

ARTICLE

AL-FĀRĀBĪ ON THE DEMOCRATIC CITY

Muhammad Ali Khalidi

INTRODUCTION

This essay will explore some of al-Fārābī's paradoxical remarks on the nature and status of the democratic city (*al-madīnah al-jamā'īyyah*). In describing this type of non-virtuous city, Fārābī departs significantly from Plato, according the democratic city a superior standing and casting it in a more positive light. Even though at one point Fārābī follows Plato in considering the *timocratic* city to be the best of the imperfect cities, at another point he implies that the *democratic* city occupies this position. Since Fārābī's discussion of imperfect cities is derived from Plato's *Republic* and follows it in many important respects, I will argue that his departure from Plato in this context is significant and points to some revealing differences between the two philosophers. In order to demonstrate this, I will first set up a comparison between Plato's conception of the democratic city and Fārābī's. Then I will propose three explanations for the greater appreciation that Fārābī seems to have for democracy, as well as for the apparent contradiction in Fārābī's verdict concerning the second best city.

PLATO AND FĀRĀBĪ ON THE DEMOCRATIC CITY

In Book VIII of the *Republic*, there is a very well-known discussion of imperfect or non-ideal societies. Having described the virtuous city, Plato gives an extensive account of how this city might come apart and decay into a non-ideal city. He describes a process consisting of a sequence of successive decays, with each city breaking up and degenerating into the next. The virtuous city decays first into a timocratic city, which in turn degenerates into an oligarchic city, which then turns into a democracy, which finally collapses into a tyranny. The implication is that this pattern of decay corresponds to a hierarchy from better to worse: (a) virtuous city, (b) timocratic city, (c) oligarchic city, (d) democratic city, and finally, (e) tyrannical city. Clearly then, the democratic city is fourth on a scale of five (see *Figure 1*). Moreover, Plato's generally disparaging attitude to democracy emerges vividly in his colorful and evocative description of the democratic city, its citizens, and its system of governance. In order to compare his account to

-
- Virtuous city (1)
 - Timocratic city (2)
 - Oligarchic city (3)
 - Democratic city (4)
 - Tyrannical city (5)
-

Figure 1 Plato's Hierarchy of Cities

Fārābī's, I will pick out what I take to be some central features of Plato's description of the democratic city. Though these features are not independent but are closely and integrally related, they serve to bring out the most salient comparison with Fārābī's views.¹

The democratic city for Plato is characterized by a general atmosphere of liberty, particularly freedom of speech, action, and lifestyle. In introducing it, Socrates asks rhetorically, 'is not the city chock-full of liberty and freedom of speech (ἐλευθερίας ἢ πόλις μεστή καὶ παρρησίας γίγνεται)? And has not every man license to do as he likes?'² (557b). He also states that one would find in such a city, 'All sorts and conditions of men (παντοδαποὶ) . . .' (557b–c). This excessive freedom eventually leads to anarchy, with teachers pandering to pupils, parents to children, and masters to slaves. Indeed, Socrates informs his interlocutors: 'Without experience of it no one would believe how much freer the very beasts subject to men are in such a city than elsewhere' (563c). Horses and asses, he tells them, 'are wont to hold on their way with the utmost freedom and dignity, bumping into everyone who meets them and who does not step aside. And so all things everywhere are just bursting with the spirit of liberty' (563c–d).³

Just as freedom leads to a diversity of individual characters, it also leads to a diversity of constitutions. Plato's democratic city itself contains many possible types of constitution within it. Socrates states that

anyone who wishes to organize a state, as we were just now doing, must find his way to a democratic city and select the model that pleases him, as if in a bazaar of constitutions, and after making his choice, establish his own.

(557d)

¹ In the *Republic*, the discussion of the non-virtuous cities is related to, and sometimes intermingled with, a discussion of non-virtuous men or characters. But since this does not figure in Fārābī's account I will not try to summarize it here.

² Plato, *Republic*, with an English translation by Paul Shorey, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970, 557b. All quotations and translations are taken from this edition.

³ Because freedom (rather than majority rule or equal participation in politics) seems to be the defining feature of the democratic city in Plato, it has been suggested that the Greek conception of democracy is closer to a modern liberal society rather than to a modern democratic one. For one suggestion to this effect, see T. H. Irwin, 'Socrates and Athenian Democracy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 (1989), pp. 185–205. Irwin states: 'the assumptions of Greek democracy are in some ways similar to, but in important ways different from, those of what might loosely be called the modern liberal tradition . . .' (p. 205). I will not try to tackle this issue here, though the corresponding issue with respect to Fārābī will be raised briefly in the conclusion.

It is not entirely clear how these constitutions manifest themselves in the democratic city, but he nevertheless insists that ‘it is the fit place . . . in which to look for a constitution’ (557d).

