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Reading al-Fārābī's View of Language through the Lens of Wittgenstein: "Language as a Form of Life"

Clara Srouji-Shajrawi[1]

Abstract

Language resembles a living organism that constantly grows and evolves. Yet, the origin of language remains unresolved, highlighting the ongoing conflict between religious and scientific views. The key question is whether language originates from *divine revelation* or is a social agreement for communication, beginning with gestures, sounds, and calls, and gradually developing into modern language. This article shows that al-Fārābī's view of language is integrative; it is both 'conventionalist' and aligns with contemporary approaches to language, while also not conflicting with religion. His effort to reconcile Plato, who believed that all knowledge is essentially a recollection of the Forms, with Aristotle's empirical approach ultimately led him to develop his own unique theory of knowledge and the invention of language. His view intersects with Wittgenstein's conception of language as a 'form of life,' suggesting the impossibility of a 'private language,' as presented in his book, *Philosophical Investigations*. Viewing al-Fārābī's writings, a Muslim philosopher from the tenth century, through Ludwig Wittgenstein's twentieth-century conceptual lens reveals the profound depth of al-Fārābī's philosophy and its ongoing significance for modern readers.

Keywords: al-Fārābī, Wittgenstein, Forms of life, Language Games, *The Book of Letters*, *Harmonization*, Conventionalism, Philosophy, Particulars versus Universals, Knowledge.

[1] University of Haifa.

Introduction

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (257/870-339/950) was born in Turkestan on the northeastern border of the lands under Islamic rule, in the town of Fārāb (in present-day Turkmenistan on the border with Uzbekistan). He is said to have moved to Baghdād at an early age when his father, who was a military officer, was one of the Turkish mercenaries recruited by the ʿAbbāsid court. Although the details of his early education are murky, he is reported to have studied logic in Baghdād under the Christian scholars Yuḥannā ibn Ḥaylān (d. 910) and Abū Bishr Mattā (d. 940), one of the translators of Aristotle's works into Arabic. Al-Fārābī was known as "the Second Master" (*al-muʿallim al-thānī*) with Aristotle being the "First". He lived and taught for almost all his life in Baghdād. But in 942, when he was reportedly in his seventies, he accepted an invitation from the Ḥamdānid ruler Sayf al-Dawlah to move to Aleppo. He died there or in Damascus (accounts differ) eight years later, in 950. His philosophical output was prolific and diverse: over a hundred different texts are attributed to him, including works on logic, physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and a well-known treatise on music.[2]

Al-Fārābī is widely recognized as the founder of the tradition of political philosophy in Islam, wherein the central concern is the nature of political life and

[2] See Deborah L. Black, "Al-Fārābī", in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr & Oliver Leaman, (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 178-179; Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), introduction, xiv; Therese-Anne Druart, "al-Farabi", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/al-farabi/ accessed 17/04/2025.

its relation to human happiness and perfection.[3] He is also noted for his role in developing a philosophical vocabulary in Arabic, drawing upon both Greek logical terminology and the semantic resources of the Arabic language. As Jacques Lançon Lanchadé demonstrates, al-Fārābī did not merely translate Greek concepts into Arabic; rather, he ***reconstructed*** them in a manner consistent with the structures and logic inherent in Arabic. This process transcended translation, constituting a form of philosophical adaptation and innovation within a distinct linguistic and cultural framework. To articulate metaphysical and logical concepts, al-Fārābī frequently coined new terms, reinterpreted existing ones, or assigned specialized meanings to familiar Arabic words.[4]

According to T.A. Druart, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf* (*The Book of Letters*) by al-Fārābī represents a deliberate philosophical endeavor to construct an Arabic philosophical lexicon. This project involved adapting terms from everyday Arabic as well as from earlier philosophical traditions—most notably Greek and Syriac. In the text, al-Fārābī traces the natural progression from perception to

[3] See Fauzi M. Najjar, "Fārābī's Political Philosophy and Shīʿism", *Studio Islamica*, 14 (1961), 57; See also, Clara Srouji-Shajrawi, "Can the human being achieve self-realization and overcome alienation within the civil order, from the perspectives of al-Fārābī and Marx?" (in Arabic), *Mawāqif*, vol. 4 (July 2021), 116-124. Available at https://www.academia.edu/49751887

[4] See Jacques Lançon Lanchadé, *La Langue Arabe et la Formation du Vocabulaire Philosophique de Farabi* (France: Institut français de Damas, 1994). Lanchadé's study complements the work of Shukri Abed, who also explores how language, logic, and philosophy interact in Farabian thought. Where Abed focuses more on epistemology and stages of cognition, Lanchadé provides the linguistic infrastructure for those ideas, examining how al-Fārābī's terms and concepts are shaped by the Arabic language. See Shukri Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in al-Farabi*, (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991).

articulation, thereby linking epistemology with language. Druart highlights al-Fārābī's grounding in Aristotelian thought, particularly in logic and metaphysics, which required a nuanced philosophical and linguistic mediation. Through this effort, al-Fārābī aimed to bridge the conceptual gap between inherited Greek philosophy and the expressive capacities of the Arabic language.[5]

Anyone who reads passages from *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf* (*The Book of Letters*) by the medieval philosopher al-Fārābī will recognize his endorsement of the ***conventionalist*** view of language; namely, the idea that language emerges from a collective agreement among a community to use specific symbols for communication. According to this view, the system of signs (language) is not fixed but continually evolving. Moreover, al-Fārābī presents the emergence of language as following an ascending hierarchy in nature, a notion that resonates, in certain respects, with modern linguistic and cognitive theories.

Al-Fārābī is known for his reconciliatory approach to the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, as he rejected the idea of any contradiction between them. Such a contradiction would undermine his comprehensive philosophical project, which views demonstrative (as opposed to dialectical or probable) philosophy as the path to truth. His interest in religion and in affirming the concept of prophecy stems from his belief that religion—if it is a true religion—serves as a "simplified language" that expresses the same truths contained in genuine philosophy, and shapes the mentality of a nation. Therefore, he is not against a multiplicity of religions as long as they represent an essential philosophical truth. For this reason, his theory of language must be understood not as conflicting with

[5] Therese-Anne Druart, "Al-Farabi: An Arabic account of the origin of language and of philosophical vocabulary", *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 84, 2010, 1-17.

religious view, but in accord with his view about the supremacy of philosophy over religion, theology, jurisprudence and political science.[6]

The Islamic debate about the origin of language is presented as an opposition between a revelationist view and a conventionalist view. It became powerful during the course of the 9th / 10th centuries. Scholars were divided between two polarized streams:

1. The first stream emphasized the role of divine agency in the imposition of language. God created a necessarily intuitive knowledge which encompassed words and their assigned meanings. This doctrine is commonly referred to as *tawqīf* (the revelationist view).[7]
2. The second stream which can be seen as the antithesis to the first one, predicates that language was established via common convention and agreement by humans who assigned communicative meaning to words. This doctrine is labeled *iṣṭilāḥ* or *muwāḍaʿa* (the conventionalist view).[8]

Proponents of the revelationist view maintain that the entire system of linguistic signification was divinely implanted in the human mind by God. The Qur'ānic verse (2:31) strengthens this view stating that God "taught Adam the names of all things" (*ʿallama Ādam al-asmā' kullahā*). As a result, they are not

[6] On the relationship between philosophy, religion and political regime, see Clara Srouji-Shajrawi, "The Role of Religion in al-Fārābī's Virtuous City", *Al-Majmaʿ: Studies in Arabic Language, Literature and Thought*, vol. 6 (2012), 1-36.

