

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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## In Search of the Comprehensive Science: The Way to Philosophy of Alfarabi's Plato

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Over three-quarters of a century has passed since Richard Walzer and Franz Rosenthal published the first Arabic edition of the *Philosophy of Plato*, and half a century since Muhsin Mahdi produced an excellent translation of the entire trilogy. Despite the lapse of time, Alfarabi's *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* remains an imposing work, much praised but little understood.<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss's pathbreaking essay, now also over seventy years old, has not been forgotten, but nor has it been consistently followed up.<sup>2</sup>

Part of the challenge of interpreting the work lies in its original form: while the second and third part present the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, respectively, the first part, titled "The Attainment of Happiness," does not pretend to be anything but a novel treatise composed by Alfarabi himself. While it is easy to perceive some overlap between the three parts, it is extraordinarily difficult to discover any consistent relationship between them. Each

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<sup>1</sup> Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). The three parts of the treatise have yet to be combined into a single Arabic edition. I cite the following: *Tahṣīl al-Sa'āda* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalūs, 1983); *Falsafat Aflāṭūn*, ed. Franz Rosenthal and Richard Walzer (London: Warburg Institute, 1943); *Falsafat Aristūṭālīs*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut: Dār al-Majallat Shi'r, 1961). The numbers in Mahdi's translation correspond to the Arabic text of the *Philosophy of Plato* and *Philosophy of Aristotle*, but not to the Arabic text of the *Attainment of Happiness*, so in citing it I have provided the references to both English translation and Arabic original. I cite these works initially by their full title and afterward by abbreviations.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, "Farabi's *Plato*," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945). A noteworthy exception, about which I will have more to say later, is Chistopher Colmo, *Breaking with Athens: Alfarabi as Founder* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 55–88.

has an entirely distinct beginning, end, and subject matter, as if Alfarabi has collected three very different animals and stuffed them into the same pen.

A hint concerning the thread that unites the work may be found in the title, the only among Alfarabi's extant works to contain the word "philosophy." This seemingly banal observation points to a major feature of the work. While some of Alfarabi's works, such as the *Political Regime*, do not even mention philosophy, and others do so only rarely, all three sections of the trilogy dramatically introduce this term. Yet the context is unique in each case. In the *Attainment of Happiness*, philosophy comes to light only after the conquest, governance, and education of several nations has been proposed (*Attainment of Happiness* [AH] 38.19 [88]). In the *Philosophy of Plato*, the meaning of philosophy is clarified only after the popular arts and ways of life prevalent in the cities have been examined (*Philosophy of Plato* [PP] 12.14–15). In the *Philosophy of Aristotle*, philosophy's necessity is demonstrated only after a thorough investigation of all the logical methods, sciences, and beings (*Philosophy of Aristotle* [PA] 132.1). Besides, while Alfarabi does aver, at the end of the first section, that Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy have the same purpose (AH 47.9–11 [97]), his accounts of their respective philosophies seem to have very little in common. So while the word "philosophy" does provide a common thread linking all three parts, a quick perusal of its meaning in each of them brings familiar interpretative challenges to the fore.

Another statement by Alfarabi helps justify the apparent divergence between Plato and Aristotle. Both philosophers gave an account not only of philosophy, but of the "ways" (*turuq*) to it, as if there are multiple equally good paths to a single end (AH 47.5–6 [98]). The implication is that while Alfarabi's Plato discusses politics, religion, poetry, and moral qualities, and his Aristotle logic, natural science, and metaphysics, both philosophers arrive somehow at the same goal. The tripartite treatise thus offers three entirely distinct paths to philosophy, one pursued by Plato, another by Aristotle, and a third by Alfarabi himself. A full understanding of the treatise would require a book-length comparison of these three ways. My more modest purpose here is to examine the way to philosophy pursued by Alfarabi's Plato. In order to emphasize the peculiarity of this way, I will occasionally compare the way of Plato to the way of Aristotle and the way of Alfarabi himself.

#### THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLATO: AN OVERVIEW

The *Philosophy of Plato* is by far the shortest of the three parts. It recounts a series of investigations carried out by Plato, ascribed to various Platonic

dialogues: every dialogue known to us, except for the *Minos*, is included. As demonstrated by Strauss,<sup>3</sup> subtle and unexpected changes in the choice of terms color the argument as it unfolds. The accounts of each dialogue are recognizably Platonic in many respects, but none come close to adequately summarizing any single Platonic work. Although obviously inspired by Plato, the protagonist is also created by Alfarabi. I will nonetheless call him “Plato,” under the assumption that we all understand whose Plato is meant.

The *Philosophy of Plato* is the middle section of the trilogy, but also, as Strauss and Mahdi have both noted, the most independent.<sup>4</sup> The first of the three philosophers in time, Plato makes the fewest assumptions about philosophy or human perfection. Unlike Aristotle, he does not begin with any previous philosopher in mind (PA 59): even his teacher Socrates does not figure in the early stages of his quest (PP 12.6). Unlike Alfarabi himself, he does not presuppose any immediate knowledge of earthly and heavenly happiness or profess the need to realize it in the nations and cities (AH 2.1 [49], PP 3.1).

Despite his early starting point, Plato arrives at philosophy rather quickly. Slightly before the midpoint of the treatise, he is ready to unveil philosophy as the art supplying the science that he seeks (PP 12.10–16). How, exactly, does he arrive at this conclusion? Plato’s argument divides cleanly enough into four main segments: first, he determines that knowledge of the beings and a virtuous way of life are required for happiness (PP 3.1–4.10); second, he refutes the claims of Protagoras and Meno, that such knowledge cannot be attained (PP 4.11–6.2); third, he examines the generally accepted logical arts, and their usefulness in attaining this science and way of life (PP 6.3–9.10); fourth, he makes the same inquiry with regard to the practical arts (PP 9.11–12.6). Of course, Plato’s understanding of philosophy continues to develop far beyond what he has established at this point. I will consider each of these four sections in turn, and then incorporate this analysis into a more general interpretation of the *Philosophy of Plato* as a whole.

While Mahdi’s translation is generally praiseworthy, four of its features may make it harder for the English reader to follow my interpretation. First, the term *‘ilm* is translated as both “knowledge” and “science.” Second, the term *ṭarīq* is translated as both “method” and “way.” Third, the terms *shay’* (thing) and *amr* (matter or affair) are not translated with any consistent

<sup>3</sup> Strauss, “Farabi’s *Plato*,” passim, esp. the footnotes.

<sup>4</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 197; Strauss, “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 360n7.

English equivalents, or, in some instances, even translated at all. Fourth, the difference between the roots ‘*a-r-f* and ‘*a-l-m*, signifying two different kinds of knowledge, disappears in translation. I will attempt to explain these terms and their significance at various points in the article.

#### THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCIENCE

Plato begins with the plausible assumption that humans, like every other being, have a perfection (PP 3.1). His starting point for examining perfection is not philosophic tradition (see PA 59.5), but common opinion. He immediately begins to investigate the claims to perfection made by the various kinds of people around him. In the course of his investigation of the prephilosophic world, Plato discovers that perfection is most commonly viewed through the lens of envy. He therefore lists the enviable things: health, soft skin, beauty, possession of a large family, many friends, and many lovers, as well as honor, wealth, and power over one’s city or group. But Plato himself is unimpressed. He defines the highest “perfection” as “happiness,” and is quite sure that the enviable things do not bring happiness, even though most people assume that they do (PP 3.9–11). Plato detaches the object of his quest so completely from envy that he almost never mentions it again: the one exception comes in conjunction with views of perfection that are evidently not his own (see PP 11.7).<sup>5</sup> For genuine human happiness, something else is needed (PP 3.12). In considering what this “other thing” might be, Plato determines that “an indefinite knowledge” and “indefinite way of life” must bring happiness.<sup>6</sup> The search for the right kind of knowledge and way of life requires a healthy contempt for the opinions of one’s fellow humans and the things these opinions lead them to envy and seek. Such indifference to envy may be difficult for many of us to acquire, but Plato seems to acquire it rather easily. It is the first, and perhaps the easiest, step on his way to philosophy.