There is a general lack of authority in Plato’s democracy, to the point that judicial sentences cannot be enforced and that military service cannot be imposed on the citizens. As he states, one is not required ‘to make war when the rest are at war . . .’ (557e). This seems to result from a total equality among citizens, which means that no one is capable of imposing anything on anyone else. Thus, the magistrates of the state cannot enforce death sentences and condemned criminals are free to roam with impunity (558a). More generally, there is no hierarchy in a democracy and everyone is treated equally, despite their unequal merits. By contrast with the virtuous city, which recognizes that different people have different talents and are capable of different tasks, the democratic city makes no distinctions among citizens. The city assigns ‘a kind of equality indiscriminately to equals and unequals alike’ (558c). Moreover, since they have no special talent for ruling, politicians in a democracy are constantly pandering to the citizens, and the city’s political scene is marked by demagoguery. The conduct and record of politicians is not of particular concern to the citizens, provided they do the bidding of their constituents. Socrates observes that the city gives no thought to a person’s way of life before turning to politics, and honors a politician ‘if only he says that he loves the people’ (558b–c).

Finally, it should be emphasized that Plato holds that there is something attractive about a democracy, but only in a superficial way: ‘Possibly . . . this is the most beautiful of polities (καλλίστη αὕτη τῶν πολιτειῶν εἶναι) . . .’ (557c). This statement clearly does not imply that the democratic city has the objective qualities that render it legitimately praiseworthy – but rather that it is misleadingly or superficially eye-catching. That is evident from what follows, where we are told that most people would find it attractive, but only in the way that women and children are taken in by brightly-colored objects. Generally, there is a great deal of irony in Plato’s description, and a harping on the difference between appearance and reality. After describing the license given citizens in a democracy, Socrates asks, ‘is not all that a heavenly and delicious entertainment for the time being?’, and his friends reply, pointedly echoing his emphasis on the transience of democracy’s attractions, ‘Perhaps . . . for so long’ (557e–558a). With similarly heavy irony, Socrates comments on the ‘exquisite (κομψή)’ unconcern of criminals who wander freely without fear of prosecution (558a). Shortly thereafter, he refers to the democratic constitution by saying that ‘it would seem to be a pleasant constitution (ἡδεῖα πολιτεία)’ (558c), clearly drawing a contrast between what appears to be the case and what really is the case.⁴

⁴ The connection between the democratic city and the feminine in Plato’s *Republic* has been pursued in Bruce Rosenstock, ‘Athena’s Cloak: Plato’s Critique of the Democratic City in

In sum, the description of the democratic city in the *Republic* calls attention to the extreme level of freedom found in such a polity and the resultant diversity in characters and lifestyles (though there is no explicit mention of virtuous characters). This city also contains an abundance of constitutions or models for city-building, but Socrates never tells us how exactly these constitutions manifest themselves. Moreover, democracy is characterized by egalitarianism and an erosion of authority, to the point that it is the scene of lawlessness and anarchy. Finally, Socrates's description of the democratic city is served up with a heavy dose of irony, and though he seems to praise it in certain respects, his object is clearly to convey that democracy is a speciously attractive system of government that would not dupe the judicious observer.

In one of Fārābī's political works, 'Kitāb al-Siyāṣah al-Madanīyyah' ('The Book of the Political Regime') there is also a typology of imperfect cities. Two of the main differences between Plato's typology and Fārābī's are the fact that there are more types of city and not all of them correspond precisely to Plato's types, and the fact that there is no explicit process of decay. But notwithstanding these differences, much of the discussion is clearly influenced by Plato's, though I will be arguing that it diverges from him at a number of significant points.

In Fārābī's scheme, there are three broad categories of city opposed to the virtuous city: the *ignorant city* (*al-madīnah al-jāhilah*), *immoral city* (*al-madīnah al-fāsiqah*), and *erring city* (*al-madīnah al-dāllah*).⁵ Roughly speaking, the difference between ignorant cities and immoral cities is that the citizens of the former simply lack knowledge of virtue and happiness, whereas the citizens of the latter once believed in happiness and were guided toward it, but they did not adhere to this goal and came to desire one of the non-virtuous goals (for example, honor, domination, pleasure, and so on) (73.15–17). Thus, the ignorant cities are distinguished from the immoral cities in that the former lack knowledge of the good, whereas the latter know the good but do not pursue it.⁶ Meanwhile, the erring cities are those whose citizens are given representations of happiness and virtue that differ from the true representations. This occurs because the rulers of such cities deceive their citizens into pursuing goals that differ from virtue

⁴ (*continued*) the *Republic*', *Political Theory* 22 (1994), pp. 363–90. Rosenstock claims: 'Plato's diagnosis of the radical privatization of public space in the democracy is linked to his characterization of the city as feminized' (p. 384).

⁵ Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Al-Siyāṣah al-Madanīyyah*, ed. Fawzī Mitrī Najjār, Beirut: al-Maṭba'ah al-Kāthūlīkiyyah, 1964, 57.5. All quotations are from this edition; all translations are from, Alfarabi, 'The Political Regime', translated by Fauzi M. Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, edited by Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, New York: Free Press, 1963.

⁶ The distinction between ignorant and immoral cities indicates that Fārābī rejected the Socratic view that immorality stems from ignorance and that no one knowingly commits an immoral act.

