

Transcript

Ahmad Bostani - "Political philosophy and the imagination from Al-Farabi to Spinoza"

Ahmad Bostani:

Thank you Anthony, and I would like to thank Marie and Dan for their efforts. My presentation will be about the connection between Spinoza's TTP and the medieval tradition, and particularly Al-Farabi's political philosophy. I will argue that Al-Farabi ... exerted the most significant influence on the TTP, regarding the role imagination can place in both prophecy and politics. As some scholars show, the imagination in Spinoza has two faces. In Ethics, he discussed how the imagination can be overcome and replaced by the true understanding of things. And in the TTP, the question is how the imagination can be stabilized and empowering. So, my talk will be devoted to this aspect in the TTP and the influence of Al-Farabi on Spinoza.

Also, what I'm going to discuss, just ... to be clear, is not about Spinoza and Islam. Spinoza, as some scholars have shown, knew Islamic civilization and religious doctrines, and we can also guess his attitude toward Islam, the Qur'an and Mohammed. My concern is the study of the influence of Al-Farabi, whose teachings were not Islamic, in stricto sensu, but philosophical, as I will discuss.

Before discussing Al-Farabi's influence on Spinoza a critical review is necessary, since my argument is against the background of two sets of bodies of literature. First, some scholars have discussed the influence of Al-Farabi on Maimonides, which is an important intermediary figure here in the medieval Jewish philosophy. And putting both of them, Al-Farabi and Spinoza and Maimonides, in one basket. However, they cut the line between them and Spinoza's radical enlightenment. For example, according to Leo Strauss, Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes and Maimonides, both of them belong to the ancient Platonic philosophy whose hallmark was the distinction between esoteric and exoteric teachings. What ... has been called in Strauss's works and his followers "the theological-political predicament", which obviously drawn from the title of the TTP. And this problem or ... the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem in Strauss's vocabulary tackles with this problem and is at the core of the history of ancient philosophy, and even modern philosophy, and could not be solved in favour of either philosophy or theology, according to Leo Strauss and his followers.

But according to Strauss, Spinoza's project is in opposition to the classical philosophical tradition, because the radical enlightenment of Spinoza disturbs the balance of freedom and faith and attempted to ... solve the problem in favour of rational enlightenment. Which requires delivering the distinction between the vulgar and the intellectuals and insisting on free rational thinking and philosophizing for every human being. Which is not a possible, and neither desirable according to Strauss.

I think there are a few problems with this account. Firstly, Strauss overlooks the differences between ... Islamic and Jewish intellectual history with regard to the connection between philosophy and theology. Because in the Islamic tradition, at least in the 10th century, there is a clear-cut distinction between philosophy and theology. Al-Farabi was a philosopher, and for example ... we have a lot of theologians defending the doctrines of Qur'an and Islamic teachings, but in ... the Jewish tradition, like

the Christian medieval tradition, theology and philosophy are intertwined, and we cannot separate them into two different fields of study or discipline.

So, it is very important to note because I would like to draw the similarity between Al-Farabi and Spinoza later. And I think what Strauss called the "theological political problem" as something shared between Plato and Al-Farabi also overlooks the original aspects of Al-Farabi's theory of imagination. Because prophecy was not the problem of Greek philosophers. Poetics, Rhetorics, Phantasia, all of them were, but not prophecy which is something different and requires a different account, according to Al-Farabi and some other Muslim philosophers.

Second, literature, is scholars who put an emphasis on the positive influence of Jewish philosophy or Jewish theology, and especially on the influence of Maimonides on Spinoza. For example, Leon Roth, Schlomo Pines, Arthur Hyman among others. A typical example of this thesis is developed in an article by Warren Zev Harvey, entitled "A portrait of Spinoza as Maimonidean", who extensively discussed the influence and, as the title shows, he portrays Spinoza as completely ... Maimonidean.

So, the problem with this works ... is that they ignored that Spinoza radically criticized and rejected Maimonides' main teachings and methods. Some of similarities Harvey and the other scholars of this group discussed are ... only apparent or based on the usage of similar words. For example, Gods, all of us know that ... Spinoza's God is completely different with Maimonides' God. And Spinoza's affection is completely different with Maimonides' temperament, which is the mixture of humours in ancient physics. Or the difference in bodily imagination in Spinoza and sensual imagination in Maimonides which are completely different.

So, and thirdly, more importantly, almost all of the main features they attributed to Maimonides are rooted in the philosophy of Al-Farabi who lived 250 years before Maimonides, and we know that Maimonides why significantly was significantly influenced by Al-Farabi.

An important point here is that prophecy was one of the main problems in Islamic political philosophy. Muslim philosophers regarded prophecy as a phenomenon as a foundation of the Islamic civilization as a social and political reality, and their approach could be called in an anachronistic way a "phenomenological approach", because they wouldn't defend Islamic doctrines.

For example, Al-Farabi or Al-Razi, who discovered alcohol and was an important scientist and philosopher and physician, who believes in God but rejected harshly rejected all religions and prophets and prophecy and called them superstition and so on. And Al-Farabi belonged to this tradition of, what has been called "golden age" of Islamic or Persian civilization. So, the difference between Al-Farabi and Maimonides was significant. For example, Al-Farabi, according to Al-Farabi ... I'm sorry, Al-Farabi was a philosopher while Maimonides was a theologian ... according to Al-Farabi there is a difference between philosopher and prophet. But according to Maimonides, the prophet and particularly Moses, is an individual with the perfection of both imaginative and rational faculty. Spinoza's distinction between true understanding of the text, and the truth of things is important here. I think Al-Farabi is on the side of the truth of things, but Maimonides' main concern is to properly understand and interpret and ... provide a true understanding of the text. Understanding the true meaning of the text, of the scriptures in this case.

