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# Al-Farabi On Divine Knowledge

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## i. Introduction

According to the Qur'an, God (*Allah*) is omniscient; He eternally knows whatever can be known, be it universal or particular in character. Muslim theologians therefore considered that "omniscience" is a necessary and "ignorance" is an impossible property for God. Nothing can escape His knowledge. Various verses in the Qur'an such as "Allah truly knows everthing" (4/179), "Nothing can be hidden from His knowledge" (34/3; 10/62), "He knows whatever in the Heavens and the Earth, even a leaf cannot fall without His awareness" (47/59) designate this basic intuition.

However the question "How does God know things in the past, present and future with His eternal knowledge?" has found various answers in different theological and philosophical schools in the Islamic thought. There are serious methodological differences between the theologians who conceived Divine knowledge in terms of an "attribution" to Divine essence and the philosophers who took Divine knowledge to be somehow identical with His essence. And in order to explicate al-Farabi's view on this issue, one needs to answer the following questions: (i) Which method is followed by al-Farabi in answering the question how God knows Himself as well as things other than Himself? (ii) Did he really deny that God does not or cannot know the particulars, as it was claimed by his opponents? These questions cannot be satisfactorily answered unless the issues of (i) the mode of Divine knowledge, (ii) the emanation of Divine

knowledge in Active Intellect and (iii) the manifestation of Divine knowledge in man or sublunar world are clarified in al-Farabi's philosophical system. These issues relate both to his ontology and epistemology.

## ii. Divine Self-Knowledge

For al-Farabi, God is the Supreme Being: "Inasmuch as the existence of the First is different from the existence of all other beings, His intellection too is different from the intellection of other beings. Such are all of His other states. None of His states can be compared to another's. In order to avoid an analogy between Him and the other (being)s it is sufficient for us to say about the First Principle that "He (*Allah*) is higher and greater than all creatures"<sup>1</sup>. "For, His being in the final stage of perfection necessitates He to be known by us in the perfect manner. But we know that things are not like this. His extreme perfection fascinates us and we can never conceive Him exactly"<sup>2</sup>.

Our inability to know God exactly or indeed never know His nature makes it also difficult for us to make a judgement about His knowledge of other things. For al-Farabi, knowing God is tantamount to knowing His nature or essence and therefore the unknowability of the First leaves anything which might be said about Him rather controversial. Presumably, therefore, al-Farabi makes no claim about Divine essence save that *He intellects*. It can even be said that his claim that God intellects Himself seems to be simply an assumption possibly derived from earlier philosophical systems.<sup>3</sup> However, it would be a mistake to think that such a claim is without a content or meaningless. For, al-Farabi seems to articulate both his philosophical and religious intuitions in terms of such an "intellection". It would be a fair to claim that al-Farabi is somewhat eclectic in general and that his account of Divine knowledge is exception to that.<sup>4</sup>

Al-Farabi explains the unknowability of Divine perfection by an analogy of light; the brighter (stronger) a light is the harder to grasp it.<sup>5</sup> And if this is the absolute light, it will be impossible to see or conceive or describe it. Nonetheless "the First intellects Himself (His essence). Even if His essence is somehow all that there is. In knowing Himself, in a sense, He knows all there is. Since each other existent derives its existence from His existence."<sup>6</sup> "In bringing about another being, He does not give a perfection unavailable to or apart from His perfection."<sup>7</sup> God naturally knows all there is in His essence and from this it can be concluded that since the emanation of all other things is a result of His knowing Himself, He therefore knows other things. Thus Divine self-recognition has an ontological character. It can thus be said that an increase in Divine knowledge of emanated beings causes their emanation. We shall explain the relation of Divine knowledge to all beings emanating from Him when discussing the status of Active Intellect.