<i>Virtuous city</i>		
<i>Ignorant cities</i>	<i>Immoral cities</i>	<i>Erring cities</i>
Indispensable city	Indispensable city	
Base city	Base city	
Vile city	Vile city	
Timocratic city	Timocratic city	
Despotic City	Despotic city	
Democratic city	Democratic city	

Figure 2 Fārābī's Typology of Cities

(74.3–6). Effectively, therefore, in the erring cities the rulers are immoral whereas the people are ignorant.

In addition to devising three different categories of imperfect cities Fārābī also further divides these categories. The ignorant cities (and presumably the other two categories of non-virtuous city, the immoral and erring cities) are subdivided into the following types (in no discernible order): (a) indispensable city (*al-madīnah al-ḍarūrīyyah*), (b) vile city (*madīnat al-nadhālah*), (c) base city (*madīnat al-khissah*), (d) timocratic city (*al-madīnah al-karāmīyyah*), (e) despotic city (*madīnat al-taghallub*), and (f) democratic city (*al-madīnah al-jamā'īyyah*). If we add the virtuous city from the original typology, we have seven types of distinct city in all, which means that Fārābī has expanded the Platonic repertoire by two cities (see Figure 2).⁷ He has introduced one entirely new city, the 'indispensable city' (*al-madīnah al-ḍarūrīyyah*), more correctly termed the 'city of indispensables', since it is a city in which people live at subsistence level, surviving on the 'bare necessities' (58.4–5). The original of this city is undoubtedly the primitive city devoid of luxuries described by Socrates in Book II of the *Republic* (369b–372e), where he first responds to the challenge posed by Glaucon and Adeimantus by describing a very rudimentary city which is not later invoked in the discussion in Book VIII.⁸ In addition to adding this city, Fārābī has split Plato's oligarchic city into two cities, the vile city (*madīnat al-nadhālah*) and the base city (*madīnat al-khissah*). The vile city pursues wealth and prosperity, while the base city pursues sensual pleasures (such

⁷ If it is correct to assume that each of the three categories of non-virtuous city (ignorant, immoral, erring) can be further divided into the six types listed (indispensable, vile, base, timocratic, despotic, democratic), then Fārābī would have a total of eighteen types of non-virtuous city. If the virtuous city is added to these, this would make for a total of nineteen cities. But it should be noted that Fārābī does not explicitly mention the six types in conjunction with the erring cities, though he does with respect to both the ignorant and immoral cities.

⁸ In the *Republic*, Glaucon deems it 'a city of pigs' (372d), and that is how it is often identified in the tradition, though obviously not by the Islamic philosophers.

as food, drink, and copulation) or imaginary pleasures (such as play or amusement) or both.⁹

Despite these differences, Fārābī's conception of the non-virtuous cities leans heavily on Plato's in many respects. In particular, one non-virtuous city that corresponds closely to an item in Plato's typology is the democratic city (*al-madīnah al-jamā'īyyah*). However, there are significant differences between Fārābī's description of democracy and Plato's. While Fārābī's view of democracy also seems negative in important respects, he breaks significantly with Plato by saying that of all the imperfect cities, 'this is the most admirable and happy city (*al-madīnah al-mu'jabah wal-madīnah al-sa'īdah*)' (70.11). This is a particularly significant statement when one recalls that for Fārābī, as for Plato, happiness and virtue go hand in hand. Moreover, the statement lands Fārābī in an apparent contradiction, since earlier in the same text he states clearly that the timocratic city 'is the best among the ignorant cities . . . (*khayr mudun ahl al-jāhiliyyah*)' (63.15–64.1). That is of course the more orthodox Platonic view, and it leads one naturally to attempt to ascertain the cause of the discrepancy. To be sure, Fārābī does not use overtly superlative attributes in this reference to the democratic city (e.g. *as'ad madīnah*) and he never states outright that it is the best of ignorant cities, so there is no direct contradiction in the text. But the context makes it clear that he is singling out the democratic city of all the ignorant cities as being *the* happy and admirable one, and there is no suggestion of irony in this reference. Moreover, as we shall see in the following section, this reading accords well with his overall portrayal of democracy, which is decidedly more positive than Plato's. Therefore, before trying to resolve this tension in Fārābī's text, I will present some additional evidence for the fact that Fārābī generally accords a higher status to democracy than does Plato.

A CLOSER LOOK AT FĀRĀBĪ'S DEMOCRATIC CITY

One might dismiss Fārābī's later remark about democracy were it not for the fact that various aspects of his description of the democratic city are considerably more positive than Plato's, and that there are a number of important differences between their respective portrayals of the democratic city, as I shall try to show in this section. In order to explain the differences, we will first need to take a closer look at Fārābī's description of democracy.