[7] See Mustafa Shah, "Classical Islamic Discourse on the Origins of Language: Cultural Memory and the Defense of Orthodoxy", *Numen* 58 (2011), 315; Sophia Vasalou, ""Their Intention Was Shown by Their Bodily Movements": The Baṣran Muʿtazilites on the Institution of Language", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 47, no. 2 (April 2009), 203.

[8] See Shah, "Classical Islamic Discourse on the Origins of Language", 315; Vasalou, "Their Intention Was Shown by Their Bodily Movements", 204.

confronted with the epistemological and historical challenges associated with explaining the origin and establishment of language—a problem that continues to preoccupy advocates of the conventionalist perspective.[9]

This article does not seek to elaborate on the broader debate—rooted in an underlying theological tension between traditionalists and arch-rationalists—from the perspective of grammarians and linguists. Rather, its aim is to examine al-Fārābī's position, which emphasizes the social and communicative nature of language, and notably anticipates Wittgenstein's conception of language as constituted by 'forms of life'.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) is widely regarded as the greatest philosopher of the 20th century. He played a pivotal role in the development of analytic philosophy and continues to influence contemporary thought across a wide range of fields, including logic, language, ethics, religion, aesthetics, culture, and even political theory.[10]

Establishing a link between past and present, and between Islamic and Western traditions, highlights the inherently dialogical nature of philosophical understanding. Reading philosophy becomes an active engagement—an interactive process that invites the reader to 'converse' with the text, posing

[9] See Vasalou, "Their Intention Was Shown by Their Bodily Movements", 208. In this article, Vasalou examines how the Baṣran Muʿtazilites adopted a conventionalist theory of language, maintaining that linguistic signs (words) are not natural or divinely ordained, but rather the product of human convention. The article's title alludes to a central Muʿtazilite idea, that language arose from intentional acts of naming, in which bodily gestures (such as pointing) expressed the speaker's intent to associate a word with a particular referent.

[10] See Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar, "Ludwig Wittgenstein", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/wittgenstein/ accessed 17/04/2025.

questions and seeking answers within it. Hans Robert Jauss, in his 'Reception Theory', articulates this dialogical character of the literary (and by extension, philosophical) text as follows:

> "Just as the producer of a text becomes also a recipient when he sets out to write, so the interpreter has to bring himself into play as reader when he wants to participate in the dialogue of literary tradition. A dialogue consists not only of two interlocutors, but also of the willingness of one to recognize and accept the other in his otherness. […] Literary understanding becomes dialogical only when the otherness of the text is sought and recognized from the horizon of our own expectations […] and when one's own expectations are corrected and extended by the experience of other."[11]

Language is embedded in communal activity

In paragraphs 114-158 of *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, al-Fārābī speaks about the development of language. He is aware (as a real anthropologist) of the fact that the public and the multitude (*al-ʿawām*) and not the select (*al-khawāṣ*) or specialists are those who decide the preliminary opinions that are the outcome of their shared cognitions. Their common collective knowledge (*al-maʿārif al-ʿāmmiyya*) precedes the practical arts and the cognitions that pertain to each art. *Al-ʿawām* are the first to originate and come to live in a specific abode and country. Each group of the public/multitude (*ʿawām*) have by nature specific forms and characteristics in their bodies and souls:

> "Their bodies have definite qualities and compositions, and their souls are disposed towards and prepared for cognitions, conceptions, and

[11] Hans Robert Jauss, "The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding", in: *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, ed. James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 9.

images to specific degrees both quantitatively and qualitatively".[12]

This idea is important for it suggests that language is definitely something innate (in the psyche) and emerges from the natural capacities of the body and is definitely related to the specific place and time when a group of people begins to create a language. The human being is conceived as a whole (body and soul) in the process of creating a language. The human body moves to whatever position and in whatever manner that it is perfectly disposed towards by nature (*bi'l-fiṭrah*), for this is the easiest move. Also, the human soul undertakes to

[12] Al-Fārābī, "The Book of Letters", in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Muhammad Ali Khalidi, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), § 114, p. 4. Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, edited by Muhsin Mahdi, (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1970), § 114, 134-135. Henceforth, all citations will refer to the English translation, with the addition of Arabic words whenever there is a need. Because both the Arabic origin and the English translation are written in identical paragraphs, I'll refer to the paragraph's number within the text.

The Arabic sentence that opens the above quotation is particularly significant, as it explicitly asserts that humans are born with innate capacities, both in their conceptual faculties and in their physical constitutions: *"yufṭarūn ʿalā ṣuwar wa-khilaq fī ābdānihim maḥdūdah*". This approach contradicts John Locke's theory of knowledge (d. 1704) in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, that we are born 'empty' of any natural/built-in mental content, so our mind is a *'tabula rasa'* (Latin for 'blank slate'). Therefore, all knowledge comes from later sensory experiences. Al-Fārābī remains consistent, throughout his philosophical writings, in confirming the idea of innate disposition (*fiṭrah*). For example, "man can achieve harmony with society and defeat 'alienation' in the realm of work if he knows his natural abilities and position in the hierarchical community, and, hence, finds the work that suits him *bi'l-fiṭrah*." Srouji-Shajrawi, "The Role of Religion in al-Fārābī's Virtuous City", 15.

For more information on "tabula rasa" see the following article, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabula_rasa accessed 17/04/2025.

know, think, conceive, imagine and intellectualize whatever it is mostly intensely disposed towards by nature for that is what comes easily. Hence, the first time man acts in this way he acts through a capacity that is in him by nature (*bi-malakah ṭabī'iyyah*) and not by prior habituation (*'i'tiyād*) nor by art (*ṣinā'ah*). (See, § 115)

A human being that lives in a community needs to communicate with other people, and to acquaint another human being with what is in his/her mind; first by using a sign, provided the other person is in a position to see his sign, and later on he will use sound (*taṣwīt*). The first sounds are calls, and each one is restricted to indicate that specific thing that is perceptible (*maḥsūs*). Each specific thing signified is given some specific sound, which is not used for anything else, and so on. (See, § 116)

> "That is how the letters of that nation and the expressions arising from those letters first originate. They originate first among some group or another. It so happens that one of them uses a sound or expression to indicate something when addressing someone else and the hearer memorizes it. Then the hearer uses the same expression when addressing the first inventor of that expression. In this case, the first hearer will have followed the example [of the inventor] and will have fallen in with it, in such a way that they will have agreed upon (*iṣṭalaḥā wa tawāṭa'ā*) that expression and acted in concert.[13] They then use it to address others until it spreads through a certain group. Then whenever something originates

[13] Al-Fārābī's use of the dual form (*al-muthannā*) reflects his view that language emerged in a communicative context between at least two individuals, rather than as a result of an internal, individual thought process. In other words, he sees language as inherently a social tool, aimed at conveying meaning and facilitating understanding between people. Language cannot exist without at least two individuals using it to communicate.

