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## Philosophical Bedrock of Farabi's Theory of Diversity

 Nadia MAFTOUNI\*

### Abstract

Diversity includes three main approaches. While exclusivist approaches contend that merely one religion is true, pluralistic views hold that all religions are as good as each other. The third approaches, namely, inclusivist ones claim that although just one religion is absolutely true, other religions to some extent enjoy value.

Farabi's theory of religious diversity contains aspects of exclusivist approaches without depriving of the advantages of inclusivist theories. Naming it relativity vis-à-vis rationality, I am trying to sort of account for Farabi's theory of religious diversity.

For him, people come to grasp rational truths and knowledge mostly through the use of their imagination. Furthermore, the arousal of people's feelings and emotions often originates in their imagination via sensory images and imagery forms. However, the ultimate utopian objective is to drive the public to gain rational pleasure. Given that the public, based on their nature and general habits, in most part, are unable to perceive rational truths and knowledge, the path to rational pleasure must be represented via their imagination. So bringing rational pleasure to people's minds through their imagination, the various religions in each society should represent rational truths and knowledge through the sensory images and imagery forms familiar to that society.

Farabian theory of religious diversity shares aspects of relativity as well as rationality. For Farabi, rational truth and rational pleasure is fixed and one, having only one denotation, while its connotations, say, sensory images and imagery forms are various and sundry. That being the case, different communities can have different ways to perceive the same truth and knowledge, working toward the same goal.

**Keywords:** Farabi, rationality, relativity, relativism, sensory images, imagery forms.



## Introduction

There are a few methods to classify different notions of religious diversity, in one of which common approaches to religious diversity include three major categories. These introductory words are meant to provide a quick overview of these three main approaches, setting the stage for voicing some concerns over Farabi's theory of religious diversity.

Following threefold division including exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist is introduced by Alan Race.<sup>1</sup>

1. Exclusivist approaches espouse that merely one religion is true.
2. Pluralistic views maintain that all religions are as good as each other.
3. Inclusivist approaches assert that although just one religion is absolutely true, other religions also enjoy some value.

In which of three approaches included Farabi's theory of religious diversity? The cornerstone of Farabi's theory is based upon replying the following question: Do we have to pick one option out of two possible notions: rationality against relativity, or vice versa? Or there is not a great deal of difference between them?

Rationality, relativity, and relativism could be regarded the subject of continuing debates in social sciences and humanities.<sup>2</sup> It should be

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<sup>1</sup> 1983

<sup>2</sup> See, to name a few:

Geertz, Clifford, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

Hollis Martin, Steven Lukes, *Rationality and Relativism*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1982.

Krausz, Michael, "Art and Its Mythologies: A Relativist View". In: Margolis J., Krausz M., Burian R.M. (eds.) *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*. Studies of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium, vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht, 1986.

Margolis, Joseph, Krausz, A.S., Burian, R. (Eds.), *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*, Springer, Dordrecht, 1986.

Jarvie, I. C. "Rationality and Relativism." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1983, pp. 44–60. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/590608](http://www.jstor.org/stable/590608).

Nielsen, Kai, "Rationality and Relativism", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 4, Issue 4, pp. 313 - 331

First Published December 1, 1974, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004839317400400309>.

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mentioned that some contemporary researchers try to draw a distinction between relativity and relativism:

I draw from classical sociological theory and make a crucial distinction between *relativity* and *relativism*. That is, I acknowledge that relativity is indeed a fact of life. Not all meaning is transparent, nor are all ideological-practical positions shared by all cultures or by all individuals within a given culture — despite the strain of hegemonic structures to exact consensus. But such relativity, I hold, refers to the level of social life I call the *presented*. This level, however, does not exhaust all of social life, though it is its most conspicuous side. There is another level in social life which I call the *given*. This level has to do with more permanent and underlying social constructs both within societies as well as among societies. p. 209<sup>3</sup>

As an instance, art to a large extent may well be regarded as a matter of relativism.<sup>4</sup> I have analyzed Farabi's theory of art in my other writings, debating his notions on art as a matter of relativity vis-à-vis rationality. Anyway, Farabi's theory of religious diversity could be discussed concerning the distinction of relativity and relativism, taking account of the stand of rationality in Farabi's philosophy.

While rationality clearly has a profound position in his philosophy, Farabi has sharp references to relativity, explaining of which will follow. Is there any contradiction in Farabi's words? How can we succeed to find consistency between rationality and relativity in Farabi's writings?