⁹ Essentially the same typology of cities occurs in Fārābī's 'Kitāb al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah', though he is not as forthcoming on the characteristics of each city. See Richard Walzer, ed. and trans., *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, chapter 15, section 17. Concerning the democratic city, Fārābī states simply that, 'the aim of its people is to be free, each of them doing what he wishes without restraining his passions in the least (*la yamna' hawāh fī shay' ašlan*)'. Elsewhere in the same text (chapter 18, section 18), he writes that, contrary to the people of other ignorant cities, 'the democratic people have many aims, comprehending the aims of all the cities (*ijtima'a fīha himam jamī' al-mudun*)'.

Some aspects of the description are shared with Plato, particularly the high level of freedom and the ensuing diversity of lifestyles: ‘The democratic city is the one in which each one of the citizens is given free rein and left alone to do whatever he likes (*muṭlaq mukhallā li-naṣsih ya‘mal mā yashā*)’ (69.7–8). In this city, people are free to satisfy their appetites, meaning that they are not generally ruled by reason. Moreover, Fārābī agrees with Plato in finding the city superficially attractive, ‘like an embroidered garment full of colored figures and dyes’ (70.11–12). As in the *Republic*, there is a great deal of equality and very little authority in the democratic city, to the point that in some circumstances, ‘the multitude would have the upper hand (*musallaṭīn*) over the rulers’ (70.9). Fārābī’s democratic city is also characterized by political corruption. But the type of corruption described by Fārābī differs subtly from that mentioned by Plato, who implies that politicians get by simply by paying lip service to the interests of the people. Fārābī states additionally that since all are equal and ‘no one has a better claim than anyone else to a position of authority’, political positions can be ‘bought for a price’ (71.8–10). In other words, he thinks that it is a direct consequence of the extreme egalitarianism of the democratic city that the political process in such a city can be corrupted by money. Though this conclusion is not drawn in the *Republic*, Fārābī seems to derive it from one of the features of democracy described by Plato. But there are various aspects of the description that do not seem to derive from Plato at all, and indeed contradict some of Plato’s remarks.

Consonant with its being the happiest of the imperfect cities, Fārābī’s democratic city contains more virtue than the other imperfect cities. Indeed, ‘parts of the virtuous city (*ajzā’ lil-madīnah al-fāḍilah*)’ may exist in the democratic city, and this is ‘the best thing that takes place in this city (*khayr mā yansha’ fī hādhihi al-madīnah*)’ (71.2–3). At the same time, it also contains more vice than the other imperfect cities, and both good and evil increase proportionately with the city’s size, degree of civilization, population, and productivity (71.3–5). Virtuous individuals are allowed to grow up and flourish within the democratic city, since all citizens are able to pursue their own favored lifestyles. Therefore, communities or groups of citizens who choose to pursue a virtuous lifestyle are also able to do so, giving rise to virtuous *groups* within the democratic city. Fārābī develops Plato’s notion of different constitutions within the city by talking about the ‘countless similar and dissimilar groups (*ṭawā’if*)’ (69.11–12) in the democratic city. He adds that ‘this city develops into many cities, distinct yet intertwined (*dākhilah ba‘duha fī ba‘d*), with the parts of each scattered throughout the parts of the others’ (70.16–18). This indicates that the groups or subcities that he has in mind are not neighborhoods clustered in distinct geographic localities, but rather communities of like-minded individuals. These entities effectively constitute cities within a city, and one such set of entities is apparently what Fārābī refers to as the ‘parts of the virtuous city’.

One feature of Fārābī’s democratic city that clearly sets it apart from

Plato's is its multicultural or multi-ethnic character, since 'the nations emigrate to it and reside there, and it grows beyond measure. People of every race multiply in it . . .' (70.14–15). Moreover, there will be 'all kinds of copulation and marriages, resulting in children of extremely varied dispositions, with extremely varied education and upbringing' (70.15–16). In fact, the city is so cosmopolitan that Fārābī says that, 'Strangers cannot be distinguished from the residents' (70.18). Not only does Fārābī suggest here that the democratic city does not discriminate on the basis of race and will include people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, he also strongly implies that it will allow intermarriage, perhaps as a means of forging closer ties between the racial and ethnic groups that make up the city. Elsewhere, in 'al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah', Fārābī considers intermarriage among different groups to be one of the factors that strengthens the bond between them and forges them into a cooperative association.¹⁰ This is perhaps partly what allows the democratic city to remain one 'intertwined' city despite the extreme diversity of its citizen body.

Another significant departure from Plato's description is that the level of anarchy outlined in Fārābī's account is considerably lower and less rampant. All the colorful but alarming talk of convicted murderers on the loose, domestic animals lording it over their masters, and teachers pandering to their students is conspicuously absent in Fārābī's description. The spin he puts on life in this city is quite different: 'Everybody loves it and loves to reside in it, because there is no human wish or desire that this city does not satisfy (*kull insān lahu hawā aw shahwah fī shay'in mā qadara 'alā nayliḥā min hādhihi al-madīnah*)' (70.13–14). The ability of all to satisfy their passions and appetites clearly shows that the city as a whole is not ruled by reason. Nevertheless, the high degree of freedom allows some citizens to pursue whatever lifestyle and profession they choose: 'Consequently, it is quite possible that, with the passage of time, virtuous men (*al-afāḍil*) will grow up in it. Thus it may include philosophers, rhetoricians, and poets, dealing with all kinds of things' (71.1–2). The proliferation of intellectual professions in Fārābī's democratic city, particularly the presence of virtuous philosophers, distinguishes it sharply from the scene conjured up by Socrates, with his emphasis on free criminals, disrespectful youths, and unruly animals.