> in the mind of one of them, which he needs to convey to one of his neighbors, he invents a sound and indicates the thing to his friend. The friend hears it from him and then each of them memorizes it and they make it a sound indicating that thing. Sounds continue to originate one after another among some group or another of the people of that country, until someone begins to manage their affairs and to bring into being what they need in terms of sounds for the remaining things, for which indicative sounds have not yet happened to have been invented. Such a person is the author of the language of that nation. From that point on, he manages their affairs until expressions are laid down for all the things they need in the exigencies of life. (§ 120)

We can summarize the stages of the emergence and development of language as follow: First and foremost, language expresses a social need for communication within a group of people. They use signals and sounds that they agree upon, or conventionally establish and collaborate on. First words, used by the group, are limited to indicating or referring to tangible/perceptible objects in their external world. Through these words, they convey or express their intentions and purposes. The group retains these symbols and signals, and uses them according to necessity and within a specific context. As the number of words increases over time, and their usage becomes established among the group, someone, with special talent and capability, organizes these words and shapes the language of that group or nation, so that they can use it for everything they need in daily life. This author of that language of a nation (*waḍiʿ lisān tilkah al-ʾummah*) also fills the gaps in their language by introducing new terms. It is clear that al-Fārābī speaks about multiple different languages that emerge in various regions and times. These languages correspond to the natural characteristics of the members of a community, without giving preference to one language over another.

Hence, language is a matter of conventional activity. It evolves out of an agreement (*iṣṭilāḥ*) within a group of persons. That means to obey the rules of language established by this group of people, "not only in words, but also in action".[14] The purpose of language is not only to communicate with one another, but also to influence other people in such-and-such ways.[15]

This line of thought brings us to Wittgenstein's argument concerning the impossibility of a 'private language'; "Obeying a rule is a practice […]. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately'."[16] By 'private language', Wittgenstein does not mean language of a speaker considered in isolation from a community, but rather language that is not publicly accessible:[17]

> "In order to describe the phenomenon of language, one must describe a practice, not something that happens once, no matter of what kind."[18]
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> "To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions)."[19]

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[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth *PI*), trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), § 486.

[15] See Ibid., § 491.

[16] Ibid., § 202.

[17] See Mélissa Fox-Muraton, "Aphantasia and the Language of Imagination: A Wittgensteinian Exploration," *Analiza i Egzystencja*, 55 (2021), 8-9.

[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, edited by G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 335.

[19] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 199. Wittgenstein's objection to the notion of a 'private language' has generated significant scholarly debate. While some have accepted his critique, others have challenged the impossibility of private language. For a reinterpretation of Wittgenstein as a 'linguistic-intentionalistic behaviourist' (a conception of behaviourism rooted in language-games and forms of life shaped by autonomous

For Wittgenstein, the question is not: does 'private language' exist or not, but rather that we cannot even think about it, because in such language "the individual words […] are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language."[20] But how do words, in our daily life, refer to sensations, to our own, individual pain, for example?

> "There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and give them names? But how is the connexion between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations? -- of the word "pain" for example."[21]

Wittgenstein seeks to challenge the assumption that the relationship between words and our private sensations is similar to the relationship between words and the properties of objects in the world. That is, while it is easy to see how the word "red" refers to a property in the external world, he asks whether the same can be said about words like "pain", which describe internal experiences. The crucial point here is that referring to pain is not as straightforward as identifying a color. Wittgenstein shows that the language we use to talk about sensations does not function by directing attention to private, inaccessible experiences, but rather operates within a framework of 'language games' and public uses. In other words, we learn the meaning of "pain" not by turning our attention inward, but through the context in which the word is learned and used, typically in social contexts,

human intention) refer to the following MA Thesis (in Hebrew): Clara Srouji (Shajrawi), *Wittgenstein: Cartesianism, Behaviourism and the Analysis of Pain*, University of Haifa, department of Philosophy (1987).

[20] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 243.

[21] Ibid., § 244.

such as physical expressions of pain, the reactions of others, and so on.[22]

Wittgenstein attempts to penetrate into the "dark" realm of language by examining the process through which language is formed. He argues that there is a possibility to say:

> "Words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. "So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" – On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it."[23]

The argument presented here is that pain, as we know it and talk about it, is not merely a physical sensation but a product of linguistic and cultural learning. In other words, the experience of pain is constructed through language, which allows us to identify, focus on, and define the sensation as something distinct and assessable. In the pre-verbal stage, bodily stimuli are not consciously translated into a distinct perception of pain but are instead expressed directly through physical reactions such as involuntary movements or crying. Only when language and the ability to articulate experiences in a differentiated manner develop does the process of identifying and conceptualizing pain take place.

Language Games, Forms of Life and the Role of Philosophy

The concept of language-games, as presented in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, is shown as diverse ways in which language is used in different contexts. These language-games are deeply embedded in forms of life, which refer to the broader cultural, social, and practical activities that give language its

[22] See George Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 282-283.

[23] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 244.

meaning; it is "inseparably tied to the practical activities of everyday speakers, […] (and) bound up with their non-linguistic practices and the natural world they inhabit."[24] Similarly, al-Fārābī, in his philosophy of language, recognizes the plurality of languages and how they are shaped by different cultures and modes of thought. He views language as a conventional system influenced by the intellectual and social contexts in which it develops. For al-Fārābī, language is not merely a tool for communication but is deeply connected to the way people think and conceptualize reality, which aligns with Wittgenstein's idea that language and life are intertwined.

The first signs of language, according to al-Fārābī, are those for particular perceptible things (*juzʾiyyāt*), followed by words for universals (*kulliyyāt*). "The process of assigning words to particulars and universals happens first haphazardly among small groups of people, who effectively develop a convention to use certain words to pick out certain things."[25] This means that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary connection, at least at the starting point of the associative bond between the signifier and the signified.[26]

Here we can witness the birth of a 'language game': "Something new (spontaneous, "specific") is always a language-game."[27] "Our language-game is

[24] John Fennell, *A Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Language - Central Themes from Locke to Wittgenstein* (New York and London: Routledge & Francis Group, 2019), 229.

[25] Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, xv.

[26] This reminds us of Saussure's notion about the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. For more details see, Sun Chen, "Arbitrariness of Linguistic Signs and Saussure's Philosophy of Language", *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, vol. 12, issue 9 (September 2024): 1-5.

[27] Wittgenstein, *PI*, 224.

an extension of primitive behaviour. For our language-game is behaviour (Instinct)."[28] "To invent a language could mean to invent an instrument for a particular purpose on the basis of the laws of nature (or consistently with them); but it also has the other sense, analogous to that in which we speak of the invention of a game."[29]

According to Wittgenstein, it is a mistake to speak of the emergence of language in the same terms that allow us to speak of the creation of a tool. Because this attitude presupposes that the creator already knows what they want from the outset. Instead, he prefers to see the emergence of language as a game with internal rules that develop organically/naturally within the contexts in which it emerges. The comparison between language creation and game creation highlights the free and dynamic nature of language, as well as the fact that its meaning arises from concrete uses within specific 'forms of life'. Language does not require external justification because it derives its meaning from the activity itself.[30] Hence, language doesn't have a single essence or structure. Instead, it comprises many different 'games', each with its own rules and purposes.

