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Persecution and the Art of Demonstration

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Rasoul Namazi's *Leo Strauss and Islamic Political Thought* contains patient and perceptive readings of four texts Strauss devoted to Islamic political philosophy. My comments are limited to just one of those readings, that of "Fârâbî's *Plato*," and to a single issue within it—the question of the identity of the philosopher or of philosophy. Namazi rightly recognizes the centrality of this question in "Fârâbî's *Plato*." As Strauss writes in explaining Alfarabi's view of Plato's philosophy, "the central question concerns . . . the precise meaning of the philosopher" (361),[1] and Namazi claims that it is "one of the main themes or even *the* theme of 'Fârâbî's *Plato*'" (148, emphasis original).

Namazi's answer to this question is that Strauss understands the philosopher as "zetetic" (a word that Strauss only introduced nine years later, in his "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*") (149). This zetetic philosophy is distinguished by the "quest for truth," or the quest for the "ultimate solutions to the most important problems," which, unlike "dogmatism," does not "presuppos[e]" the achievability of those solutions. On the other hand, what distinguishes zetetic philosophy from "skepticism" is the "*hope* for reaching a solution" (149–50, emphasis original); tellingly, Namazi adds that zetetic philosophy "shares dogmatism's *trust* in our powers to solve the ultimate problems" (150, emphasis added). His sole textual basis for this assertion regarding Strauss's conception of the philosopher in "Fârâbî's *Plato*" is the last paragraph of the essay,[2] in which Strauss writes that, according to Alfarabi, philosophy is

> the investigation rather than the result. Philosophy thus understood is identical with the scientific spirit "in action," with σκέψις in the original sense of the term, i.e. with the actual quest for truth which is animated by the conviction that that quest alone makes life worth living, and which is fortified by the distrust of man's natural propensity to rest satisfied with satisfying, if unevident or unproven, convictions. A man such as Fârâbî doubtless had definite convictions concerning a number of

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[1]Leo Strauss, "Fârâbî's *Plato*," in *Louis Ginzberg: Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Saul Lieberman et al. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945).

[2]Namazi rightly points out that Strauss generally believed that the crucial passages in a text are placed in the center, not the beginning or end (128, 174).

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> important points, although it is not as easy to say what these convictions were as the compilers seem to think.[3]

In explaining why this passage supports a zetetic conception of philosophy, Namazi emphasizes Strauss's use of the word "actual," as though an "*actual* quest for truth" were, specifically, one that cannot be sure it will find the truth (148, emphasis added). But "actual" here could just as easily mean "successful"; and, indeed, earlier, Strauss explains that one of the designations of "philosophy" is "the actual investigation of things which leads to that science," that is, "the science of the essence of each of all the beings"; "actual" here means what—actually—achieves science.[4] Additionally, the passage quoted suggests that neither Alfarabi, nor even Strauss himself, could count as zetetic philosophers: Alfarabi held "definite convictions" and Strauss is "doubtless" about this point. Namazi is aware of this problem (at least as it pertains to Alfarabi), replying that these definite convictions "do not play a particularly important role in Alfarabi's philosophy" (148). But—apart from conceding that Alfarabi did hold such convictions—this flatly contradicts what Strauss writes (that the convictions concern "important points"). It is also worth mentioning that, earlier in the essay, Strauss attributes to Alfarabi the view that "there can be, not only philosophers, but even perfect human beings (i.e. philosophers who have reached the goal of philosophy) in imperfect cities";[5] and then, in a footnote, explains that the ambiguous word "king" can mean "the philosopher who has reached his goal by having completed the philosophic investigation."[6]

The largest problem, however, with Namazi's view is that it implies that the central thesis that Strauss ascribes to Alfarabi in "Fârâbî's *Plato*"—that "philosophy is *the* necessary and sufficient condition of happiness"[7]—is false (or, to speak more zetetically, not more true than false). And, to make matters worse, given that, for Strauss, it is this thesis that largely explains the conflict between philosophy, on the one hand, and religion, politics, and morality, on the other, Namazi's view makes this conflict inexplicable (since its basis is no more true than false). One senses here the dark Valkyries of decisionism descending on Strauss's philosophy—surely what, above all, that philosophy needs to be defended against.[8]