Finally, the most revealing divergence between the two accounts consists in Fārābī's judgement that 'the construction of virtuous cities and the establishment of the rule of the virtuous men are more effective and much easier (*amkan wa ashal*) out of the indispensable and democratic cities than out of any other ignorant city' (72.3–4).¹¹ Here, Fārābī goes well beyond Plato's

¹⁰ Ibid., chapter 18, section 8.

¹¹ This view is shared by Ibn Rushd, who apparently follows Fārābī on this score: 'Out of this [democratic] State will grow the Ideal State and other States of these <various> kinds, because they exist in it potentially . . .'. See *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic*, ed. E. I. J. Rosenthal, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 230.

opinion that the democratic city is a good place for constitution hunting, deeming it a starting point for establishing a virtuous city.¹² By contrast, there is no explicit indication in Plato that the democratic city is the most easily transformable into a virtuous one. This point of difference between Fārābī and Plato provides a key part of the explanation for Fārābī's more positive attitude towards the democratic city, as I will argue in the following section.

THE DEMOCRATIC CITY AND THE VIRTUOUS CITY

In this section, I will propose two explanations for Fārābī's somewhat surprising judgment on the democratic city and for the tension that exists in the text concerning the second best city. But before doing so, I will briefly consider an interpretation put forward by E. I. J. Rosenthal, who claims that the reason that al-Fārābī views democracy more favorably than Plato does, is that he has simply missed the irony implicit in Socrates's mock praise of democracy. Indeed, Rosenthal attributes the same mistake to Averroes, who takes a similar (though not identical) attitude to democracy in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*. According to Rosenthal's reading, 'Averroes takes Plato's ironical praise of democracy seriously. So does Alfārābī . . .' Yet Rosenthal goes on to acknowledge that some of Averroes' remarks on democracy are 'in line with Plato's disapproval of democracy' (as are, of course, Fārābī's).¹³ It should be clear that the evidence presented in the previous section for Fārābī's favorable attitude to various aspects of the democratic regime cannot simply be explained away by his failure to grasp the irony in Plato's description, nor can Rosenthal's reading provide a satisfactory explanation for the tension in Fārābī's text concerning the second best city. Therefore, rather than consider Fārābī impervious to Socratic irony, I will make an effort to develop a more charitable interpretation of the text.

The first reason for Fārābī's surprising verdict on the democratic city concerns the fact that there are virtuous individuals and virtuous groups in the democratic city. As shown in the previous section, Fārābī builds on Plato's remark about the variety of constitutions and the possibility

¹² In this passage, Fārābī also thinks that a democracy can emerge from the indispensable city. But the indispensable city would seem to have this property by default, since it is a skeletal framework that can be fleshed out in various ways. Still, it is clear that Fārābī also values the indispensable city to some extent, by virtue of the fact that he inserts it into his typology of cities at all.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 293. Rosenthal refers here to 'al-Siyāṣah al-Madaniyyah', 70.20–71.5. However, Rosenthal also states, without elaboration: 'The positive evaluation of some features of democracy, in contrast to Plato, may be due to the Islamic outlook of the Falāsifa' (p. 287). Later, he states: 'It is not impossible that both Alfārābī and Averroes owe their positive evaluation of democracy to Aristotle. . . .' (p. 294).

of constitution hunting in the democratic city, but he takes matters much further. His view is that there will be virtuous groups within the democratic city that correspond to ‘parts of the virtuous city’. These groups arise because individuals are free to pursue a virtuous lifestyle and to set up voluntary associations in any way they choose. Fārābī does not say what these associations are, though he emphasizes that they do *not* have a geographic or localized character. He may be thinking of professional and guild associations, or religious groups and Šūfi orders (which originated in Mesopotamia in the early tenth century, around the time Fārābī was writing), or looser associations of similarly minded individuals. At the risk of sounding anachronistic, some of these groups may correspond to what we would today call the institutions of civil society. Therefore, the first reason for Fārābī’s judgment that the democratic city is second best is that it contains within itself certain microcosms of the virtuous city. Even though the democratic city as a whole is not virtuous, it may contain miniature cities that are. Moreover, virtuous philosophers are among the types of people tolerated in the democratic city, so democracy exhibits a high degree of hospitality towards philosophy in particular.¹⁴

At this juncture, it must be admitted that for Fārābī, as for Plato, the virtue of a city cannot simply be identified with the virtue of its individual citizens. Hence, a city with the highest proportion of virtuous individuals is not necessarily the one with the greatest virtue overall. A number of recent commentators on the *Republic* have observed that Plato seems to endorse two different accounts of what makes a city just: (a) A city is just if and only if its citizens are just (individualism); and (b) A city is just if and only if each of its elements does its job (holism). Since the same can be said *mutatis mutandis* for the other three cardinal virtues (courage, wisdom, and temperance), the virtue of a city is not necessarily a direct consequence of the virtue of its individual citizens, but may be a holistic or emergent property of the

¹⁴ In discussing the *Republic*, Leo Strauss claims that

democracy is the only regime other than the best in which the philosopher can lead his peculiar way of life without being disturbed: it is for this reason that with some exaggeration one can compare democracy to Hesiod’s age of the divine race of heroes which comes closer to the golden age than any other.