The desired knowledge and way of life are yet to be defined. But Plato seeks to reassure impatient readers by proposing an astonishingly quick definition of the desired knowledge (*‘ilm*): it is the “knowledge of the substance

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Colmo drew my attention to the importance of envy, but he downplays the difference between the large role of envy in conventional views of perfection and its minimal role in Plato or Alfarabi’s own view. I therefore do not see how the early emphasis on envy announces that Alfarabi “is not a Platonist” (Colmo, *Breaking with Athens*, 58–59).

<sup>6</sup> Mahdi’s translation of “certain” is misleading because it can mean “definite,” whereas the Arabic term *mā* clearly means “indefinite.” This confusion is significant because Alfarabi’s Aristotle, unlike Plato, does speak of a “certain science” in the definite sense (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*, PA 74.7).

of each of the beings” (PP 4.2–3).<sup>7</sup> The unusual “knowledge (or science) of the substance of each of the beings” is not mentioned in Alfarabi’s own classification of the sciences, in which every science examines a particular class of beings: mathematics examines numbers, physics bodies, and political science actions and customs.<sup>8</sup> In the first part of his trilogy, Alfarabi follows a similar schema, proceeding from mathematics, to natural science, to metaphysics,<sup>9</sup> and finally to political science, all of which are assigned a particular subject matter (AH 8.10–16.20 [55–64]). The peculiar kind of knowledge sought by Plato seems more comprehensive than the conventional sciences. Is it, therefore, an ensemble of all the sciences? Later in the treatise, Plato places this science “among the sciences” (PP 6.4), without even trying to define these other sciences. However all-encompassing the “science of the substance of each of the beings” may appear to be, it does not devour all of the other sciences in its wake. This might be because “beings” do not include all “things,”<sup>10</sup> a possibility to which we will return. The status of this science among the other sciences remains as mysterious as its subject matter.

The meaning of the term “substance” (*jawhar*) is also somewhat enigmatic. While Plato speaks again of beings and the science that investigates them on numerous occasions, he returns to substance only once, in conjunction with linguistic science (PP 7.4). We will examine that passage in due course. Alfarabi himself does speak quite extensively about substance, but only when discussing thinkers other than Plato. In the third part of the treatise, Alfarabi indicates that the philosophical concept of substance, and its application to both natural things and human perfection, was treated far more systematically by Aristotle (PA 66.2–3, 87.9, 132.9). Alfarabi himself follows Aristotle’s cue, discussing the term at great length in the *Book of Letters*, as the Arabic translation of the Greek *ousia*. Substance signifies either a natural being of which qualities are predicated, such as stars, earth, air, water, fire, animals, plants, and humans, or the definition that makes known the essential character of that being.<sup>11</sup> In seeking the substance of each of

<sup>7</sup> The Arabic word *‘ilm* can, like the Greek *epistēmē*, mean both knowledge and science, which is why Mahdi, as previously noted, translates *‘ilm* in both ways, according to context.

<sup>8</sup> See Alfarabi, *Enumeration of the Sciences (Iḥṣā’ al-‘Ulūm)*, ed. ‘Uthmān Amīn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlu al-Misriyya, 1968), 94, 109, 124.

<sup>9</sup> Alfarabi explains that even metaphysics has a strictly limited scope, treating “exclusively” the beings that are “beyond nature” rather than being or substance as such (AH 12.14–19 [59–60]).

<sup>10</sup> As Strauss suggests (“Farabi’s *Plato*,” 389).

<sup>11</sup> See Alfarabi, *Book of Letters (Kitāb al-Ḥurūf)*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut: Dār Al-Mashriq, 2004), 100–103.

the beings, Plato hopes to apprehend not any chance fact about them, but rather their fundamental character. But does he ever succeed in clarifying what substance is? Plato does not even attempt to do so in conjunction with the science of the substance of the beings, offering no further explanation of substance whatsoever.

