

Farabi Hermeneutical and Dialectical Reading of Meno and Gorgias

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Abstract

In the context of comparative and intercultural philosophy the approach and engagement of one philosopher with another, is a very basic issue. With regard to this, I want to narrate Farabi's special engagement with the *Meno* and *Gorgias* dialogues of Plato. His engagement can be named hermeneutic dialectical reading-here hermeneutic means the relation of Farabi with the *Meno* and *Gorgias* texts and also inside these two texts there are diverse and different levels, layers and mediations (though this is also true so far as my self as a researcher); dialectical means his reading is in the form of synoptic question (s) and answer; and reading means conversational construction of meaning in relation to the text and context.

Farabi's hermeneutic dialectical reading of the *Meno* and *Gorgias* has these characteristics: he propounds these two dialogues thematically or in accordance with their subject matter as two parts or orders in the whole of the Plato philosophy. Therefore for understanding these dialogues we have to put them in a broader context that have interconnections with the whole philosophy. Besides, the *Gorgias* is connected with or exists in a set of dialogues that collectively make a network that too has logical relation with the *Meno*. He says that Plato philosophy as a whole begins with a search about human perfection as the first order that is discussed in *Alcibiades I* and then for getting this perfection we need knowledge that *Theaetetus* dialogue discusses thematically as the second order. After searching about eudaimonia in the *Philebus* and knowledge of eudaimonia in *Protagoras* respectively, Plato further searches about the possibility and the quality and how-ness of getting this special knowledge in the *Meno*. Farabi says that in the *Meno* (means fixing) dialogue as the fifth order or level of Plato philosophy he searches about this matter i.e. getting of this knowledge and the method if the answer is positive. Plato in this dialogue says that this knowledge is possible by means of *Sana't* / art / *τεχνη*. Therefore the next step is searching for these arts that are well-known among citizens of different cities and civilities.

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Farabi says that for Plato these arts are six arts according to six dialogues-that begins with theological syllogism art in the *Euthyphro* and continues by language, poetics, rhetoric, sophistics and ends by art of dialectics in the *Parmenides*. According to Farabi Gorgias (means service) is after *Ion* dialogue about poetics, before the *Sophist* that is about sophistics. In this dialogue Plato searches two problem, does this art give us knowledge or only the method, and how much this art is knowledge?

Key word: Reading, Hermeneutic, Dialectical, Engagement.

Introduction

It is natural that every thinker or philosopher with an inspiration and aim can have his own perception about other philosopher's authentic or attributed text(s). In this context I want to present Farabi's perception of the Meno and Gorgias as an intercultural/comparative philosopher who lived and thought in-between. My account of Farabi's perception is based on his own existent and available Arabic texts, the English translations of these texts and my own inferences or additions.

For me, it seems more appropriate to examine Farabi's perception in the broad context of Reading. If this heuristic suggestion can be accepted then I have to search for his own theory about Reading. Farabi discusses in a specific and obvious way about Reading as the sixth part or constituent of the linguistic in every nation. For him, linguistics or the knowledge of language has seven broad sections where Reading (or more precisely rules of Correct Reading) is between rules of Correct Writing and Poetics. Rules of correct reading are rules about the place of points or punctuation; signs for letters; signs for the phases of sentences and grounds for instability of interconnected words and sentences [1]. Accordingly, he has a very special and different

theory of Reading that differs from ours and seems to answer specific questions that are unknown to many contemporary problems. Therefore we ought to propose suitable question with regard to Farabi's internal logic or theory of Reading.

As a whole, taking account of other related works of Farabi, I can infer that the basis of his theory of Reading is an appropriate combination of Aristotelian logic and Arabic grammar [2]. This makes the argument of reading a complex practice including both universal and particular aspects. Therefore reading of a texts is a kind of universal/logical and particular/grammatical practice and the reader should not enmesh his-or herself merely in one aspect-although it is a very hard task. Therefore reading is simultaneously contextual and textual, can not be neutral and without context or context-boundedness. For clarity more and to help to think this I suggest following propositions:

- different texts need universal and particular rules for reading.
- combination of the universal and particular in the mind of the reader that guides his or her reading, can be affected by many factors.
- Through placing the correct reading after Correct Writing and before Poetics, Farabi shows that reading is a complex and interconnected

practice. On the one hand, it is related to correct writing and wants to correct or complete the writing in its overall position in the knowledge of language. On the other, it is related to a special perception of aesthetics in the form of Poetics. Therefore I can say that for Farabi, reading is not merely limited to one discipline rather has many layers or interrelated layers: logical; grammatical; aesthetic and graphical.

