations do not precisely mirror Plato's, Ibn Rushd instrumentalized the Platonic model of social organization to critique his society through an Islamic lens, a critical moment of Platonic-Islamic intellectual syncretism.

"...Ibn Rushd's understanding of *social decay* terminates in *tyranny*, which he says is evident in 'men of our own time.'"

4.2.2 Al Farabi's Three Errors

In al-Farabi's work, he employs a different yet interrelated taxonomy for charting the decline of public life. These divisions are between the virtuous city and three forms of deviation: the ignorant city, the immoral city, and the erring city. The ignorant city knows nothing of virtue, the immoral city knows virtue and rejects it, while the erring city is misled by its rulers on manners of virtue. Using these categories as markers, al-Farabi attempts to place the Platonic models of government into these categories, which he presents in no particular order.

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[56] Rosenthal, *The Place of Politics*.

[57] Ibid.

Perhaps most clearly, the aristocracy of Plato is the virtuous city of al-Farabi. Al-Farabi further divides oligarchy into the vile and base cities, with both of these distinctions sitting at the bottom of al-Farabi's categorization.[58] Interestingly, al-Farabi does not levy a value judgment between democracy and timocracy. Al-Farabi attributes the imperfection of timocracy and democracy to immorality or ignorance but is not consistent on which state is preferable. In favor of democracy, al-Farabi calls democratic cities the "most admirable and happy."[59] In defense of timocracy, al-Farabi calls timocratic cities "the best among ignorant cities."[60] This seeming contradiction illuminates a critical element of al-Farabi's understanding of the city's decline. Although the virtuous city is ideal, timocracy and democracy are preferable alternatives to tyranny and oligarchy. This framework is distinct from Plato's but is made possible by including *The Republic*'s political categories in al-Farabi's evaluation criteria.

Conclusion

The interplay between the classically Platonic and Islamic worldviews in the works of al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Sina illuminates a rich tradition of political philosophy. As exemplars of the medieval philosophical heritage, these thinkers demonstrate the enrichment of Hellenic political theory by introducing Islamic theological and social principles. This synthesis dates back to the beginning of the Islamic intellectual tradition, with verses from the Quran reflecting the imagery and language of the Platonic dialogues. Using the fundamental compatibility of both the Platonic and Islamic perspectives, Islamic Platonists have fashioned novel positions about the role of the ruler to society, the citizen's duty to good governance, censorship, and the origin and destination of political life. In their work, the considered philosophers offer not only a sound extension of orthodox Platonism but also novel insights on the nature of politics, informed by the life and teachings of Muhammad. Al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Sina`s political philosophies offer a model of intellectual exchange and social thought that situates them and their coreligionists as key architects of the Platonic intellectual tradition, a critical reality in constructing a genealogy of Western political thought.

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[58] Alexander Orwin, *Imposing Alfarabi on Plato: Averroes's Novel Placement of the Platonic City* (Plato's Republic in the Islamic Context, 2022).

[59] Cotesta, *Avicenna: Man Society and Governance*.

[60] Ibid.

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About CFIG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFIG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFIG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFIG’s spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

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