While Plato investigates the desired science and offers a provisional definition of it, he does not go even this far for the desired way of life (*sira*). He turns instead to an investigation of happiness, describing its main features and distinguishing between the real and imagined variety. Plato does add that the “virtuous way of life” brings about the achievement of “this happiness,” but as Leo Strauss has pointed out,<sup>12</sup> the ambiguous antecedent does not tell us whether he means the real or imagined happiness (PP 4.6–10).

We conclude that the meaning of “the science of the substance of each of the beings,” and of “the virtuous way of life” that leads to happiness, remains obscure. Two attempts to resolve this obscurity are intriguing. Strauss argues that this science must be the “art of demonstration.”<sup>13</sup> The word “demonstration” does not occur in the *Philosophy of Plato*, as Strauss himself indicates, so he implies that the demonstrative art is the “other faculty” required beyond dialectic in order to attain this science (PP 9.8). To be sure, demonstration follows dialectic in the Aristotelian Organon, but can we safely apply Aristotle’s thought to Plato? Christopher Colmo argues that Alfarabi implicitly criticizes Plato for sanctifying knowledge and philosophy without knowing whether it exists.<sup>14</sup> I would respond that Alfarabi’s Plato is perfectly aware of the questions that surround his definition, and aim to develop that response in the rest of this article.

At this stage of the investigation, Plato most emphatically does not know if the desired knowledge and way of life exist. He has courageously abandoned the things sought by the vast majority of humankind for the sake of what is initially a mere hope. In order to ensure that some of his readers go with him, Plato consciously lures them onward with promises of comprehensive knowledge and virtue, before indicating just how difficult it is to attain them. Those who do follow Plato may be puzzled to discover that his definition of this knowledge or way of life does not in itself undergo any obvious development. He repeatedly, and quite maddeningly, refers back to “this knowledge,” “that

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<sup>12</sup> Strauss, “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 385–86.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 364–65, esp. nn20–21.

<sup>14</sup> Colmo, *Breaking with Athens*, 55–69, esp. 56–58, 60, 63.

knowledge,” “the desired knowledge,” or “the knowledge of the beings,” as well as “this way of life.” I will assume, safely I hope, that all of these phrases take “the knowledge of the substance of each of the beings” and the “the virtuous way of life” as their antecedent. To understand what Plato might mean, we need to consider the course that the rest of his argument takes.

#### THE FLIMSY GROUND OF THIS SCIENCE AND THE TURN TO ART

As rapidly as Plato may formulate his definition of comprehensive knowledge, he is just as quick to acknowledge that he stands on shaky ground. Although human beings “aspire” to a knowledge of this sort (PP 4.12–14), its very existence is exposed to the familiar objections of people like Protagoras and Meno, who deny, each in his own way, that such knowledge is by nature attainable. Protagoras argues that “the knowledge natural to humans” is a matter of individual opinion and belief (PP 5.1–4), while Meno maintains that learning as such is impossible, beyond the knowledge given us haphazardly by nature and chance (PP 5.14–17).

Plato rebuts Protagoras simply by reiterating the claim that humans have a single perfection which is attained by the knowledge that he has just described (PP 5.5–6). As pleasant as it may be to thrust the troublesome sophist Protagoras aside, it is not clear how this repetition advances the argument. Meno’s objection is a harder, but perhaps more valuable, nut to crack. In order for Plato to refute Meno, it has to “become clear to him” that learning is not the result of mere nature or chance, but the consequence of some sort of art (*ḡinā’a*, PP 6.1–4). The importance of the introduction of art cannot be overestimated. Plato promptly begins to investigate the “generally accepted arts” (PP 6.8) of his time in order to find the art that provides the desired science, and this search takes up the next two sections.<sup>15</sup> While Plato never seems to take seriously the generally accepted claims to happiness with which he so brusquely dispenses in the first paragraph, he is intrigued by the generally accepted arts. One could say that the arts, founded as they are on some kind of rules (*Enumeration of the Sciences*, 57–58), offer more promising ways (*turuq*, PP 6.6) toward certain knowledge than social or political opinions inspired primarily by envy (PP 3.2, 11.7). It is widely believed that the arts can be learned, at least by somebody with a modicum of natural ability, so Plato may effectively appeal to them in response to the claims of Meno and his ilk, in the