Wittgenstein argues that meaning arises through use within a given 'form of life', a shared way of being in the world. When people agree on the way they use language, they are not necessarily agreeing on opinions but on the structure and rules that make communication possible. What counts as "true" or "false" is embedded in the linguistic and social practices of a community. Truth is shaped by the collective human activity. Therefore, different forms of life create different language games. Forms of life are the shared background of human

[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2nd edition, 1981), § 545.

[29] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 492.

[30] See Srouji (Shajrawi), *Wittgenstein: Cartesianism, Behaviourism and the Analysis of Pain*, 84-85.

practices, language, and culture; and, hence, can be changed according to the needs of the complex human activity:

> "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life."[31]

To my mind, when al-Fārābī spoke about the types of cities—meaning the political systems of the virtuous city versus the ignorant cities—and titled his famous book *mabādiʾ ārāʾ āhl al-madīnah al-fāḍilah* (*translated into English by Richard Walzer "On the Perfect State", 1985)*, he was actually speaking about different *forms of life* that distinguish each civic system (*niẓām madanī*) according to the intellectual framework of the community responsible for shaping its political order. Therefore, the term *opinions* (*ārāʾ*) is better understood as a 'form of life' in the sense of Wittgenstein's concept.[32]

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[31] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 241. Andrey Pukhaev draws our attention to Wittgenstein's use of various (two or three) conflicting voices, which makes *PI* a collection of dialogues. See, Andrey Pukhaev, "Understanding Wittgenstein's positive philosophy through language-games: Giving philosophy peace," *Philosophical Investigations*, 2023; 46: 377. https://doi.org/10.1111/phin.12373, accessed 17/04/2025.

[32] In his book *mabādiʾ ārāʾ āhl al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*, al-Fārābī does not address the role of a common language among the city's inhabitants as a means of communication, despite emphasizing that humans rely on one another for survival, since no individual can accomplish all the tasks necessary to attain ultimate perfection (p. 117). This omission may stem from the assumption that language is a given prerequisite for social interaction and cooperation. Al-Fārābī's primary concern, rather, is to lay the philosophical foundations of the virtuous city, governed by the principles of certain knowledge. See al-Fārābī, *Ārāʾ āhl al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*, edited with an introduction by Alber Nasri Nader, (Beirut: Dar El-Mashreq, 1968).

Having reached this point, it is important to emphasize al-Fārābī's distinction between language and logic, and, hence, between 'particulars' and 'universals'. Particulars, which he also calls "individuals" (*āshkhāṣ*) or "concrete entities" (*āʿyān*), refer to sensory objects that people perceive directly and name differently depending on their language and culture (see, § 123). Universals, on the other hand, are abstract intellectual concepts that transcend the boundaries of specific languages. They are more closely related to the realm of logic than to language. Therefore, logic remains universally comprehensible, though it can be expressed in different languages. For him, logic is a "sort of universal grammar that provides those rules that must be followed in order to reason correctly in any language whatsoever. Grammar, on the other hand, is always confined to providing the rules established by convention for the use of the particular language of a particular culture."[33] In other words, "grammar is culturally specific, because it is tied to the language of a single people, whereas logic is universal and uncovers the structure of human reason itself."[34]

In order to understand and speak a language one must, first of all, learn the *use* of words in their conceptual system, to engage in the form of life of such language, to know the rules of the language game and to participate, as an active player, in the game: "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique."[35]

Language, as a dynamic system, is constantly evolving. It develops beyond simple, clear expressions into figurative expressions rich in metaphors, similes, and other rhetorical devices, as noted by al-Fārābī. Therefore, we must recognize the possibility of breaking linguistic rules—not only in the grammatical sense

[33] Black, "Al-Fārābī", 180.

[34] Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy without any Gaps*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74.

[35] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 199.

but also in the sense of creating new expressions that break away from the conventional and familiar use of language. This is what al-Fārābī highlights when he speaks about a group of people learning Arabic, for example, as a foreign language rather than their mother tongue. In doing so, they begin to distort the language and break grammatical rules. Hence, he suggests returning to those who inhabit the wilderness in houses of hair or wool and tents (*sukkān al-barārī*) rather than inhabitants of cities, towns and villages to trace the language back to its original roots (see, § 134; § 135). The evolution of language from simple expressions to complex, figurative expressions is considered progressive in linguistic development. Yet, this progression leads to a situation where a single word, which once had a single meaning, now conveys multiple meanings - whether closely related or even far removed from its original sense:

> "After expressions settle on meanings, linguistic rules start to be broken, issuing in figurative meanings. A word that has already been attached to a certain meaning comes to be associated with a different meaning, based on some near or distant resemblance between the two meanings."[36]

This, in turn, results in ambiguity and even intellectual challenges, and seems to be what led Wittgenstein to assert, in his early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that the primary function of philosophy is the elucidation of language:

> "Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. […] Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries."[37]

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[36] Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, xv; See, also, al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, § 127.

[37] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness (London and New York: Routledge, 1974), proposition 4.112.

For him, many traditional philosophical problems arise not from actual metaphysical issues, but from confusions in language. Hence, philosophy should not propose theories but rather clarify propositions, revealing their logical structure and eliminating nonsensical or pseudo-problems:

> "Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical […]; (They) arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language."[38]

In his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, this idea evolved into the view that language is a series of games governed by rules, and philosophical confusion stems from misapplying those rules. Philosophy should consist of particular descriptions of actual uses of language in practical situations. Wittgenstein moves away from the 'picture theory of language' he proposed in his earlier work (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and instead develops the concept of 'language games'. Language, in his later work, is much more complicated, even elusive; it is a "labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one* side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about."[39]

However, in both phases, philosophy's role is therapeutic; to heal the intellect by showing the way out of conceptual confusion: "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."[40] It is not a discipline whose imperative is to produce a unitary, universal theory of how language means, "but whose job is to cure us of the disease of thinking we need such a single, unified theory of representation."[41]

[38] Ibid., proposition 4.003.

[39] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 203.

[40] Ibid., *PI*, § 309.

[41] Fennell, *A Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, 230.

Language games give us an understanding that consists of 'seeing connections' through an overview of the use of our words.[42]

Wittgenstein liberated philosophy from being preoccupied with futile metaphysical questions about the "essence" of things or searching for an absolute truth. For him, "philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. […] What is hidden […] is of no interest to us."[43] Philosophy "leaves everything as it is; […] (and it) may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it."[44] What philosophers must do is to bring words, such as "knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition", back from their metaphysical to their everyday use, not to try to grasp the *essence* of the thing.[45]

While Wittgenstein viewed philosophy as a method for clarifying language, revealing and correcting the misuse that leads to conceptual problems, al-Fārābī regarded philosophy as the highest form of human knowledge, drawing from both Aristotelian and Neoplatonic traditions.[46] For him, philosophy leads the soul

[42] See, Pukhaev, "Understanding Wittgenstein's positive philosophy through language-games", 384.

[43] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 126.

