



The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna

“Matilla, Janne. *The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna*. Leiden: Brill, 2022, 256 pages.”

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Abstract

This paper is about the book which is written by Janne Matilla “(The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 256 pages)”. This work written by Matilla revolves around the comparative analysis of two eminent philosophers of Islamic Philosophy. Matilla adopts partially the method that emerges in the literature about Islamic Philosophy. Therefore, the results that the author reaches are unique contributions to the literature. Because this method is not applied completely, some problems of interpretation are seen in the work.

Keywords: al-Fārābī, Avicenna, Ethical philosophy, Eudaimonism, Virtue, Practical philosophy.

Öz

Bu yazı, Janne Matilla tarafından kaleme alınan “(The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 256 sayfa)” isimli çalışmanın kritiğidir. Çalışmada yazarın bu iki İslam filozofunu mukayeseli bir şekilde incelemesi üzerinde durulmaktadır. Matilla’nın benimsediği yöntem son dönemde İslam felsefesi araştırmalarında öne çıkmakla birlikte henüz tam olarak oturmuş bir yöntem değildir. Bu nedenle araştırmacının İslam filozoflarını mukayeseli olarak irdeleyen bir yöntem benimsemesi literatüre özgün bir katkıdır. Fakat bu metodun tam olarak uygulanması nedeniyle bazı yorum sorunları çalışmada görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fârâbî, İbn Sinâ, Ahlak, Mutluluk, Erdem, Pratik felsefe.

The literature on ethical philosophy in Islamic Philosophy dominantly examines the early period of Islamic Philosophy. The book that J. Matille wrote published in Brill in 2022 covers al-Fārābī’s and Avicenna’s ethical theories and consists of two main parts focusing on the issue of virtue and happiness. This choice is highly justifiable when the two philosophers’ theories about ethical philosophy are considered. The book is based on the author’s dissertation; however, it is highly divergent from the structure of the dissertation.

The method used in the book is quite different from the works about Islamic philosophy produced in English literature. First, the major inclination in English literature about the topics of Islamic Philosophy is to analyze theories of Islamic philosophers concerning the ancient Greek sources. When al-Fārābī’s and Avicenna’s philosophies are taken into consideration, most of the seminal works are constructed on the idea that these peripatetic philosophers created a synthesis that is only understandable when referring to the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and ancient Greek commentators. In contrast to this situation, the method of analyzing Islamic Philosophers in their consistency develops in the literature. Matille’s work might be categorized under this chance not completely but essentially.

In every chapter of the work, the author focuses on the background of al-Fārābī and Avicenna. This is a legitimate endeavor, but in terms of a philosophical interpretation of the two philosophers, there might be a different outlook. For instance, it is as valid as the historical method to analyze al-Fārābī in his own consistency and try to find Avicenna’s theories regarding what al-Fārābī claims as background. The author selects the method of finding the historical similarities between the Islamic and Greek Philosophers but does not neglect the former aspect.

In that vein, the book's first part focuses on the issue of happiness according to al-Fārābī and Avicenna. The author claims that the general framework of the two Islamic philosophers about the problem of happiness takes Aristotle as a root and it diverges from the Stagirite at the same time. In terms of al-Fārābī's ethical philosophy, he blends the idea of happiness as a final end with a metaphysical flavor. This continues with Avicenna; however, his framework differentiates because of his theory of separation of the human soul from the body.