<sup>15</sup> Colmo asks why “Plato continues to investigate at this point,” since he “already knows the knowledge that brings perfection” (*Breaking with Athens*, 63). The answer is that Plato still does not know how to attain such knowledge.

same way that people today appeal to “science” in response to “relativism” or “facts” in response to unproven political claims. Yet on this note, it is striking to observe that Plato does not appeal to the particular sciences. Despite alluding to the existence of multiple sciences distinct from “this science” (PP 6.4), he does not bother to investigate any of them. Plato’s neglect of the sciences is rather puzzling: wouldn’t mathematics and natural science, for example, help Plato in his quest? In the first part of the trilogy, Alfarabi urges his contemporaries to learn these sciences (AH 8.10–13.1 [9–20]). Perhaps Plato declines to investigate these partial sciences because he suspects that they deal only with particular classes of beings, and are unable to show the way to the more comprehensive science of the beings that he seeks. If that is the case, then Plato’s way to philosophy is determined by his assumption that there is a comprehensive science, which must be sought not through partial sciences, but through broader and more flexible methods. The logical arts considered by Plato, in contrast to the sciences, all concern a variety of classes of beings.

One could say that for Plato the way to philosophy passes not through the narrow rigor of science, but through the openness of what we might call the liberal arts. Yet this very openness also constitutes a risk, leaving the investigator exposed to error. While the logical rules developed by Aristotle protect the investigator from error in the study of the sciences (PA 85.6–86.19), something less tangible is required by Plato. In order to keep himself and his reader on the right path, he offers not a method but a concise and subtle description of each of the theoretical arts (PP 6.10–9.10).

#### THE INVESTIGATION OF THE SIX THEORETICAL ARTS

Alfarabi’s account of Plato’s investigation of the six syllogistic arts devotes a single paragraph to each art. Its terse summaries may appear, at first glance, extremely monotonous, as Plato briefly investigates each art before stating its inadequacy. A second glance, however, reveals great discrepancies between each art. Not one of them employs the same methods, examines the same subjects, or produces the same results as its counterparts.

None of the six arts leads to the desired knowledge or way of life. At the same time, all of Plato’s investigations are fruitful, since in every case he states either the knowledge given by the art (PP 6.15, 7.7, 8.4) or the value of the art (PP 7.19, 9.5). All of them succeed, in some form or another, in bringing Plato closer to his goal. This applies especially to sophistry, which is ridiculed in no uncertain terms, but acknowledged to have some kind of “value” as well (PP 8.10).

Each art has at least one characteristic that is not shared by any of the others. Religious speculation, for example, gives some knowledge of both the beings and ways of life (PP 6.15–16; cf. 8.2–4). The linguistic art seeks knowledge of the substances of things: this is the only place apart from 4.2 where the word “substance” occurs (PP 7.4). It is also the only art that provides unambiguously a “way” (*tariq*) to the desired science (PP 7.7; cf. 7.17, 8.9). Poetry alone has a strong interest in “natural beings” and “the desired way of life,” along with some value “for being human” (PP 7.14, 7.19). Rhetoric is the only art that reflects by means of “opinion” on both beings and ways of life (PP 8.2–3). Sophistry is the only art whose aims, actions, and practitioners are thoroughly examined, and whose primary subject is “matters” (*umūr*, PP 8.14–15). Finally, dialectic alone is said to be “extremely valuable” in the quest for the desired knowledge (PP 9.5).

The six arts divide into three pairs. The first pair, the religious syllogistic art and linguistic science, are conventional arts linked to the doctrine of a particular religion and conventional rules of a particular language.<sup>16</sup> Poetry and rhetoric, the central pair, are popular arts that reach the largest number of human beings. Plato describes the two investigations as “similar” (PP 8.1), and indicates their broad dissemination by describing their audience with the pronoun “us” (PP 7.13, 8.2). Sophistry and dialectic, in contrast, are investigative arts practiced by the elite that purport to seek knowledge rather than any way of life (PP 8.7–10, 9.4–7). Dialect follows directly “after” sophistry just as the linguistic art follows directly “after” religion (PP 9.3, 7.1).