(*The City and Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 131)

However, by contrast with Fārābī, the evidence in the *Republic* is slight and equivocal when it comes to the alleged hospitality of democracy towards philosophers. Socrates merely states that the *democratic man* can be found sometimes idling and neglecting all things, ‘and at another time seeming to occupy himself with philosophy’ (561d). After wondering why Socrates did not assign to democracy ‘the highest place among the inferior regimes’, Strauss acknowledges reluctantly that Socrates showed his preference for democracy ‘in deed’ (by remaining in Athens), but not ‘in speech’ (pp. 131–2). See also, Waldemar Hanasz, ‘Poetic Justice for Plato’s Democracy?’ *Interpretation* 25 (1997), pp. 37–57.

city as a whole.¹⁵ Thus, it need not be the case that the democratic city is the most virtuous among the imperfect cities merely because it has the highest proportion of virtuous individuals. While Fārābī's emphasis on the existence of both virtuous individuals and groups in a democracy represents a departure from Plato, it cannot be a sufficient explanation for Fārābī's attitude to democracy. For like Plato, he is not a pure individualist about the virtue or happiness of a polity.

Another objection may be raised to this attempt to explain Fārābī's favorable attitude towards democracy. It may be observed that, in addition to holding that 'parts of the virtuous city' will exist in the democratic city and ruling that virtuous individuals and groups will flourish there, Fārābī admits that there will also be a greater quantity of *evil* in the democratic city. Thus, the virtue and the vice may actually cancel each other out. Though he does not speak of evil associations or communities of vice, in the way that he speaks of virtuous communities, it may still be maintained that the presence of a higher proportion of virtuous individuals or groups cannot be an adequate reason for deeming democracy the best among the imperfect cities. However, I will propose in what follows that the presence of these virtuous individuals takes on a special significance when it is related to what I take to be Fārābī's second reason for valuing democracy.

Another reason for Fārābī's relatively favorable conception of democracy has to do with the ease of transforming the democratic city into a virtuous one. Fārābī seems somewhat more concerned than Plato with the question of how to set up a virtuous city from one of the imperfect cities. Note that this is quite different from the question of how close the various non-ideal cities are to the ideal city, in terms of the degree of virtue or happiness (whether this is construed holistically or individualistically).¹⁶ For a city might be quite close in nature to the ideal, but it may be very difficult to make the transition from it to the ideal city; conversely, a city may be far from ideal in nature but it might be relatively easy to make the transition from it to the ideal. The two things might coincide in practice, but there is no prima-facie reason why they should. In other words, there is a crucial

¹⁵ For more on this issue, see Bernard Williams, 'The Analogy of City and Soul in Plato's *Republic*', in *Plato's Republic: Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Kraut, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 49–59. For a recent discussion of the issues involved, at least concerning the happiness of the good city, see Donald Morrison, 'The Happiness of the City and the Happiness of the Individual in Plato's *Republic*', *Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001), pp. 1–24.

¹⁶ Interestingly, in his commentary on the *Republic*, Averroes seems to equate the two issues of proximity in nature and ease of transformation:

a transformation of the two extremes which are in utmost opposition to each other will consist in their transformation first into the intermediate stages. This will also take place according to the order of the intermediate stages, that is, that they will first change into the nearest of the intermediate stages, then into the one following it.

(Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, pp. 206–7)

difference between two criteria for evaluating a city or political regime: (a) how closely it approximates to the virtuous regime; and (b) how easily it can be transformed into the virtuous regime. If Fārābī holds that timocracy is superior according to the first criterion, while democracy is according to the second, then this would help to resolve the tension in Fārābī's text, which privileges timocracy at one point and democracy at another.

It is worth noting here, by way of contrast, that in his discussion of the democratic city in the *Republic*, Plato does not develop the notion of constitution-hunting in this manner and does not consider the possibility that democracy is easily transformable into the best city. Moreover, it is safe to say that Plato would balk at this suggestion, for he would not endorse the possibility of a gradual transformation from one of the imperfect cities to a virtuous city. At the end of Book VII, Socrates suggests that his ideal polity would come about only if everyone in the city over ten years old were sent into the countryside and the remaining children were educated according to his proposed educational regimen (540e–541a).¹⁷ This passage suggests that the establishment of a good city would require a radical rupture with Athenian democracy rather than gradual evolution out of it (or any of the other imperfect cities). Therefore, by contrast with Fārābī, Plato simply does not think that the democratic city is transformable into the best city, at least not without a radical disruption. Moreover, he does not appear to rate polities based on this criterion (ease of transformation).