[44] Ibid., § 124.

[45] See Ibid., § 116.

[46] See Majid Fakhry, "Al-Fārābī and the Reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (October-December, 1965), vol. 26, no. 4, 470. In this article, Majid Fakhry argues that al-Fārābī's attempt to reconcile the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle was founded on a significant error. A Neoplatonic text, likely authored by Porphyry (Plotinus' disciple) and later translated into Arabic as the *Theology of Aristotle*, was mistakenly attributed to Aristotle. Al-Fārābī based his harmonization of the two philosophers on this misattributed work. However, the text reflects Neoplatonic ideas, which had already sought to merge the teachings of Plato and Aristotle prior to al-Fārābī's efforts. See especially pages 471-474.

toward the understanding of the First Cause (God) and to establish the ideal human society governed by reason and virtue:

> "As for the ultimate goal sought in learning philosophy, it is the knowledge of the Creator—Exalted is He—that He is One, unmoving, the active cause of all things, and the One who has arranged this world through His generosity, wisdom, and justice. As for the actions performed by the philosopher, they consist in imitating the Creator to the extent of human ability."[47] (my translation)

The subjects of the various sciences—such as the natural sciences, logic, mathematics, politics, as well as the divine sciences—all fall within the domain of philosophy.[48] Philosophy encompasses not just logic and metaphysics but also political philosophy and ethics, guiding both individual and societal development.

Al-Fārābī believed that if philosophy was certain (*falsafah yaqīniyyah*), it would reveal the truth more comprehensively than religion. Yet he did not completely separate the two but rather sought to reconcile them within a hierarchical epistemological framework, where philosophy occupied the highest rank. "Every prophet-ruler and every philosopher understands the same truths: the oneness of God as First Principal, the descent of His providential influence through the heavens and celestial intellects, and so on. These truths are

[47] Al-Fārābī, *Mabādiʾ al-falsafah al-qadīmah* (principles of ancient philosophy) (al-qāhirah: maṭbaʿat al-muʿayyid, 1910), 14.

[48] See al-Fārābī, *Al-Jamʿ bayna Raʾyay al-Ḥakīmayn*, edited with an introduction by Alber Nasri Nader (Beirūt: Dār el-Mashreq, 1968), 80 (henceforth, *Al-Jamʿ*); this book was translated and annotated by Charles E. Butterworth as "The Harmonization of the Two Opinion of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle", in: *Alfarabi: The Political Writings "Selected Aphorisms" and Other Texts* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 125-167 (henceforth, *Harmonization)*, 125-126.

symbolized in different ways by different prophetic revelations."[49] The supremacy of philosophy over religion does not mean that philosophy is antagonistic to religion, but means that religion is a reflection of that demonstrative and well formulated knowledge which is philosophy. The truth of religion is based on revelation whereas the truth of philosophy is based on demonstrative reasoning.[50] In his book *al-siyāsah al-madaniyyah* (*The Political Regime*),[51] al-Fārābī speaks of two fundamental ways of attaining knowledge; that is, the knowledge of the principles of beings, their ranks, happiness, and the leadership of virtuous cities. These are:

1. The direct rational method whereby the essences of things are imprinted in the human soul as they truly exist in reality. This is the method specific to philosophers and those with contemplative intellects. In this approach, a person perceives principles and intelligibles (*maʿqūlāt*) directly through the Active Intellect, without the mediation of senses or imagination.
2. The Imaginative or Imitative Method, which is suitable for the general public, who are unable to grasp the intelligibles directly. Instead, they

[49] Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World*, 74.

[50] See Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 215; See, also, Srouji-Shajrawi, "The Role of Religion in al-Fārābī's Virtuous City", 26-27; Hans Daiber, *From the Greeks to the Arabs and Beyond* (Leiden; Boston: 2021), chapter 23, 441; and 443-445.

[51] See al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-siyāsah al-madaniyyah, al-mulaqqab bi-mabādiʾ al-mawjūdāt*, edited with an introduction by Fawzi Metri Najjar (Beirut: al-maṭbaʿah al-kathūlīkiyyah, 1964), 85-86. The book is translated into English, but all references here are to the Arabic origin. See, al-Fārābī, "The Political Regime," in: *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, edited by Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Toronto, Ontario: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 31-57.

are presented with approximations of those higher truths, but in the form of symbols, images, examples, parables and stories that they can understand. This method is used in religion, laws, and myths, and while it mimics the philosophical method, it conveys truth in the language of imagination.

Interpreting al-Fārābī's attempt to reconcile the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle on the attainment of knowledge not simply as a consequence of textual misattribution,[52] but as a deliberate and creative philosophical project, aligns with modern views that emphasize the constructive role of the philosopher as an interpreter and system-builder. Contemporary thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, through his hermeneutical philosophy, have argued that understanding is always historically situated and shaped by the interpreter's context;[53] "The horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.*"(Italics in the original)[54] Hence, from a 'Gadamerian' perspective, al-Fārābī can be seen as engaging in a 'fusion of horizons', reinterpreting Greek philosophy through the lens of his own intellectual and cultural milieu. Therefore, al-Fārābī's harmonization can be seen not as a mistake, but as a purposeful synthesis informed by his intellectual environment. According to Majid Fakhry, al-Fārābī's reconciliation of the two sages (Plato and Aristotle) was "conducted against the back-ground of an Islamic controversy which saw in the apparent discord of the two major proponents of Greek philosophy a serious challenge to their authority, as indeed to the

[52] See note 46.

[53] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 280.

[54] Ibid., 306.

reiterated claims of their followers that they were the two infallible spokesmen of the truth."[55]

But we know that Plato and Aristotle differed in many major issues, and the topic they disagreed on the most was acquiring knowledge. Therefore, al-Fārābī's reconciliation of Plato's and Aristotle's views on this subject is interesting.

How do we conceive, learn and use words that relate to 'universals'? Wittgenstein versus al-Fārābī

Words like 'equality', 'justice', 'beauty', 'freedom', 'redness', 'humanity' etc. are considered to be abstract concepts in the minds. They don't exist physically like a rock or a tree in the outer world. So, how we get to learn, know and understand these kinds of concepts?[56]

We cannot find a persuasive answer to the above question in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, because these abstract ideas don't map onto concrete facts. These words don't correspond to things in the world. His 'pictorial model' of the language cannot speak about such kinds of concepts, nor deal with metaphysical issues: "A picture is a model of reality;"[57] "Pictorial form is the possibility that

[55] Fakhry, "Al-Fārābī and the Reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle", 473; See, also, "The argument of the work" written by Charles E. Butterworth in: *Alfarabi: The Political Writings "Selected Aphorisms" and Other Texts*, especially 123-124.

[56] In his analysis of the relationship between Greek logic and the Arabic language, Shukri Abed—drawing on al-Fārābī's philosophical framework—outlines the stages of human language acquisition. This progression moves from the sensory perception of particular objects, through the formation of 'second intelligibles,' and culminates in the conceptualization of 'universals.' This account supports a conventionalist view of language: while language is a human construct, it develops in tandem with underlying cognitive processes. See Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in al-Farabi*, 141-145.