Based on these observations, I propose a tentative account of how Plato’s investigation progresses. The investigation of religion gives a certain amount of knowledge of the beings, but nothing about their substance. It also gives some knowledge of ways of life, but not necessarily the desired, virtuous way of life. This knowledge, however insufficient, moves Plato’s investigation forward (PP 6.12–17).<sup>17</sup> The linguistic art, in contrast, does not examine beings or ways of life, but “the substance of things,” with “things” replacing “beings” (PP 7.4–5). The focus on “substance” suggests a greater interest in the essential character of things than is displayed by the religious art. But “things,” unlike “beings,” could be figments of the imagination that do not exist outside the soul (*Book of Letters*, 128). Such fictitious “things” are often created

<sup>16</sup> Alfarabi, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, 58–59, 131; see Strauss, “Farabi’s Plato,” 374.

<sup>17</sup> While religious investigation may be the “lowest step of the ladder of cognitive pursuits” (Strauss, “Farabi’s Plato,” 373–74), it is undoubtedly a useful step.

by the poets (PP 7.11)<sup>18</sup> of the particular language to which any given linguistic art is restricted. The religious art fails because it examines beings but not substances, whose existence it may not even recognize. As Alfarabi's disciple Maimonides explains, the predominant schools among Muslim theologians taught that every being was created and recreated at every instant by God.<sup>19</sup> Examining beings in this way presupposes that they have no essential character, and therefore leads either to religious dogmatism or complete *aporia*. The linguistic art fails because it does not recognize the difference between conventional names or imaginings and the things that actually exist outside of the soul. Yet by introducing the question of the substances that the names signify, the linguistic art helps move beyond the indefinite notion of being proposed by the religious syllogistic art and thus provides a way toward the desired knowledge (PP 7.7).

While the religious syllogistic art examines beings, and linguistic science examines the substances of things, poetry focuses on the natural rather than the conventional and the human rather than the divine (PP 7.14, 19). Following Plato in Book X of the *Republic*, Alfarabi explains in more specialized treatises like the *Epistle on the Canons of Poetry* that poetry consists of wide-ranging imitations.<sup>20</sup> Poetry speaks to "us" by opening up our mind to the widest variety of human characters, as well as natural phenomena, through imitation of them. It expands the investigator's world from the closed horizon of a particular religion or language to the broader human and natural sphere. It is less successful, however, as a method (*tariq*) of instruction. It gives familiarity rather than precise knowledge or science: the term translated as "knowledge" near the bottom of the paragraph (PP 7.16–18) is *ma'rifa* rather than *'ilm*, roughly equivalent to the English distinction between familiarity and knowledge. The implication is that poetry, despite its value for being human (PP 7.19), may not give us any scientific knowledge at all. Furthermore, Plato emphasizes that the most widely accepted poetic method leads us far away from everything he seeks (PP 7.19–20). Unlike rhetoric and dialectic, poetry does not figure among the methods of instruction later employed by philosophy (PP 15.18–16.3; cf. BL 150.3–16). So while

<sup>18</sup> Mahdi omits "things" from his translation: "that of which poems and poetic statements are made" should be "the things of which..." For the view that "beings" are prior to "things," but that the knowledge of the two is interrelated, see Strauss, "Farabi's *Plato*," 389–90.

<sup>19</sup> See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1:194–214, esp. 200–203.

<sup>20</sup> Alfarabi, *Epistle on the Canons of Poetry (Risāla fī Qawānīn Šinā'at al-Shi'r)*, trans. A. J. Arberry, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 17 (1938): 267–78.

rhetoric receives considerably less attention than poetry, it does supply some scientific knowledge (*ilm*, PP 8.4), and might in that respect be more useful in philosophical investigation. One can more profitably investigate the beings by means of rhetorical premises and arguments based on opinions, than by using poetic images. The rhetorical investigation of the beings paves the way for more elaborate sophistical and dialectical methods.