That Divine knowledge at the first stage of emanation can never be knowable to us is characterised by al-Farabi in the following way: "Although there is a rat-

her weak relation (between God and us), granted that there is no proportion between our cognition and His cognition and also between what is known by us and what is known to Him, our taste, joy and happiness cannot be compared to His. A simple quantity *versus* an infinite quantity in time; if one (of these) is extremely perfect and the other extremely imperfect, how are we to take them as equivalent?"<sup>8</sup>

Al-Farabi's view that Divine essence is unknowable seems to make it equally difficult for us to understand how God *does* know the particulars and, say, how the afterlife reward and punishment might take place? Whereas, it is readily conceded by the theologian who criticized al-Farabi (and Muslim Peripathetics in general) that we need a comprehensive knowledge of Divine essence and attributes.

Al-Farabi explains our imperfection and incapability of having a better comprehension of God as follows:

Allah is at the summit of perfection, whereas man is at the lowest limit of imperfection... Inasmuch as we are mixed with the matter our substance is has remained far from His substance. Whenever our substance becomes nearer to Him, our conception of Him becomes more complete, more adequate and more realistic. That is to say: As long as we distant away from matter we conceive Him in a more complete manner. More we turn into an active intellect, more we become nearer to Him.<sup>9</sup>

In al-Farabi, the formation of being and knowledge is very much interrelated, both can find their real value only by an abstraction from matter. Man's nearest stage to Divine realm consists in his attachment to Active Intellect which is the intersection of the Divine and the human realm. At this stage, man finds the real meaning of his existence. This is where man becomes somewhat divine and contacts with Divine knowledge or revelation.

For al-Farabi, Divine omniscience is not something superadded to His essence but from His very essence. "In order to know the virtue, He does not need something [**a being?**] apart from His essence such that from which He gets benefit. Also He does not need another being for what is known. In substance He is sufficient for knowing and being known. He is wise not through a wisdom attained from something outside His essence [from which He benefits] but through His own self-sufficiency of knowing Himself.<sup>10</sup> Were Divine knowledge thus mediated by another being, God would be in need of a being which he creates, but this is unintelligible and incompatible with the concept of God. Given that a mediated knowledge might also involve time, space etc., this too will go against Divine timelessness. It should therefore follow that Divine knowledge cannot be articulated in terms of certain facts peculiar to the human knowledge such as space, time, causation, sense perception and so on. None of this however –as some in fact have argued- entails that God is deprived from knowing,

since God knows, He is known and He is knowledge<sup>11</sup>; and all this designates one and the same fact in Divine reality. But Divine “intellection of all existence (*mawjudat*) and multiplicity does not bring about a complexity in God’s essence”<sup>12</sup>. But, what is multiplicity? It is *al-Sawani*, Active Intellect and the sub-lunar world, all emanating from God. If so, since God’s knowledge of all these domains stems from His essence, it causes no multiplicity in His essence whatsoever. By the same token, since existence (being) is nothing other than the natural and actual knowledge it does not cause any change in Divine nature. If God’s knowledge was a matter of “attribution (*idafah*)” as al-Ghazali seems to have thought, indeed there would have been such a change. To be sure, al-Ghazali would not welcome such a conclusion, but as Ibn Rushd satisfactorily argued<sup>13</sup>, there seems to be no other way of understanding knowledge based on “attribution”. Yet, it remains as an interesting claim that God *does* intellect the multiplicity but that this does not cause any complexity in His nature. Indeed this is something which we can hardly conceive.

The following statement made by al-Farabi seems to exemplify his basic intuition on the issue of Divine knowledge:

Undoubtedly, the governor (*mudabbir*) of the world is Allah, even a thinnest atom cannot escape His knowledge (*la ya’zibu anhu mithqale zarra-tin*). Thus Al-Farabi goes on to comment upon this verse by saying that “The universal providence permeates into all the particulars. Every part of the universe and the position of every particular is most properly designed.”<sup>14</sup>

Apparently, these statements –which partly finds its expression in the Qur’an (34/4)- seem to show that Divine knowledge is all-comprehensive. The same Qur’anic verse is also exploited by Ibn Sina<sup>15</sup>. Here one can therefore say that Ibn Sina is under the influence of al-Farabi. On the other hand, al-Ghazali, whose critical attitude to the doctrines of the philosophers is well-known, maintains that Ibn Sina is an exception to those who deny that God knows the particulars inasmuch as he quotes and comments on the verse in question.<sup>16</sup> Yet, it seems that al-Ghazali’s contention that “all the philosophers deny that God knows the particulars with the exception of Ibn Sina” is cannot be true for al-Farabi.