[57] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, proposition 2.12. On the 'picture theory' and the relationship of language to logic in the *Tractatus* see, Tue Trinh, "Logicality and the Picture Theory

things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture."[58]

Meaning comes from how words correspond to things in the world. Therefore, we cannot talk about these abstract concepts in a clear logical manner, yet they can be *shown* (may be through art and fiction): "What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said;" so it is better to "pass over in silence."[59]

In the *Tractatus*, universals, abstract concepts and notions (as the notion of God) are outside the boundaries of clear logical language: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world;"[60] "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical."[61]

To my mind, a reader of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* cannot help but feel that the intellectual world he was raised in has collapsed, for all the issues that philosophy has dealt with since Plato and Aristotle, have lost their meaning. Likewise, philosophy can no longer address matters of ethics, religion, virtuous politics, literary criticism, and so on, but these are pushed outside the bounds of meaningful discourse. Language has become limited to the linguistic analysis of statements and the determination of their logical truth or falsehood. However, K. T. Fann emphasizes that Wittgenstein (in his *Tractatus*) has never said that

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of language", *Synthese* 203, 127 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-024-04549-4; Leo K. C. Cheung, "The Unity of Language and Logic in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," *Philosophical Investigations* 29: 1 January 2006, 22-50; William Child, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2011), Chapter 2; Kevin Cahill, "Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", in: Hans Sluga and David G. Stern (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition 2018), 54-95.

[58] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, proposition 2.151.

[59] Ibid., proposition 4.121; proposition 7.

[60] Ibid., proposition 5.6.

[61] Ibid., proposition 6.522.

metaphysics is nonsense or 'the inexpressible' is just nonsense, although he was critical of the traditional metaphysical philosophers who presented their sentences as 'propositions': "The attempt to say something (in the sense of stating propositions) about what transcends the world (the inexpressible) results in nonsense";[62] "For Wittgenstein, metaphysics, ethics, religion and art all belong to the realm of the transcendental which cannot be *said* but only *shown*."[63]

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein changes his view of language. It is no longer seen as static or fixed. Abstract terms have no inherent essence; instead, their meaning arises from their use within specific forms of life. Language evolves through human activity—not merely through grammatical rules, but through the broader context of lived experience. Consequently, meaning is fluid, shaped by use, context, and shared human practices.

We learn the meaning of words like *love*, *justice*, *slavery*, *sadness*, and *discrimination* through their use in real-life situations. Words derive their meaning from how they are employed within language games, which are themselves embedded in forms of life—cultural activities, customs, and the everyday practices that shape human experience.[64] "Forms of life (as explained by N. Gier) are the formal framework that make society and culture possible […] They are found as the givens at the end of any chain of explanation. Wittgenstein is concerned with the meaning of life and the concepts we use, not their causes, empirical content, or ontological status."[65]

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[62] K. T. Fann, *Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy*, (Singapore: Partridge, 2015), 28.

[63] Ibid., 29.

[64] See, Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 23; §199; and 226.

[65] Nicholas F. Gier, "Wittgenstein and Forms of Life," *Philosophical Social Science*, vol. 10, 1980, 257. For more studies on 'forms of life' see, Newton Garver, "Form of Life in Wittgenstein's Later Work", *Dialectica*, vol. 44, no. 1/2 (1990), 175-201.

'Lying', for example, is considered "a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one."[66] In this context, we can say that if someone is colorblind, their perceptual experience of color differs from others. As a result, their ability to fully participate in the part of the language-game that involves distinguishing and naming colors is limited. They might still use color-related words, but the richness of that usage—the kind that relies on perceiving subtle differences—would be diminished.

In Wittgenstein's view, abstract terms are not ontologically comparable to Plato's Ideas or Forms; rather, their meaning arises from their use within specific forms of life.

The metaphysical underpinnings of al-Fārābī's holistic philosophy are entirely absent from Wittgenstein's thought. In al-Fārābī's framework, the conception of universals (*kulliyyāt* or *maʿqūlāt*) is closely tied to his belief in the existence of the soul and the role of the Active Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl*), particularly as articulated in chapters ten and twelve of *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions*. In these sections, al-Fārābī endeavors to reconcile Platonic and Aristotelian positions on the nature of knowledge acquisition and the process of recollection. This synthesis is, to some extent, consonant with religious doctrine; however, it diverges notably in that religious discourse does not posit an emanated Active Intellect responsible for imparting intelligible forms to the human soul.[67]

Al- Fārābī does not see a difference between Plato and Aristotle; both defined the essence of philosophy as "the knowledge of existing things insofar as they

[66] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 249.

[67] See al-Fārābī, *Al-Jamʿ*, 97-100 and 105-109; *Harmonization*, 150-153 and 160-165.

are existent."[68] He imagines three possible reasons that might give the illusion of disagreement between these two sages:[69]

1. Either this definition that clarifies the essence of philosophy is incorrect,
2. Or the opinion of most people regarding the philosophical engagement of these two men is absurd and flawed,
3. Or those who think there is a disagreement between them on these fundamental principles are simply lacking in understanding.

An illustrative example of al-Fārābī's efforts to reconcile the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle is found in his treatment of the nature and sources of knowledge.

Plato was the first philosopher to undertake a systematic inquiry into the nature of knowledge. He positioned himself between two contrasting epistemological viewpoints: on one side, the Sophists, who maintained that knowledge is derived from sensory perception and is therefore subject to change; on the other, Socrates, who asserted that genuine knowledge is grounded in rational thought. Plato aligned himself with the latter, and from this foundation emerged his theory of the Forms (or Ideas). He posited that true knowledge originates in the realm of Forms—eternal, immutable archetypes that transcend the empirical world. According to Plato, what we perceive as knowledge in the material world is, in fact, a form of *anamnesis*: a recollection by the soul of truths

[68] Al-Fārābī, *Harmonization*, 125.

[69] See, al-Fārābī, *Harmonization*, 126; See, also, the analytical introduction to the book *Al-Jam'*, written by Alber Nasri Nader, 73.

it once knew in the realm of the *Forms* prior to its embodiment. Thus, for Plato, knowledge is not acquired but remembered.[70]

In Platonic philosophy, the 'Forms' constitute true being, whereas physical objects are mere imitations—illusory representations of these ideal entities. For Plato, genuine knowledge derives from the realm of 'Forms'. In contrast, Aristotle maintained that knowledge originates in sensory experience and is developed through processes of intellectual abstraction. He was a persistent critic of Plato's theory of Forms, rejecting the claim that such entities possess an independent existence in a separate, divine realm.

If we examine al-Fārābī's attempt to reconcile Plato and Aristotle on the issue of knowledge, we find that the previously mentioned distinction between the two philosophers appears to vanish.

To summarize the central point of disagreement between Plato and Aristotle concerning the acquisition of universals - that is, the principles of demonstration or cognitions - it may be stated (according to al-Fārābī) that 'universals' are either apprehended directly through recollection, or derived indirectly through induction from particulars: "Sensory perception is only of particulars, and universals are obtained from particulars. Universals are experiences in truth. However, some experiences are obtained intentionally (*ʿan qaṣd*), others unintentionally (*lā ʿan qaṣd*)."[71]

Al-Fārābī claims that Aristotle, in his *Posterior Analytics* (*al-burhān*), stated that "all learning proceed only from previously existing cognition;"[72] otherwise,

[70] See the following dialogues of Plato: "Phaedo", sections 74-76; "Meno", 81c-86b; "Republic", sections 509d-511e, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in: *Plato Complete Works*, edited with introduction and notes by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

[71] Al-Fārābī, *Harmonization*, 151; *Al-Jamʿ*, 98.