The above points give a general image about Farabi's theory of Reading however, are not sufficient specially for his reading of *Gorgias* and *Meno* dialogues. For completing the image, I refer to his explicit perception in the written form about these two dialogues. Farabi discusses these two dialogues under the broad topic of "*The philosophy of Plato, Its Parts, The Ranks of Order of its Parts, From The Beginning to the End*". In its printed Arabic version the content of this topic is arranged in about thirty pages with thirty-two numbers or levels [3], but English translation of the same has fourteen pages with thirty eight numbers or levels [4]. According to Farabi's perception or reading, every dialogues of Plato has a special place and subject in the series of levels that contributes to the general theme and has relation with its earlier and later dialogues or as a group they pertain to a sub-theme. Accordingly, the two dialogues of *Gorgias* and *Meno* constitute about two printed pages, and in the context of the general schema *Meno* is at the fifth / sixth level and *Gorgias* is at the ninth/tenth level.

Farabi believes that Plato's philosophy as a whole begins with a search for perfection of beings and different kinds of it. In the other words, he

investigates the things that make man enviable as to which of them constitute the perfection of man as man, for every being has a perfection [5]. In this broad context human beings have a kind of perfection, the highest level of which is *eudaimonia*. It is obvious that as a whole or in part we can suggest and discuss perfection differently such as beautiful face, soft skin, healthy bodily organs, having a distinguished ancestry and tribe, having many friends and lovers, being prosperous, being glorified and exalted, ruling over a group or city and According to this reading of Farabi, in Plato's search for perfection it becomes clear that the mentioned items are insufficient and are only believed to be happiness.

Therefore they do not lead to perfection and are illusions, thus human beings need some thing else and Plato begins his own second search and reaches to the conclusion that other thing must be a certain knowledge and way of life. All this is discussed as the first order and exists in *Alcibiades (that is to say, model) Major, which is known as on man*.

Then he searches for the nature and distinguishing mark of this knowledge. According to Farabi Plato knowledge is the knowledge about the substance of each of beings-therefore perfection has to be searched for and examined in connection with this kind of knowledge and not opinions and beliefs. Nature of knowledge as the second order in the general philosophy of Plato is discussed in *Theaetetus (meaning voluntary)*.

According to Farabi's reading, Plato connects perfection with a special kind of knowledge and mentioning briefly about this knowledge, he

searches for the true perfection and its relations to knowledge and opinion.

And he finds that the virtuous way of life is what leads to the achievement of this happiness. This is the third order of the general schema that is examined in *Philebus* (meaning beloved).

Farabi then discussed the connection between knowledge and perfection or *eudaimonia* with their special characteristics. According to him, Plato searches for the possibility of acquiring such knowledge. After investigating Protagoras' argument, Plato explained that, contrary to what Protagoras asserts, this knowledge, whose character was explained in the *Teaetetus*, can be attained and does exist, and that this is the knowledge that belongs to human perfection, not the one asserted by Protagoras. This topic is discussed in *Protagoras* as the fourth order. This reading paves the way to pay attention and examine *Meno* and *Gorgias*. However, before going further, I must summarize that:

- Farabi applies the phenomenon of "appropriation", i.e. he makes Plato's philosophy his own and then makes it suitable for specific condition, purpose, place and so on.

- Farabi has a contextual reading of Platonic philosophy in its entirety and the related dialogues have to be understood in this context.

- Farabi has a conceptual and selective and not necessarily historical or diachronic reading of dialogues.

- Farabi's reading has the form of a synoptic and didactic course: briefly and carefully discussed according to the supposed theme of every dialogue although it is not clear who the audiences are.

After mentioning the form of Farabi's reading of Plato's philosophy I can now turn to the discussion of its content with regard to the related dialogues. The substance of his reading is both dialectical and hermeneutic. Regarding complexities about the term 'dialectic', Farabi's approach to the Plato's translated texts or philosophy, and his narrative mode of representing them, it seems inappropriate to relate dialectic with dialogue and say that Farabi has a dialogical reading. Furthermore, Farabi dialectic differs from eristic although in his translation and definition it seems that dialectic is very close to eristic or at least one of its meaning. Therefore it would be better if I define dialectic as discussion by the means of question and answer, although some are short and some are longer— a definition that is not alien for classical thinking [6].

Now I turn to the second aspect that is hermeneutic though a very special kind. With regard to Farabi's reading of Plato's dialogues, most of which are in a mediated and indirect fashion (for any reasons), it seems that he approaches them with a certain intention and purpose and interpret them accordingly. In other words, he discovers a subject for every dialogue and summarizes all discussion in the form of few questions and answers. Therefore, his reading from the very beginning is hermeneutic in nature and continues it through selected dialogues (as said it is a very specific kind of hermeneutic).