We search the answer in Farabian theory of pluralism, explanation of which requires developing the concept of imagination.

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Simon, Lawrence H.. "Rationality and cultural relativism", 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-R024-1. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/rationality-and-cultural-relativism/v-1>.

<sup>3</sup> Muñoz B. (1986) "On Relativity, Relativism, and Social Theory". In: Margolis J., Krausz M., Burian R.M. (eds.) *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*. Studies of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium, vol. 1. Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 209-222.

<sup>4</sup> Krausz, Michael, (1986) "Art and Its Mythologies: A Relativist View". In: Margolis J., Krausz M., Burian R.M. (eds.) *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*. Studies of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium, vol. 1. Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 189-208.

[Then we will illustrate that the notion of pluralism may well be realized in Farabi's philosophy, capitalizing on the powers of imagination.]

Farabi's theory of pluralism simply serves to the consistency of relativity versus rationality, which in turn could be viewed as an efficient global language not only among religions parties as well among them and non-religious parties. What an awesome idea!

### **Divine Imagery Forms**

Divine imagery in Farabi's theory of religious diversity is regarded as a medium toward heaven as well as toward the global language among human beings.

Farabi conceptualizes the imagination as including three principal activities: 1. It stores sensory forms. 2. It analyzes and synthesizes sensory forms. That is, the imaginary faculty produces a variety of analyses and syntheses that combine into infinite compositions and decompositions. Sometimes these are in concord with the sensible world, and sometimes they are not. (Farabi, *Ara Ahl al-Madinah al-Fadilah wa Mudāddātihā*, 84, 95) For example, the imagination invents the winged human through combining the wings of the bird with the human body. 3. The imagination uses metaphor and embodiment. Among the different faculties of the soul, only the imagination is able to portray the sensible and the rational. It can even depict the rational truths of utter perfection, such as the prime cause and abstract beings. Of course, it embodies these truths using the most exalted and most perfect sensible forms, beautiful and stunning things. It also embodies the opposite—imperfect rational affairs through the use of despicable, ugly and imperfect sensible forms. (Ibid, 106-107)

Thus, the imagination is a force that stores, analyzes, and synthesizes sensory forms, and utilizes them to embody the sensible and the rational. For example, the Iranian poet Sa'di has created one of the best metaphors for analogizing the rational and the sensible:

Adam's sons are body limbs,  
to say, for they're created of the same clay.  
Should one organ be troubled by pain,  
others would suffer severe strain.  
Thou, careless of people's suffering,

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Deserve not the name human being. (Sa'di, *Kulliat Sa'di*, 15)

In this poem, Sa'di simplifies many rational concepts such as sympathy, compassion, and sacrifice. He makes them accessible to the imaginary faculty by embodying human beings as organs of one body.

Before Farabi, Aristotle spoke about the nature of the imagination in his discussions of the self. However, it is held that, he did not consider the third feature mentioned above. (Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 427 a 18- 429 a 4, 432 a 9) This fact has been demonstrated by researchers. (Black, 'Al-Farabi', 185)

### **Rational Pleasure and Divine Imagery**

According to Farabi, final contentment is the state in which a human being successfully perceives the rational, and achieves the nearest possible status to the Active Intellect. (Farabi, *Risalah fī al-Aql*, 31) For him, people who cannot understand the rational nonetheless have full use of their imagination. (Farabi, *Al-Tanbih 'alá Sabīl al-Sa'adah wa al-Ta'liqat wa Risalatan Phalsaphīyatān*, 129-130) So, rational truths—and thus, contentment—should be somehow transferred to the imagination of such people. This task should be undertaken first by the Prophet, who has himself been linked to the Active Intellect, and has thus received all facts in their rational and imaginary forms.