The first part of the verse, which al-Farabi takes as evidence for that God knows the particulars, clearly designates that God has an absolute knowledge of things visible or invisible. It again shows that al-Farabi took the truths of revelation on the subject into a serious consideration. Indeed his remarks on God’s knowledge of future particulars in his *al-Ibarah (De Interpretatione)* are also noteworthy and rather illuminating.

Al-Farabi views that it is essential to theistic religions that God eternally knows every future contingents. What really matters, to be sure, is to provide a philosophical explanation for such a theistic doctrine and al-Farabi, considering the

issue is philosophical in ultimate sense, maintains: “Here we have solve the problem with a view which should remove all doubts and requires no ready or famous [answer] that is properly compatible with religion.”<sup>17</sup> These statements outlines al-Farabi’s basic inclination for providing a solution for the problem in hand. In *al-Ibarah*, in order to solve a problem, he first clarifies its logical grounds and then concentrates on its metaphysical aspect. Thus he writes: “Right answer, the reality of something is not necessarily from another thing but due to a necessity in the very essence of the thing required.” And

thus the truth of a contingent statement is necessary when it is inevitable that that thing must happen. From this, however, it does not follow that the thing in itself must necessarily exist. But its necessity is required only for the truth of the statement. It is not like this when something entails another thing through something necessary, then the thing in itself would be necessary. What is contingent in itself is something like the premises’ necessitating its conclusion in a syllogism. For there are syllogisms which yield necessary conclusions that are not necessary in themselves; i.e., necessarily necessary. Yet their being contingent in themselves do not remove the necessity involved in the premises.<sup>18</sup>

From all this one can conclude: The necessity of *A* does not entails an, so to speak, essential necessity in *B*, which is somehow related to *A*. Thus the necessity involved in a contingent being is, so to speak, a relational necessity, that is, it is necessary through something other than itself.

Accordingly, considering both Divine foreknowledge and the human freedom al-Farabi provides an explanation for the statement that “Zayd will travel tomorrow” as follows:

*Allah* the Transcendent foreknows in an infallible way that Zayd will travel tomorrow and Zayd indeed set off travelling. [But] this does not remove Zayd’s power not to travel. Even if Zayd’s journey happens to be the case... Reward and punishment (*sawab* and *iqab*) apply as known (as proclaimed). *Allah* the Transcendent’s foreknowing that he [Zayd] will perform such an action and therefore His knowledge that he will do so, does not remove Zayd’s power to do (refrain from) it. Nevertheless, the necessity in Zayd’s action originating from Allah’s knowledge, in its relation to the reality of the action, is not a necessity which makes Zayd’s action beyond his will.<sup>19</sup>

At least two things need to be highlighted here:

- i.** God foreknows the human actions through His eternal knowledge. To assume that God does not know the future is, for al-Farabi, something unacceptable.<sup>20</sup>
- ii.** God’s foreknowing a contingent fact about an human action and the occurrence of such an action do not accordingly remove man’s power (or his will) to do

otherwise. God's foreknowing that Zayd will do x, is a part of His reality, whereas Zayd's having an ability to do not-x is a part of his reality. But, for al-Farabi, although this is in itself possible, this can never happen. The issue of reward and punishment is something yet to be explained.

### iii. Active Intellect and the Form-giver (*Wahib al Suwar*)

In al-Farabi's metaphysical thought, Active Intellect is the counterpart of Gabriel (*Jabrail*, *Ruh al-Quds*, *Ruh-al Amin*) and the Preserved Tablet (*Lawh al-Mahfuz*) in the religious language.<sup>21</sup> Active Intellect or the Preserved Tablet is the place where God reveals His knowledge of worldly and social happenings. Here is the source of prophetic revelation and philosophical knowledge. Therefore it is Active Intellect in which the divine and the human realms coincide; where the divine has the intellectual impact upon the human.