[3]Strauss, "Fârâbî's *Plato*," 393.
[4]Ibid., 389.
[5]Ibid., 381.
[6]Ibid., 381n57.
[7]Ibid., 381 (emphasis original). Namazi agrees that this is Strauss's view of Alfarabi's central thesis (compare 128).
[8]The problem identified here is very close to that identified by Christopher Colmo in "Theory and Practice: Alfarabi's *Plato* Revisited," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 4 (1992): 966–76, namely, that on Strauss's own understanding of "political philosophy" in "Fârâbî's *Plato*," the central thesis is indemonstrable. Namazi refers to Colmo's article in his discussion of zeteticism (161n44), but does not mention this

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Here, then, it is worth asking whether Strauss does offer any demonstration of the view that "philosophy is *the* necessary and sufficient condition of happiness," and thus that Namazi's zetetic conception of philosophy is inconsistent with it. It seems that he does. In the last section of "Fârâbî's *Plato*," Strauss claims that Alfarabi understands "divine beings" as "the most outstanding group of natural beings," and mentions Avicenna's "esoteric" "identification of the heavenly bodies with God."[9] At the beginning of this section, Strauss differentiates "beings" from "things"; while "beings" are "things" studied by philosophy, other "things" (which are not "beings") are "essentially dependent" on "beings" ("qualities, relations, actions, products, and so on").[10] Moreover, Strauss states that, according to Alfarabi, "divine" "may simply designate [the] excellence" of something.[11] The understanding of "divine," therefore, which emerges from this discussion, is that of what might be called a *first being*, a being which depends on nothing but on which other things depend, and which, by virtue of this primacy, by virtue of itself, is excellent (since, being a first being, this excellence could not depend on anything else).[12] Now, in the same discussion Strauss asserts that, according to Alfarabi, the "science of the beings" is a "divine thing."[13] While, therefore, this science is not a "being," let alone a first being, it shares the divinity that belongs to the latter. Why this is, Strauss explains by understanding the science of the beings as the "product" of the "art of demonstration."[14] This art—as opposed, for example, to the "mystical knowledge of God"[15]—produces, or, more precisely, reproduces, the essential dependence of things on the first beings; it therefore produces, or reproduces, the primacy, and therefore the excellence, of those beings.[16] Given that, according to Strauss, "philosophy" primarily signifies the "actual" exercise of the art of demonstration, that is, the production of the science of the beings,[17] and given that the

problem. As the following should make clear, I believe that it can be solved; the premises that demonstrate the central thesis do not belong to political philosophy.

[9]Strauss, "Fârâbî's *Plato*," 390–91.

[10]Ibid., 389.

[11]Ibid., 391. More precisely, he claims that "the science of the beings and the right way of life" are "divine things"; but Strauss identifies this science and life earlier; see "Fârâbî's *Plato*," 386 ("the science of the beings and the desired way of life, are identical").

[12]Compare Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 89 ("Beings that are always are of a higher dignity").

[13]Strauss, "Fârâbî's *Plato*," 391.

[14]Ibid., 364, 386. More precisely, with the "products" of "the science of the beings and the desired way of life"; but, in this context, he says that this science and this way of life are "identical."

[15]Ibid., 374n42.

[16]Ibid., 381n58.

[17]Ibid., 364, 389, 393.

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happiness due to philosophy is due to its perfection, that is, its excellence,[18] this explanation of divinity explains why "philosophy is *the* necessary and sufficient condition of happiness"—at least so far as human happiness is concerned.

Namazi understands esoteric writing as ultimately justified by its "pedagogical" intention, specifically, that it simulates philosophical thinking itself: "It is through thinking out the problems, contradictions, half arguments, slight changes in the enumerations, repetitions, and such esoteric clues that the student is trained in the ways of philosophic thinking" (43). This seems to me to confuse the essentially rhetorical or dialectical nature of esoteric writing with the essentially demonstrative nature of philosophy,[19] and exhibits the same curious resistance to science as does Namazi's endorsement of zetetic philosophy.

[18]Ibid., 370n32.

[19]See, for example, ibid., 361, on the distinction between "the ways of philosophic investigation" and "the ways of teaching."

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