We are now in a position to say why Fārābī makes apparently contradictory statements about the second best city. He would seem to judge the democratic city second best when measured according to the criterion of transformability, but judge timocracy to be so when judged according to the criterion of resemblance. Since one can easily conceive that a city may be easily transformable into the best city but not closely resemble it and vice versa, he issues differing verdicts on the identity of the second best city. Hence, a second and more important explanation for Fārābī's judgment that democracy is second best, at least in one respect, is his claim that it is most easily transformable into a virtuous city. Moreover, the two reasons are not unconnected: it may be precisely because the democratic city contains virtuous citizens that it holds out hope for being transformed into a virtuous city. Given Fārābī's emphasis on the fact that the democratic city will contain 'parts of the virtuous city', he may hold that these virtuous people and groups are capable of campaigning for and establishing a virtuous regime out of the democratic one. Though Fārābī does not tell us how this might actually be done, his emphasis on virtuous communities, and indeed virtuous philosophers, naturally suggests a lobbying group for the virtuous city within the democratic city.¹⁸ This is particularly true for the *ignorant*

¹⁷ A similar suggestion is made earlier, at 501e–502c.

¹⁸ The conduct of virtuous individuals in non-virtuous cities is of course the theme of Ibn Bājjah's (Avempace) well known treatise, 'The Governance of the Solitary' ('*Tadbīr*

democratic city as opposed to the *immoral* democratic city. Recall that the citizens of the former have no knowledge of virtue, while those of the latter know what virtue is but have turned their backs on it. Therefore, in the former but not the latter, one can more easily conceive that a virtuous vanguard might succeed in converting their fellow citizens to virtue and in erecting a virtuous city. This point answers the objections raised to the first explanation offered earlier in this section: even if the virtue of a city is not reducible to the virtue of its citizens, and even if the good elements in the democratic city are balanced or outweighed by the evil ones, the presence of the good elements has a special significance, since it may well be what makes possible the transformation of the democratic city into a virtuous one.

THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF DEMOCRACY

Thus far, I have advanced two explanations for Fārābī's more favorable attitude to the democratic city, to the point where he apparently singles it out as the happiest of the ignorant cities. First, though not virtuous itself, the democratic city contains virtuous individuals and groups. Second, it is most easily transformable into a virtuous city – perhaps precisely because it contains such virtuous groups. Both reasons are extrinsic, in that they find merit in democracy in so far as it relates to the virtuous city. The third explanation concerns a source of attraction that is intrinsic to the democratic city itself. This is necessary to account for the more positive overall tone that Fārābī adopts when describing democracy, especially when contrasted with Plato's account. To introduce this third explanation, we need to bear in mind that in comparing these two texts by Plato and Fārābī, the difference in context must be brought to the fore. These works were written over thirteen centuries apart in very different cultural climates. In the interim, we have left the relatively cloistered and parochial world of the Greek *polis* and have moved to what is sometimes described as a *cosmopolis*.

Baghdād, the city Fārābī grew up in, was an Islamic city with a decidedly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic makeup, and this feature has already been signalled as marking a departure from Plato's description of the democratic city. To illustrate, Fārābī himself was born in Turkestan on the northeastern border of Islamic territory, in the town of Fārāb (in what is now Turkmenistan on the border with Uzbekistan). His father was a military officer and may have been one of the Turkish mercenaries recruited by the 'Abbāsīd

al-Mutawaḥḥid'). In Ibn Bājjah's terminology, virtuous individuals in non-virtuous cities are described as 'weeds (*nawābit*)', a term ultimately derived from Fārābī. But note that in Fārābī's terms, 'weeds' are (more intuitively) the non-virtuous individuals in virtuous cities.

court in Baghdād, so the young Fārābī moved there with his family at an early age. He was apparently taught philosophy by a Nestorian Christian, Yūḥannā bin Haylān, whose intellectual lineage connected him to the Greek philosophical school of Alexandria, representatives of which are said to have migrated to Antioch, and from thence eventually to Baghdād. Fārābī lived and taught for almost all his life in Baghdād, which was already past its peak in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, but remained an important center for both trade and culture for another three hundred years. Furthermore, in 942, when he was reportedly in his seventies, Fārābī accepted an invitation from the Ḥamdānīd ruler Sayf al-Dawlah to move to Aleppo. He died there or in Damascus (accounts differ) eight years later, in 950.¹⁹ The bare parameters of Fārābī's life are a testament to the ethnic diversity of Islamic society and the geographical mobility of the people who constituted it during Fārābī's lifetime. Moreover, Fārābī's willingness to uproot himself from the city in which he had lived for most of his life and resettle in Aleppo in the eighth decade of his life stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of Socrates who, at around the same age, chose death over exile from Athens.