So according to Al-Farabi a prophet possesses ... only the powerful imaginative faculty. In Arabic it is interesting that in Arabic there is a distinction between Rasul and Nabi. Rasul is the messenger of

God, and nabi means someone who has some powers. For example, he can tell what will happen ... in the future, has very difficult dreams, intuitions, performs magic and so on, miracles and so on. ... Interestingly Al-Farabi didn't talk about rasul, ... it is missing in his vocabulary. But he talked about nabi, which is based on ... his theory of imagination.

So unlike Al-Farabi, Maimonides' enterprise was to justify the authenticity and the authority of Moses. But Al-Farabi just wants to offer a philosophical interpretation of the phenomenon of prophecy.

So, let's take a look at Al-Farabi's account of prophecy. Al-Farabi discussed extensively the features and functions of the imaginative faculty more than ... any medieval philosopher I think, or prior to them. Some functions of imaginative faculty according to Al-Farabi, for example recollecting the sensible data in ... the mind, in the form of memory. Working on and organizing the images and data drawn from sense perception. Imitation of sensual images, for example in literature. And imitation from intellectual forms and transforming in them into representations and images. And finally, to connect, according to Al-Farabi, the imagination connects two parts of the rational faculty: theoretical and practical. So, it is somehow connected to the term of phronesis as something ... located between theoretical and practical, back and forth between them.

So political philosophy according to Al-Farabi will be impossible without imagination, although the position of the intellectual faculty and active intellect is higher than imagination. According to Al-Farabi, the imagination has always an intermediary role. For example, between sense perception and reason. Between particulars and generals. Between theory and practice, as I said. And in this case Al-Farabi went beyond Aristotelian, for example phantasia, rhetoric, poetics and attempted to provide an extensive philosophical theory of imagination. And it is the main difference of Al-Farabi and some other philosophers in Islamic civilization like, for example, Averroes. Averroes wanted to explain prophecy based on just some linguistic strategies like poetics and rhetorics, because he didn't want to accept that the prophet, like Maimonides, the prophet is not a philosopher. He's doesn't have the ... perfection of rational faculty. But for Al-Farabi accepts that the prophet is completely should be separated from the philosopher and ... their perfection ... of faculty is different.

So, the similarities between Al-Farabi and Spinoza especially in the TTP are striking to me. I mentioned just a couple of points. Al-Farabi draws a distinction between intellect and imagination in his political treatises. There he discusses prophecy and politics in the same framework, similar to Spinoza. The philosopher is someone with a perfect or a high level of intellectual capacity, while a prophet is someone with perfect imaginative factors.

Second important point. Al-Farabi and Spinoza explain prophecy and politics not only based on rhetoric, as I said, rhetoric, noble lies, poetics, and so on. As I said that there are striking similarities between them in drawing the distinction between the couple such as reason-imagination, the philosopher-the prophet, the intellectuals and the vulgar, and the ... unity and multiplicity, multiplicity sorry. Because unity is rooted in reason and multiplicity is rooted in the imagination, according to both Al-Farabi and Spinoza.

According to Al-Farabi as well as Spinoza, religion and community are based on the imagination. And although their epistemology is intellectual or rational, their political theory puts emphasis on the role ... of the imagination, since they observed that most people think and act in accordance with imagination

and irrational. So ideal politics requires prophecy, not in a religious sense of the term, but the act of prophecy.

Number five. Al-Farabi and Spinoza maintained that the truth-falsehood split is based on rational knowledge of things, which is a philosophical enterprise but the judgment of good and evil is based on the imagination. It is the idea later developed by Arendt, Hannah Arendt, in this interpretation of Kant's theory of Judgment, Kant's Third Critique.

And I would like to conclude with a lot a couple of differences between Al-Farabi and Spinoza. The differences between them, their accounts of imagination, is rooted in their different world views and metaphysical schemes. Although both are monists, rationalists and share a naturalist conception of God, their difference can be epitomized by the vertical - horizontal split in drawn from phenomenology. The Farabian God is the One with the capital O, the One of the theory of emanation. The world is emanated according to him, the world is emanated from the One in a hierarchy of beings. But the Spinozist world view is horizontal, and God is the nature itself. It is a kind of palm-faced conception of God.

So, consequently their conception of reason is different. Intellection for Al-Farabi is the reception of forms from the active intellect. But for Spinoza reasoning is a human activity in which the human beings are more or less equal, or at least they are in a horizontal axis. So, the imagination in Al-Farabi is also vertical, mediating between the higher level of the intelligible and the lower level of the sensible, in the Aristotelian psychology in his book "De Anima" and epistemology. But Spinoza's imagination is horizontal for example his discussion of bodily imagination or imagining the external bodies was completely absent in Al-Farabi.

Drawing on the French distinction between three concepts in the study of imagination which are L'imagination, l'imaginaire and l'imaginal, or the imagination, the imaginary and the imaginal... The first one is an individual faculty, the second consists of an inter-subjective and collective realm, and the third is an ontological world, which is the neologism of Henry Corbin, imaginal world or mundus imaginalis. We can say that Spinoza's theory of imagination commutes between the imagination and the imaginary. The concept of the imaginary was already discussed in the works of, in English, for example the words of Gatens and Lloyd's "Collective Imaginings" or in French by Michel Bertrand, his book titled "Spinoza et L'Imaginaire". While Al-Farabi's theory is located between the imagination and the imaginal, meaning the ontological realm, an ontological world of images and the independent words of images, which is not based on sense perception, the sensible world. So... to summarize Al-Farabi's imagination is vertical, in the sense I've just said, and Spinoza's imagination is horizontal. Thank you very much.