It looks somewhat easier to talk about God's knowledge as embodied in Active Intellect than His knowledge *as such* (in His essence). It can be rightly argued that Al-Farabi assign Active Intellect as agent in order to explain God's knowledge of the created realm (the world?) without making any harm to His simplicity.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the idea that a comprehensive knowledge of the created realm is preserved in something other than God's essence (in a "book") is not incompatible with the Qur'an. The following seems to be the bulk of al-Farabi's view on Active Intellect: "In this case, the power which enables mankind to define various things and actions and thus lead them to happiness turns from Active Intellect into passive intellect (*aql al-munfail*). And what comes from Active Intellect to the passive intellect through the acquired intellect is revelation. Active Intellect originates from the very being of the First Cause. Therefore, the one who reveals by means of Active Intellect is said to be the First Cause."<sup>23</sup> Of course, what is revealed to Active Intellect also involves truths about the human actions in future.

For a better understanding of all this, al-Farabi's following statement might be helpful:

The cause which turns the potential intelligibles into the actual intelligibles and the potential intellect into the actual intellect is Active Intellect. The rational ability (**power?**) is a candidate for being an actual intellect. The rational ability has two parts (**aspects?**): (i) theoretical and (ii) practical. The practical part of rational ability deals with the particular things now and to-come, whereas the theoretical part of rational ability intellects the intelligibles for knowledge. And the power of imagination (*muhayyila*) is conjoined to both parts of rational power. [Knowledge] is transmitted from Active Intellect into the power of imagination. Thus the impact of Active Intellect on the power of imagination is sometimes in terms of intelligibles caused by the rational power, which we call 'theoretical'; and sometimes in terms of particular perceptions caused by the ra-

tional power, which we call 'practical'. It receives intelligibles through resemblances.

Thus, the perceptions consciously produced by the practical reasoning are of this kind; some of which are about present and some are of future. Active Intellect's presentation of the particulars to the power of imagination takes place through ordinary and true (*sadiq*) dreams. These events occur during sleep (in dreams) as well as while awake. Although those taking place while awake are seldom, only a few can enjoy them. Whereas those taking place during sleep are generally of particulars; very few are of intelligibles.<sup>24</sup>

As seen, the intelligibles for knowledge, which are intellected by theoretical part of the rational power, are not in a full correspondence with the intelligibles regarding the knowledge of existents. They are rather general and conceptual in nature. And it is at this point, it seems to me, where the Muslim peripathetics are in fact criticized. But, on the other hand, in addition to such a conceptual recognition, there is particularistic way of knowing in God's emanating Himself to other beings through Active Intellect.

Practical reasoning is particularly significant inasmuch as it relates to knowledge of particulars, that is, of temporal facts. Active Intellect, as pointed out earlier, receives its nature and knowledge of contingent beings from God. Only through such a mediation God's knowledge of particulars rules out sensory knowledge of things in time and space. Thus, we can conclude that God knows things other than Himself, something which seems to contradict al-Farabi's idea that "God's knowledge is identical with Himself" without there being a multiplicity in His essence. It seems to me that this is a bare contradiction in al-Farabi's thought.

Al-Farabi's thought of emanation constitutes significant evidence for the idea that Active Intellect draws its content from God. Thus,

The existence of second emanates from the First Being. Even the second is not yet embodied and its matter, as a substance, intellects itself and the First Being [God]. Through intellection of the First, a third must come out. And since it is substantiated [become a substance] by its own essence, the first sphere must draw its existence from it. Even the third is immaterial and therefore intellect in substance. It intellects itself and the First. Since it is substantiated by its own essence, the unchanging class of stars must come out of it. By intellecting the First a fourth must come out of it...