[72] Ibid.

how could one be certain that one has acquired the knowledge one was pursuing? In other words, Aristotle asks: does the seeker of knowledge know that he is ignorant of what he seeks, or does he already know it? If he seeks what he does not know, how can he be certain, upon learning it, that it is indeed what he was seeking—unless he possesses some prior knowledge upon which he relies? This implies that Aristotle, like Plato, asserted the existence of 'previous', innate knowledge (or universals) in the mind, which we depend on in our judgments, such as the concept of 'equality'.[73]

In his analysis of the acquisition of knowledge, al-Fārābī states: *"It is manifestly clear that an infant possesses a soul that knows potentially and that has senses as instruments of perception."*[74] This view aligns with Aristotle's assertion in the *Posterior Analytics* that *"he who loses a certain sense loses a certain knowledge,"*[75] underscoring the essential role of sense perception as a prerequisite for the development of knowledge.

In this context, we observe al-Fārābī's attempt to harmonize the epistemological views of Plato and Aristotle, culminating in a distinctly Fārābian conception of knowledge. For al-Fārābī, knowledge is acquired exclusively through sense perception. However, because such knowledge is assimilated into the soul gradually and often without deliberate awareness, individuals frequently fail to recognize which elements have been derived from empirical experience. Consequently, many are led to believe that this knowledge has always been inherent within the soul. Once these experiential impressions are fully actualized, the soul attains rationality, as the intellect is essentially the result of accumulated and processed sensory data. Knowledge, therefore, is a product of engagement

[73] See, Ibid., *Harmonization*, 151; *Al-Jamʿ*, 97-98.

[74] Ibid., *Harmonization*, 151; *Al-Jamʿ*, 98.

[75] Ibid., *Harmonization*, 152; *Al-Jamʿ*, 99; See, Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 1.18.81a38-39.

with the empirical world; the soul becomes rational insofar as it is capable of abstracting from sensory input and generating universal concepts—that is, effecting the transition from the sensible to the intelligible:

> "Intellect, without the senses, has no function peculiar to it except for [seizing] what is similar and conjecturing about the conditions of existing things being otherwise."[76] Accordingly, "a yearning seeker (of knowledge) is someone with a certain undertaking. […] Whenever he finds allusions, signs, and meanings of what was previously in his soul in what he intends to cognize, it is as though he recollects it at that point."[77]

For al-Fārābī, the "acquired" intellect (*al-ʿaql al-mustafād*) is the highest power of the human intellect. "It begins to function after the potential intellect has become fully, or almost fully, actualized, that is, after the mind has detached or abstracted all or almost all the forms of material things, which are now its own intelligible forms. […] (The "acquired" intellect) is the upper limit of human intellection and the borderline between it and the separate divine mind (active intellect)."[78]

In his book *al-siyāsah al-madaniyyah* (*The Political Regime*), al-Fārābī explores the concept of the "acquired intellect" and connects it to the notion of revelation—wherein no intermediary remains between the human intellect and

[76] Ibid., *Harmonization*, 153; *Al-Jamʿ*, 99.

[77] Ibid., *Harmonization*, 152; *Al-Jamʿ*, 99.

[78] Muhsin S. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 154. See, also, Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, 110-111.

the active intellect. When the ruler of a city reaches this level of knowledge, he becomes the *first ruler*, and his leadership is deemed virtuous.[79]

Al-Fārābī also emphasizes the variability in human intellectual capacities—particularly in grasping metaphysical principles, the nature of happiness, and the governance of virtuous cities. Most individuals, he argues, lack the natural or cultivated ability to attain rational, theoretical knowledge. Some are limited by their innate dispositions (*bi'l-fiṭrah*), while others fall short due to a lack of habituation to abstract reasoning. As a result, an alternative educational method must be employed for the majority: *imitation* (*muḥākah*) - the use of examples, stories, and symbolic representations. From this, we can infer that the perception of intelligibles or universals originates in sensory experience. The human mind then processes these impressions to arrive at abstract knowledge - either directly through reason, or, for most people, through imitation or imagination (*mukhayyalah*).[80] There seems to be some sort of hierarchy here. Also, in *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, al-Fārābī assumes a tripartite classification of types of discourse or modes of reasoning: rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative. "Rhetorical and dialectical reasoning are associated with the multitude of human beings and are

[79] See al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-siyāsah al-madaniyyah*, 79-80. It is important to note that al-Fārābī does not reserve the term "revelation" exclusively for prophets. A philosopher, too, may attain a perception of the intelligibles, held within the active intellect, through the advancement of his knowledge. In this regard, the philosopher is even considered superior to the prophet, as the latter reaches this level of understanding primarily through imagination.

[80] Ibid., 85. Imagination has an important place in al-Fārābī's philosophy, which requires further study. See, for example, Suhayb Amin Nadir, "Investigating the Place of Imagination in Farabi's Epistemological Theory", *Asian Social Science*, vol. 11, no. 22 (2015), 220-227; Nadia Maftouni, "Farabi vis-à-vis Sartre on Imagination", *Transcendent Philosophy: An International Journal for Comparative Philosophy and Mysticism*, vol. 25, no. 36 (2024), 203-214.

the modes of reasoning adopted in popular disciplines, whereas demonstrative reasoning is the province of an elite class of philosophers, who use it to achieve certainty."[81]

Al-Fārābī's theory of language is deeply rooted in a metaphysical structure, linking linguistic development to the interaction between the mind/soul, sensory experience, and a higher transcendent reality. Wittgenstein, by contrast, resists such metaphysical engagement, asserting that language can only meaningfully describe what is within the bounds of shared, empirical experience. For him, terms like "soul" and "God" belong to a realm where language fails to secure clear meaning, serving instead as metaphors or expressions of feeling rather than knowledge. For example, Wittgenstein remarks: "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul."[82] He even challenges the reader asking him to describe the 'aroma' of coffee: "Have you tried to describe the aroma and not succeeded?"[83] Therefore, since we struggle to describe something as immediate and sensory as the aroma of coffee, how can we ever hope to describe something as abstract and transcendent as God, the soul, or the metaphysical world?

Al-Fārābī's response to the aforementioned question is of considerable significance and does not, in essence, conflict with Wittgenstein's perspective on arguments concerning divine matters:

> "Necessity dictates applying synonymous utterances from physics and logic to those subtle and venerable ideas that are exalted above all descriptions and divergent from all the things that come into being and exist naturally. Even if one were intent (*qaṣad*) upon inventing (*ʾikhtirāʿ*) other utterances and contriving languages other than the ones

[81] Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, introduction, xiv.

[82] Wittgenstein, *PI*, 178.

[83] Ibid., § 610.