For an art that is apparently so fruitless, Plato's account of sophistry is unusually detailed, covering three separate Platonic dialogues (PP 8.11–12, 8.16). It includes an isolated statement about the value of sophistry, in the midst of what appear to be scathing critiques of it: sophistry supplies neither this science nor a way to it, and the matters (*umūr*) on which it reflects do not even pertain to science (PP 8.9–10, 8.14–16). Sophistry does not ponder either beings or things, natural or otherwise, but “matters” or, as I might prefer to translate, “affairs.” It is the only theoretical art to focus on the affairs that are contrived by humans. It does not seek knowledge, but rather manipulation of the audience, interlocutor, or judge. The still lengthier account of sophistry in the *Philosophy of Aristotle* spells out all of its ingenious devices, designed to win the argument by inducing confusion, error, or even shame and silence (*Philosophy of Aristotle*, 81.8–83.17). Yet Alfarabi's Aristotle, like Plato, insists on the importance of learning sophistry. A student cannot count on succeeding in his dialectical training unless he knows about sophistry, and how to both avoid and defeat it. He needs to understand not merely things and beings, but the complexity of the affairs in the midst of which his investigations will take place. By way of illustration, the sophist Protagoras asserts that people reflect mainly about *umūr* (PP 5.1), while Plato invokes an *amr*<sup>21</sup> of his own order to vanquish him. It seems to involve stubbornly repeating his earlier argument about the existence of the knowledge of the substance of the beings, contrary to Protagoras's own claim (PP 5.5–7).<sup>22</sup> Plato therefore takes pains to learn everything about sophistry, its practitioners, its aims, and its subject matter, before engaging in dialectic.

The final art, dialectic, is “extremely valuable” for attaining the desired knowledge. It holds the promise of distinguishing many of the things (*ashyā'*, 9.6–7) examined by the linguistic art and used in poetry, finally paving the way for “this knowledge” of the substance of the beings. Despite his evident

<sup>21</sup> *Umūr* is the plural of *amr*.

<sup>22</sup> The term *amr* falls out in translation: those who “speculate about things” in fact speculate about *umūr*, and “contrary to what Protagoras asserts” is rendered more literally as “the matter is contrary to what Protagoras says about it.”

progress, Plato emphasizes that dialectic is merely for training, and “another faculty” is still needed (9.8–9). His investigation remains incomplete.

#### THE VALUE OF THE PRACTICAL ARTS

Having exhausted the liberal or “theoretical” arts, and determined their insufficiency for attaining the knowledge that he seeks (PP 9.11–12), one might expect Plato to finally turn to the sciences, such as physics or mathematics. Yet he proceeds to investigate, not the sciences, but the practical arts. It is as if a student steeped in poetry, literature, and logic in high school should inexplicably decline his acceptance letter from Harvard or MIT and take up auto repair instead. The following discussion attempts to explain this puzzle.

Plato’s initial assumption is that the practical arts contain some science, albeit mixed with practice (PP 9.14–18). But when he considers whether the sciences they contain contribute to the desired knowledge and way of life, he reaches the conclusion that one would expect: these arts do not seek the highest perfection at all, but merely usefulness and gain (PP 9.18–10.3). Plato is thus exempted from learning the details of auto repair after all. What, then, is the purpose of his excursion into the rigidly practical sphere?

There are two translations that may conceal an important part of the meaning of this passage from English-language readers. First, the “useful and gainful things” are in fact “matters” (*umūr*), the same entities that were examined by sophistry. In following up his discussion of sophistry, Plato continues to direct the gaze of the student toward the “affairs” that humans actually seek. Second, as Mahdi does explain in note 3 to page 58, “good” translates the same term (*fāḍil*) that is usually rendered as “virtuous,” as in the phrase “virtuous way of life” (PP 10.4, 10.9–11). The turn to the practical arts raises the question of concrete human goods and ends in a way that the more refined but less purposeful theoretical arts could not. These ends come to light as either necessary and useful or gainful and virtuous (PP 10.3–6). The association of the virtuous with the merely profitable in the eyes of the multitude tends to confirm Strauss’s interpretation of the early reference to the “virtuous way of life” as an entirely vulgar one.<sup>23</sup>