I will not try to do justice here to the multi-ethnic character of tenth-century Baghdād nor to the official ideology of the Islamic umma, which regarded ethnic diversity as a virtue and deemed religious affiliation to trump cultural affiliation. I will merely attempt a brief contrast with the situation in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Despite the fact that these Islamic attitudes were not univocal nor universally shared, they constitute a far cry from the very rigid distinction made in Athens and other Greek city-states between citizen, resident alien (*metic*), and foreigner. Pericles's citizenship law of 451/450 BC reserved citizen rights in Athens to the offspring of two Athenian parents. Though the law did not affect the right of foreigners to reside in Athens, resident aliens were barred from ownership of land and discriminated against in various ways.²⁰ The law was re-enacted in 403/402 BC, indicating that mixed marriages between Athenians and non-Athenians incurred increasing disapproval as they became more frequent, according to one historian.²¹ By contrast, no such rigid distinctions were made between members of different ethnic groups in a large Islamic metropolis in the late tenth century AD, and there were no legal restrictions attached to ethnically mixed marriages.

Having said that, we should not assume that Fārābī regarded diversity or pluralism as an intrinsic political good. He would obviously not have been

¹⁹ Little else is known about his life; the information in this paragraph is derived mainly from the entry on al-Fārābī in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, eds B. Lewis *et al.*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965, pp. 778–81.

²⁰ M. Ostwald, 'Athens as a Cultural Centre', in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, second edition, eds D. M. Lewis *et al.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 307–8.

²¹ P. J. Rhodes, 'The Athenian Revolution', in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, second edition, eds D. M. Lewis *et al.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 76–7.

tolerant of diversity of opinion in the sense of dissent from the truth and ignorance of virtue. As is clear in his account of the virtuous city in ‘al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah’, all denizens of the perfect city hold the same opinions and act in the same ways. However, it is safe to say that diversity in culture and ethnicity would certainly have been more agreeable to Fārābī and his society than they were to Plato and his.²² Consequently, the affinities between a democratic regime that tolerates cultural pluralism and universalist Islamic ideology, not to mention the similarities with Fārābī’s own socio-cultural milieu, evidently influence his more favorable verdict on democracy.

IS DEMOCRACY SECOND BEST?

To sum up, I have proposed three explanations for Fārābī’s surprisingly favorable attitude towards the democratic city (given his clear debt to Plato), and for the tension in the text regarding the second best form of government. First, the democratic city contains virtuous individuals and groups. Fārābī recognizes communities of virtue – not neighborhoods or clan-based groups – that consist of free associations of virtuous individuals and constitute ‘parts of the virtuous city’ within the democratic city. In particular, virtuous philosophers flourish in the democratic city. Second, perhaps as a result of the first reason, the democratic city is most easily transformable into a virtuous city. Though Fārābī is not explicit concerning the process of transformation, his emphasis on the presence of virtuous communities suggests that these groups might play a role in converting the democratic city into a virtuous city. On this point, he explicitly breaks with Plato, who seems to hold that the process of establishing a virtuous city requires a more radical rupture with the status quo. Finally, Fārābī’s favorable attitude to democracy can also be explained by the fact that it accords well with the universalist character of official Islamic doctrine as well as his own multicultural experience.

Does this mean that Fārābī considers democracy the second best form of government? Is it fair to say that he thought the democratic city was second only to the virtuous city, even if we qualify this by adding, *according to one criterion*? One problem with such a statement may be thought to be his very concept of ‘democracy’. Some interpreters may prefer to say that the concept of ‘democracy’ that we find in Plato and Fārābī is somewhat different from

²² Plato’s parochialism also presented a problem for Averroes. As noted by Ralph Lerner, in Averroes’s commentary on the *Republic*, he dissents from Plato’s judgment that the virtuous city ought to be limited in size, suggesting that the virtuous polity might even encompass all of humanity. To this effect, he quotes the words of the well-known universalist *ḥadīth* (saying attributed to the prophet Muḥammad): ‘I have been sent to the Red and the Black.’ See Ralph Lerner, ed., *Averroes on Plato’s Republic*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974, pp. xxii and 46.

our own. Indeed, it has been suggested that Plato's concept of 'democracy' more closely corresponds to what we would term 'liberalism'. It may be argued that the centrally salient feature of the democratic regime, in Plato as in Fārābī, is freedom rather than majority rule, equal participation in the political process, or any of the other main features that we associate with democracy in the twenty-first century. But despite the passage of more than a millenium between Fārābī's age and our own, the above discussion shows that his 'democratic city' is sufficiently recognizable as a liberal democracy that it would not do violence to his beliefs to describe it as such. Hence, we can say without distortion that Fārābī's attitude towards liberal democracy is considerably more positive than Plato's, and that he regards the democratic city as closest to the virtuous city, at least when evaluated in terms of ease of transformation into the virtuous city.²³

American University of Beirut, Lebanon

²³ I would like to thank audiences at the University of Arizona and the American University of Beirut for very helpful feedback. I am grateful to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Arizona for hosting me as a visiting scholar during summer 2001, enabling me to complete this paper.

Copyright of British Journal for the History of Philosophy is the property of Routledge, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.