According to Farabi, there are two ways to achieve understanding: one can perceive the essence of a thing and imagine it in its existing form, or one can imagine an idea, and all the things similar to it. (Farabi, *Al-Sīyāṣah al-Madanīyah*, 225) It is not possible to speak of or bring into action the particular details of that which is non-sensible – such as the soul, the ten heavenly intellects, the hyle, and all abstract beings. It is not possible, that is, unless they are formed in the imagination. Although such things cannot be felt, we can imagine them through analogy, parallelism, or allegory. (Farabi, *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr*, 43)

This relates to those concepts and beings that one cannot explain or describe through the use of reason alone. However, it is important to note that the majority of people do not have the reasoning power, due to their nature or habitude, to comprehend rationally even those things that can be described in this way. (Farabi, *Al-Sīyāṣah al-Madanīyah*, 225) In other words, they are not used to reasoning about the rational. In most people, the soul is attracted to the imagination, and the imagination controls the

self. Bodily forces prevent the soul from being solely concerned with its essence and rational perceptions. So the self finds a confidence in the sensible to the extent that it denies the existence of the rational truths, and considers them to be baseless delusions. (Farabi, *Al-Tanbih 'alá Sabīl al-Sa'ādah wa al-Ta'līqāt wa Risālatān Phalsaphīyatān*, 129 -130) Thus, the proper method for educating the public on such affairs is through transferring images and resemblances into their minds through the imagination. (Farabi, *Al-Sīyāṣah al-Madanīyah*, 225)

Elsewhere, Farabi reiterates that the public is not to follow the rational. Human actions are often guided by the imagination, even though the imagination may be in conflict with one's knowledge, or be subject to one's suspicions. (Farabi, *Al-Mantiqīyāt*, vol. 1, 502) In some cases, one's beliefs are actually contrary to what one imagines. One may be quite sure that reality is different from what one imagines. For instance, when a person merely imagines something frightening, he or she feels a sense of horror as if the idea were real. (Farabi, *Fuṣūl Muntaza'ah*, 52-53) And most people would be afraid to sleep next to a corpse, even though we know that dead bodies are harmless.

Ultimately, in order to make people experience contentment, it is necessary to transfer facts and rational contentment through the use of images and embodied forms.

### **Exemplifying the Rational**

Art serves a special function in Farabi's utopia. The utopia is governed by five kinds of wise leaders. The first section is composed of the sages, as well as those who are clear-sighted in important affairs. (Farabi, *Fuṣūl Muntaza'ah*, 55) The ultimate leader of the utopia, however, is none other than the prophet. His government is blessed by divine revelation, and all his actions and views are based on heavenly inspiration. (Farabi, *Al-Millah wa Nuṣūṣ Ukhrá*, 44) In second place, there are the religion-bearers including orators, missionaries, poets, singers, writers and the like. (Farabi, *Fuṣūl Muntaza'ah*, 55) Farabi places these poets, singers and the like, all of whom he refers to as artists, immediately after the prophet, and next in importance to orators and religious missionaries.

Now we reach the function of the utopian artist. Among the elements mentioned in Farabi's discussion of art, imagination and the comprehension of the rational are most useful in explaining the task of the

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utopian artist. As mentioned above, Farabi believes that the most exalted art is in the kind that uses imaginary forms to lead the people to imagine divine thoughts and actions. Moreover, desirable art, by nourishing the imagination, works to moderate extremes of emotions.

According to Farabi's theory of the imagination, there is a relation between the imagination and the intellectual faculty: specifically, the imaginary faculties are able to access the rational through imaginary and sensory forms. The ultimate goal of the utopian rulers is to provide the public with rational contentment. The prophet, through revelation, perceives all the truths, both in her/his rational faculty and in her/his imagination. He has the ability to perceive the essence of truths; in addition, he knows the metaphors and analogies through which to describe these truths.

But since intellectual perception of true contentment is not possible for the public, metaphors are provided that will appeal to the peoples' imaginary faculties.

The utopian artist produces rational contentment through creating sensory and imaginary forms. So the artist performs an activity similar to that of the prophet.

### **Conclusion**

For Farabi, people come to grasp rational knowledge vs. rational pleasure, mostly using their imagination. Furthermore, the arousal of people's feelings and emotions often originates in their imagination via sensory images and imagery forms. The ultimate goal of prophets is to drive the public to achieve rational pleasure. Given that the public, based on their nature and general habits, in most part are unable to perceive rational knowledge, the path to rational pleasure must be illustrated via their imagination. So, bringing rational pleasure to people's minds through their imagination, the religion of each society should represent rational knowledge through the sensory images and imagery forms familiar to that society.

Farabian theory of pluralism shares aspects of relativity as well as rationality. To Farabi, rational knowledge and rational pleasure is fixed and one, having only one meaning, while its sensory images and imagery forms are various and sundry. That being the case, different communities



do have different ways to perceive the same truth and knowledge, working toward the same goal.



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