> being used, there would be no approach to utterances from which one could conceptualize anything other than what the senses cling to. […] (Hence) we limit ourselves to existing utterances, forcing ourselves to bear in mind that the divine meanings we express by means of these utterances are of a more venerable species and are other than we imagine and conceptualize."[84]

Al-Fārābī's approach does not stand in fundamental opposition to Wittgenstein's reflections on the limits of language in relation to the divine. As human beings, we are drawn, almost irresistibly, to speak of that which transcends the sensible world: the divine, the absolute, the highest reality. Yet the very medium through which we attempt this (language) is itself a product of the sensible realm. Our words and concepts are forged through sensory experience, bound to the empirical world from which they arise.

Consequently, when we endeavor to speak of the divine, we must do so with the awareness that our language is inherently inadequate. It gestures toward truths that lie beyond its grasp, and thus remains ever distant from the reality it seeks to convey. Even if we were to invent new symbols or expressions in an effort to better approximate the divine, such attempts would still be circumscribed by the horizon of our perception.

In this light, Wittgenstein's saying: "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world," echoes with particular resonance. For insofar as our world is constituted by the senses, our language cannot transcend them. The divine remains, as it were, beyond the veil of signification, ineffable, accessible perhaps through silence, contemplation, or negation (apophatic), but never fully through speech.

[84] Al-Fārābī, *Harmonization*, 162; *Al-Jamʿ*, 107.

Conclusion

The philosophical divergence between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī reflects deeper epistemological and metaphysical differences between modern Western analytic philosophy and classical Islamic thought. While Wittgenstein sought to delimit the scope and ambition of philosophical inquiry, al-Fārābī elevated philosophy to the highest form of human endeavor, oriented toward metaphysical and ethical truths. Their contrasting frameworks continue to shape contemporary understandings of philosophy across diverse intellectual traditions.

Wittgenstein's philosophical method, particularly in his early work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, embodies a rigorous analytical stance that eschews the search for essential meanings in favor of linguistic clarification. For Wittgenstein, many enduring philosophical problems arise from misunderstandings of language. By elucidating the logical structure of language, he believed such problems could be dissolved rather than solved, as they result from linguistic confusion rather than substantive metaphysical puzzles.

In contrast, al-Fārābī articulated a vision of philosophy grounded in the pursuit of ultimate truth and intellectual perfection. For him, philosophy was not merely a tool for analytical clarity but a comprehensive endeavor aimed at understanding the cosmos, the human soul, and the divine. Through rational inquiry, al-Fārābī held that the human intellect could ascend toward a form of union with the divine intellect, imbuing philosophy with both metaphysical depth and ethical purpose.

Al-Fārābī's treatment of language, particularly his distinction between universals and particulars, reflects his broader metaphysical commitments. While recognizing the diversity of languages shaped by cultural and historical contexts, he maintained that all languages function as vehicles for expressing

universal meanings. This view affirms the unity of human thought despite linguistic variation. Wittgenstein, by contrast, rejected the notion of a fixed essence in meaning. Instead, he argued that abstract concepts are acquired through participation in specific linguistic practices—what he termed 'language games'.

The notion of a language game, as developed in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, posits that meaning emerges from use within particular forms of life. Language is not a static system but a dynamic activity embedded in lived human practices. The genesis of a language game resembles the invention of a new rule-bound activity, rooted in primitive, often non-verbal, forms of life. In a parallel fashion, al-Fārābī's philosophy of language acknowledges the multiplicity of linguistic forms and their development within hierarchical and culturally embedded structures of thought.

Despite their differing metaphysical and epistemological orientations, both thinkers emphasize the contextual nature of meaning. Wittgenstein's emphasis on language games and forms of life, and al-Fārābī's attention to the cultural and intellectual dimensions of linguistic expression, converge in their recognition of language as inherently dynamic and context-dependent. This shared insight challenges the notion of language as a neutral medium and instead presents it as a fundamental site of human understanding shaped by history, culture, and intellectual aspiration.

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الملخَّص

قراءة في فلسفة اللغة عند الفارابي من خلال الإطار المفاهيمي لفيتغنشتاين: "اللغة كشكل من أشكال الحياة"

كلارا سروجي-شجراوي

تُشبه اللغة كائنًا حيًّا، يولدُ، ينمو ويتطوّر ويتغيّر باستمرار. غير أنّ مسألة نشأة اللغة تواجهنا بإشكاليّة لم تُحلّ حتى يومنا هذا، وهي تمثِّل في أحد جوانبها ذلك الصراع بين وجهَي النظر: الدينيّة والعِلميّة. والسؤال المطروح: هل اللغة هي نتيجة وَحي إلهيّ، أم أنّها شكل من أشكال "الاتّفاق" بين مجموعة من الأشخاص بهدف التواصل، بدأت عن طريق أصوات أو نداءات أو إشارات كي تتطوّر تدريجيًّا وتصير "لغة" بالمفهوم المعاصر؟

إنّ مَن يقرأ تلك المقاطع من "كتاب الحروف" للفارابي سيجد أنّه من أنصار الرؤية "الاصطلاحيّة"، أي أنّ مجموعة من الناس قد تواطأوا فيما بينهم وأنشأوا مجموعة من الإشارات كوسيلة للتواصل، وهي في تطوُّر مستمرّ.

ولكن، كيف لفيلسوف مثل الفارابي، المعروف بتوجُّهه التوفيقيّ فيما بين أفلاطون وأرسطو (لأنّه لا يحتمل وجود تناقض منطقيّ بينهما)، وفيلسوف آمن بالنبوّة، أن يعرض نظريّة في اللغة تتعارض (في ظاهرها) مع التوجُّه الديني؟

يحاول هذا المقال أن يُبيّن بأنّ فلسفة الفارابي تكامُليّة؛ هي عِلميّة تتناسب مع التوجُّه المعاصر للّغة من ناحية، كما أنّها لا تتعارض بشكل مُطلق مع الدين من الناحية الأخرى. كما أنّ محاولته التوفيق بين أفلاطون، الذي كان يعتقد أن كلّ المعرفة هي في الأساس تذكُّر لعالم المُثل، مع النهج التجريبي لأرسطو، قادته في نهاية المطاف إلى تطوير نظريته الفريدة في المعرفة ونشوء اللغة؛ وهي وجهة نظر تتقاطع مع مفهوم الفيلسوف فيتغنشتاين للّغة باعتبارها "شكلًا من أشكال الحياة"، وبالتالي تشير إلى استحالة وجود "لغة خاصّة"، كما قدّمَها في كتابه "بُحوث فلسفيّة".

إنّ قراءة أعمال الفارابي، الفيلسوف المسلم من القرن العاشر، من خلال الإطار المفاهيمي للودفيغ فيتغنشتاين، الفيلسوف النمساوي من القرن العشرين، إنّما تسلِّط الضوء على جانب مهمّ في فلسفة الفارابي لم يلقَ البحث اللائق، كما تُبيّن أنّ فلسفته لا تزال قادرة على إقامة حوار مع قرّاء القرن الواحد والعشرين، أي أنّها ليست فلسفة ميّتة أو مجرّد امتداد للفلسفة اليونانيّة، شريطة أن نكون مُتنبّهين لأوجُه التقارب والاختلاف بين منهجيهما.