In the following chapter, the author systematically directs attention towards the examination of "the function argument (ergon)," a constituent that appears to assume a pivotal role in elucidating al-Farabi's conceptualization of happiness. In this part, the author focuses on al-Fārābī's *Exhortation to the Path of Happiness* (*Tanbīh 'alā sabīl al-sa'āda*) and claims that al-Fārābī employs function argument for an intellectualist understanding of happiness (Part 1-Chapter 2). The nature of this work is highly controversial, it is paramount to decide the place of it inside al-Fārābī's philosophy. The closest text to this book is *Attainment of Happiness* (*Taḥṣīl al-sa'āda*). Both works are meaningful in terms of the theory of perfection that is seen in other branches of al-Fārābī's ethical and political philosophy. While *The Attainment of Happiness* concerns the issue of epistemological perfection, *The Exhortation* focuses more on individual ethical perfection. In terms of Avicenna's philosophy final end of human perfection and happiness is more grounded on a psychological and metaphysical basis. The author elaborates on how and why the emanation scheme is crucial to understanding Avicenna's theory of human's perfection or final end. The emphasis on the metaphysical and psychological side is latent in al-Fārābī but more emergent in Avicenna. In the second chapter of the first part, the author translates the word contemplation as "ra'y" (lit. opinion) (p.29). This translation might be an interpretive one. If that is so, the logic behind it must be shown because the word contemplation (*naẓar*) is one of the central concepts, especially for al-Fārābī. The centrality of this concept comes from its being the crux of the relationship between metaphysics and ethics. For al-Fārābī, the end of philosophical research is to reach a point of *naẓar al-ilāhī* (divinely contemplation). This is not exactly like Avicenna's theory of imitation of God, but it is to reach the most abstract thinking act and contemplate existence through this action. Furthermore, the concept of opinion in al-Fārābī's philosophy might be investigated with the act of deliberation (*rawiyya*) and with the concept of commonly accepted opinions (*mashūrāt*). Still, it goes beyond the ethical aspects of his philosophy.

In chapter three of the book's first part, the author discusses one of the neglected topics in ethical studies of the philosophers of Islamic tradition i.e., the problem of pleasure. The author contrasts the theories of al-Fārābī and Avicenna against the hedonistic framework and investigates the hedonistic implications in their explanation. Naturally, these philosophers are not hedonists, but pleasure constitutes a very fundamental aspect of their theory of happiness. For al-Fārābī, pleasure is not an integral part of happiness unlike Avicenna, because of the metaphysical nature of Avicenna's theory of happiness. The author points out the fact that for al-Fārābī, the city of depravity, which is among the non-virtuous cities, aims for pleasure as the final end of life. However, for al-Fārābī and Avicenna, pleasure in complete life is paramount, Avicenna emphasizes the divine contemplation and the interrelation between happiness and pleasure more definitively.

In the chapter four of the book, the author discusses theoretical perfection, which is the defining character of the ethical theories of two philosophers. The author starts with Aristotle's definition of happiness as virtuous ethical activity. The main difference between Aristotle, al-Fārābī and Avicenna, in the context of happiness as a theoretical perfection, is where Aristotle emphasizes the ethical side of the happiness, al-Fārābī and Avicenna focuses on the theoretical aspect of the issue. The author shows that for al-Fārābī existence has a normative structure and perfection in correspondence with this normative structure is one of the goals of happiness as theoretical perfection. Furthermore, this metaphysical aspect of theoretical perfection was developed by Avicenna and became the major topic of the latter's ethical philosophy. For Avicenna, happiness essentially consists of theoretical philosophy, and the good, in ethical terms, is an object of desire. The author claims, in this context, that the topics on the metaphysics of the rational soul, natural theology, and the nature of the First Principle constitute the background for Avicenna's ethical theory.

In the fifth chapter of the first part, the author discusses happiness as the ascent of the human soul (epistrophe). For the author, neither al-Fārābī nor Avicenna is strictly Plotinian concerning their idea of human ascent. This is because of their essential additions to the metaphysical scheme of Plotinian philosophy. For al-Fārābī and Avicenna, there is a strict hierarchy in existence, and contemplative activity is the most virtuous and crucial activity in the process of ascension. On page 95 of the book, the author claims that for al-Fārābī human being becomes divine by perfecting the intellect. This opinion is observed in other passages of the book. However, this is the basic framework of al-Fārābī's ethical philosophy. The practical side of happiness, perfection, and ascent is essential because for al-Fārābī perfection is not possible without the social and practical side of the human being. For Avicenna, the upward motion of the human soul and the downward motion of celestial intellects are more fundamental compared to al-Fārābī. In chapter 6, the author focuses on the problem of the afterlife, which is highly discussed by studies on al-Fārābī, and he points out the religious flavor of al-Fārābī's theory of the afterlife and he discusses the mysticism of Avicenna in that context.

After the seventh chapter of the book the second part starts. In the second part of the book, the main issue is the theory of virtue. In the seventh, eighth and ninth chapters of the book, the gist of the argument of the author here is the tension between the theory of moderation and the theory of purification of soul. In general terms, where al-Fārābī more follows Aristotle's definition of virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Avicenna adopts a more platonic theory of virtue, which focuses on the purification of the soul. Despite these similarities, the author shows that, unlike Aristotle, two philosophers define virtue inside the intellectualist framework. In the last chapter of the second part, the author focuses on the topic of moral progression and implies the contextual (religious and philosophical) nature of moral progression for two philosophers. It means that the definition and actualization of moral actions depend on the philosophical and religious context.