The process thus follows up to the tenth intellect and

The ninth's intellecting the First, must bring about a tenth intellect from itself. Even the existence of the tenth is without matter and it intellects itself and the First. Inasmuch as it is substantiated by itself, the lunar must



proceed from it. Through the tenth's intellecting the First, the eleventh intellect must proceed from it and the eleventh intellect is too without a body and it intellects the First. But in order to bring about its existence, the things which need no matter and predicate terminate here. They [unlike matter] are both intellects [the subject] and intelligibles [object].<sup>25</sup>

The purpose of making such a long quotation is to underline a crucial point in al-Farabi's scheme of emanation: *no intellect has any essential ontological or epistemological dependence on another intellect save the First [God]*. By intellecting the First, every intellect logically causes the existence of the following one. The higher intellect borrows the existence of the lower from God and thus every intellect owes its existence and properties to Him. And whatever emanated from these intellects is somewhat divine in character. This is something clearly pointed out by al-Farabi himself: "each of them [i.e., each intellect] intellect both itself and the First Cause. In none of them is there any ontological perfection to intellect itself only. Rather, each of them, by intellecting itself and the First's essence, borrows the perfect virtue [from Him]." <sup>26</sup> So every property of each intellect is from the First and hence Active Intellect receives every particular knowledge for forming the sub-lunar world and for establishing a virtuous society through prophets and philosophers and also the knowledge of future events from God.

The idea of a perfect man is also explained by al-Farabi by reference to the activity of Active Intellect on man. How are we to understand this? To start with, the revelation takes place through intellect. The revelation emanating from God comes to the imaginative power of man through mediating, in an emanative manner, Active Intellect, acquired intellect and the passive intellect. A person addressed by such an illumination is a philosopher; a true man of wisdom. The person who receives such a revelation through his imagination is a prophet who might have an epistemological access to the future particular events.<sup>27</sup> The man who is thus illuminated by Active Intellect becomes a divine being.<sup>28</sup> In sum, therefore: (i) Revelation emanates from God to Active Intellect, and then (ii) revelation emanates from Active Intellect to man, and (iii) by means of this revelation man foresays things about the future particular that are known to the Deity. (iii) seems to be particularly crucial to our discussion. As seen the being who is eternally intellecting by God knows particular things, if so nothing should remain outside of His knowledge too. Then someone like al-Ghazali<sup>29</sup> will be mistaken in saying that, according to the philosophers, God knows the 'prophethood' but does not know the particular truth that *Muhammad is a prophet*.

To know the particulars is to know the changeable truths about the temporal world. However, for al-Farabi, it is impossible to know any changes in God's essence and also there is no multiplicity in His essential knowledge. On the face of it, these claims are contradictory: If God's essence is unknowable in principle, how do we know that His knowledge can only be simple? On the other

hand, God's knowledge of Active Intellect, apart from His knowledge of Himself, is still different. It is considered to be reasonable that Active Intellect should accommodate changes/multiplicity and thus the knowledge of temporal world. For, it is Active Intellect which forms the temporal (material) world through revelation received from God. Al-Farabi thus explains how the first governor organizes the society and city according to knowledge by revelation. One can sum up al-Farabi's view as follows: (i) God reveals to Active Intellect, and (ii) this revelation is secondary to Divine knowledge, (iii) the revelation, which is originally from God's eternal knowledge, is re-revealed to different societies in different times. (iv) The city is fully governed according to this revelation.<sup>30</sup>

It seems to me that one of the motivation for al-Farabi in postulating Active Intellect is to avoid any multiplicity in Divine essence. Here one might rightly think that he is under influence of Aristotle and Plotinus. In any case, it can be rightly claimed that al-Farabi's God knows both the universals and particulars, even His knowledge seems to remain somehow mediated. God's knowledge in al-Farabi is everlasting and actual, whereas the forms have a potential existence in Active Intellect, that is, they have the power to bring about material forms. Again, God's essential (self) knowledge is everlasting, Active Intellect's knowledge is not. By the same token, the activity of Active Intellect is not everlasting. It can be actual as well as potential.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, Active Intellect is not in the state of the highest perfection since It accommodates changes and therefore potentialities. Now it seems fair to ask: Is al-Farabi really coherent in postulating Active Intellect which seems to replace Divine essential properties in certain theological schools?

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