After describing these two qualities there is a better situation for representing and understanding Farabi's reading of *Meno* and *Gorgias*. As mentioned before, he propounds these two

dialogues thematically or in accordance with their subject matter as two parts within Plato's philosophy in its entirety. Therefore to understand these dialogues it is more appropriate to put them in a broader context that have interconnections with the whole and also with their earlier and later dialogues. According to Farabi's reading at the fourth order, exemplified by the dialogue of Protagoras, examined the possibility of the special knowledge that is appropriate for human perfection. The next search is about the quality or how-ness of this special knowledge that is related to perfection. In the other words, he investigates whether this knowledge is attained by chance or by investigation or by instruction and study. In this regard, Farabi introduces the fifth/ sixth order that is the dialogue of *Meno*. He makes it clear that this knowledge can be attained by investigation and by a faculty and art.

His reading of this dialogue is dialectical: it seems that this dialogue has only two characters that are Meno (which means fixed) and Plato. In his search for true knowledge Plato asks: is it possible that we reach to this knowledge by accident and nature or we can acquire it by research and education, or research and education have no role and status in this regard? Therefore Plato's dialogue begins with a question that the two characters are answer to it – first, Meno relatively long answer against education, and then is Plato's support for education in the form of a short answer. Thus Farabi's reading of *Meno* is dialectical not in the sense of being dialogical, rather due to the theme of *Protagoras* dialogue in the context of Plato's philosophy which is in

precise question and answers form. This reading is hermeneutic, too. It means that the content of this dialogue has to be put in a broader context and background and it is actually connected with it as a whole. Next, the whole of the dialogue is translated or interpreted by a pivotal category that is a definite question and answer - but it is no more in a dialogical form. The main aim must be to acquire and discover the basic theme or the core of the question and answer. It seems that in the background of Farabi's reading, exists a very permanent and stable intention and goal, making his actions or practices a mediated one.

In short, in Farabi's dialectical and hermeneutic reading of *Meno* dialogue as the fifth/sixth order in the general schema, the concluding point is the demonstration of the possibility of acquiring this specific knowledge that is related to perfection. Then the next problem according to Farabi's reading is the different kinds of *techné* that are famous and most common among different cities and *madaen* and also have the required power and ability for acquiring this knowledge. According to Farabi's reading, for Plato, these *techné* are of six kinds and six dialogues of Plato are arranged according to this theory – it begins with *techné* of theological syllogism in *Euthyphro* and continues through language (*Cratylus*); poetics (*Ion*); rhetoric (*Gorgias*); Sophistics (*Sophists*) and ends in *techné* of dialectics (*Parmenides*).

According to Farabi, the dialogue of *Gorgias* (which means service) is in the ninth/tenth order, it is after *Ion* dialogue about poetics and is before the *Sophists* that is about sophistics - although in other places this arrangement is different or reverse [7].

In Farabi's dialectical and short reading, the dialogue begins with or is constructed around the question: whether rhetoric, or the use of rhetorical opinion when inquiring into the beings, supplies us with that knowledge about them or supplies us with knowledge of that way of life? It seems that in this reading Plato himself answers his question and says that rhetoric gives some kind of knowledge but it is not sufficient and adequate.

In completing this dialectical reading, Farabi applies his hermeneutic. The dialogue of *Gorgias* has a special place and status in the total schema of Plato philosophy, and also together with the other five dialogues it forms a special group, which would be better understood in connection with the dialogue of *Meno*. Rhetoric as a *techne*, can persuade people about every thing and produce a kind of calmness and peace among them. According to different factors there are different levels of persuasion but all of them are different kinds of doxa or more correctly weak doxa, and therefore can not provide certainty and truth.

I have attempted in this paper to show Farabi's special engagement with two dialogues of Plato. His engagement can be called dialectical and hermeneutic reading - an aspect that in its related literature is neglected or only is mentioned in passing.

Endnotes

[1] A. N. M. M. Farabi, *Enumeration of Sciences/Ihsa al-ulum*, Husyan khadiw Djam (translator),

Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications Company, 1985, pp. 47, 48.

[2] A. Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique Aristotelicienne Et Grammaire Arabe*, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1983.

[3] Abdurrahman Badawi, *Platon En Payes D'Islam*, Teheran: Heydari Publication, 1974, pp. 5-12.

[4] Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi's philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, New York: The free Press of Glencoe, 1962, pp. 53 – 67 .

[5] *ibid.*, p. 53.

[6] G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 59.

[7] A. N. M. M. Farabi, *op. Cit.*, pp. 65,66.

Bibliography

[1] A. N. M. M. Farabi, *Enumeration of Sciences/Ihsa al-ulum* , Husyan khadiw Djam (translator), Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications Company, 1985.

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[5] Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi's philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.