As it is seen in the plan of the work, the author's method has three aspects. First, the author shows the ancient Greek background of the problems and topics and then he elaborates al-Fārābī's and Avicenna's position. Then he compares three philosophers and shows the contrasts between them. In terms of the issue of consistency, if we consider the literature about al-Fārābī, for

instance, we might categorize Matilla's work in the same vein as the study of Damien Janos who tries to find the consistency in al-Fārābī's philosophy about the problem of cosmology (Damien, Janos. *Method, Structure and Development in al-Fārābī's Cosmology*. Leiden: Brill, 2012). I think the main trend of the literature is this endeavor however, it is premature. Matilla's work might be considered as a beginning to find the philosophical interpretation of Islamic philosophers without neglecting the historical context. Because Avicenna explicitly claims his debt to al-Fārābī, it is natural to read and interpret these philosophers together.

Despite this emerging attitude that paves the way for a more objective interpretation of Islamic philosophers, some questions should be asked about the work of Matilla. First, the author claims that he tries to find the consistency in al-Fārābī and Avicenna. At the same time, the author tries to find this consistency inside the historical scheme. This situation creates, as the author shows, an inconsistency in understanding the theories of these two philosophers because all the material they use is a raw material on which they work. This raw material is essential to understanding the historical stance of the philosophers, but the main issue is to create the mindset that these philosophers aim to establish.

In this framework, the author asks a question about the omission of *Nicomachean Ethics* by al-Fārābī in his work *The Philosophy of Aristotle*. If this question is analyzed according to the presuppositions that al-Fārābī is a strict Aristotelian, it might create other problems. I think the issue here is related to the philosophical project of al-Fārābī that is seen in other branches of his philosophy (logic, metaphysics, politics).

Secondly, the author points out the question of the separation of ethics from other branches of philosophy. This is also a question that other authors discuss in the literature. I think if al-Fārābī's philosophy continues to be read according to the ancient sources, questions like this are very hard to answer. But if this philosophy is considered according to the philosophical project that al-Fārābī clearly states in his *Emergence of Philosophy*, it is possible to find more comprehensive answers. This is the ideal of al-Fārābī for the revivification of Aristotelian philosophy.

As the author points out al-Fārābī changes the meaning of entelechy and includes Neoplatonic feature to this main concept of Aristotelian philosophy. This is, I think, one of the most important findings of study concerning al-Fārābī's philosophy. To contextualize the separation of ethics from the other branches of philosophy al-Fārābī creates a theory of perfection which makes all the inconsistencies understandable in his system of philosophy.

What the author neglects here is the role of logic in the process of perfection. However, al-Fārābī did not repeat the role of logic in the process of the perfection of the power of logos, he claims that happiness is not possible without the proper use of logic. However, the author refers to this issue in another context (p.30), it might be formulated as a separate subject to discuss.

In addition to that, the theory of human which is asserted by al-Fārābī and Avicenna is highly different. Where Avicenna claims dualism in a very strict sense, al-Fārābī emphasizes the importance of the material side of human being. This differentiation is one of the main issues that the basis of their ethical theories differs.

When Avicenna's philosophy is considered, the author claims that the issues of pleasure and afterlife are the main points that Avicenna is diverted from al-Fārābī's conception of ethical philosophy. According to al-Fārābī, the aim of perfection is the ultimate happiness, it means that Avicenna might be interpreted in line with al-Fārābī on the question of afterlife inside the ethical theory.

As the author implies, the issue of religion and ethics are the major points that al-Fārābī and Avicenna works on. In terms of al-Fārābī's philosophy, the theory of "milla" has different ramifications compared to Avicenna's theory of religion. For al-Fārābī religion is the actualization of philosophical ideal and it is the manifestation of philosophical perfection inside the society. Al-Fārābī points to that issue in his seminal work "*Selected Aphorisms*". Therefore, I think, religion for al-Fārābī has social status, which has effects on the ethical life of the individual because of the general rule that the human being is a social animal.

Apart from all the interpretive issues that the author points out, I think the method of analyzing Islamic philosophers concerning each other and in comparison, is a valid method that should be developed by further research.

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