Once the “matter [*amr*] of all the practical arts” has become clear, Plato begins to investigate the things that they pursue, namely, the necessary, gainful, and virtuous (PP 10.7–8). Just as Plato’s investigation of the theoretical

<sup>23</sup> PP 4.8 with Strauss, “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 385–88.

arts never examines the necessary or gainful, so it never examines virtue, rendering it unable to approach the heart of the question of happiness or the desired way of life. That same investigation is unable to distinguish between what is held to be true by the multitude and what is truly the case, as Plato does so frequently in the rest of the work (PP 10.10, 13.4 *et passim*; cf. 7.3). Plato examines the useful from the point of view of the vast majority of human beings, along with the many different things that they find gainful and virtuous. He then proceeds to compare the view of the multitude to what is truly useful, gainful and virtuous. He determines that there is some kind of relationship between the two, although that relationship is not fully elucidated at this point (PP 10.10–11.2). Part of the problem may be that the truly necessary and virtuous has yet to be fully defined (cf. 13.1–3).

Plato turns, without any explanation, to investigate a way of life rooted in the hypocrisy of feigned manliness,<sup>24</sup> and then the ways in life that seek pleasure (PP 11.4–12.6). These subjects appear at first glance to have little to do with the discussion of the necessary and gainful arts that preceded them. For one thing, they aim above and beyond the narrow goals of the practical arts. Unlike the arts, these ways of life pursue not merely use and gain, but some kind of perfection or end (PP 11.4, 12.2). The necessary and profitable as conventionally understood do not in themselves consider any ultimate perfections (PP 10.2–3), goals sought by the multitude no less than by philosophers. The comparison between the gainful and useful according to the multitude and what is truly gainful and useful leads to the conclusion that the practical arts which purport to be for the sake of nourishment or money alone in fact arouse fantasies of the masculine power or intense pleasure that may be procured by their successful pursuit.

The reintroduction of “that desired perfection” and “the desired end” (*ghāya*) raises several questions. First of all, does “that perfection” refer to the genuine or ignorant perfection (PP 11.4; cf. 4.8–9)? The latter interpretation is suggested by some striking similarities between this passage and Plato’s original investigation of popular notions of perfection. These are the only places in the work where Plato treats the things through which “human beings become enviable” (PP 3.2, 11.7). Many of the perfections that Plato first perceived to be envied by the people around him, such as ancestry, honor, and power, are likely to be viewed as manly (PP 3.1–8). “The desired end,” in contrast, can

<sup>24</sup> The Arabic *rajula* is translated by Mahdi as “fortitude,” a rendering that Mahdi himself corrects in note 1 (PP 11.7–9). Note that *rajul* (man) occurs in 11.7 and 11.9, while *insān* (human being) occurs only in 11.7.

only refer to the one end previously mentioned, namely, knowledge of the beings, “the greatest of ends” (PP 4.2–4).<sup>25</sup> Plato asks whether the way of life he describes might attain the most widely esteemed perfections, on one hand, and the highest end of knowledge, on the other.

Plato’s answer to his own question seems at first glance to be incomplete. Most glaringly, he does not even attempt to resolve whether manly hypocrisy attains perfection. Instead, he drops “this perfection” after the first line, while he repeats the term “end” no fewer than seven more times.<sup>26</sup> The omission of “this perfection” from the rest of the paragraph might amount to a tacit admission that the enviable way of life described in the paragraph often does attain the widely esteemed perfections listed at the beginning of the work. Plato’s attack on this way of life therefore comes from the point of view of knowledge. He is quite sure that the practitioners of this way of life lead us very far away from the desired end (11.14–15). They affect to pursue a “noble” end such as knowledge (11.6), but actually attain only the ends of hypocrisy, false persuasion, and quarrelsomeness (PP 11.9–11.11). They are identified with two men (*rajulain*) known as sophists. Sophistry is not only an art feigning knowledge, but a way of life as well (PP 11.6, 10). Despite the emptiness of sophistry’s pretensions to knowledge, which confuses astuteness in *umūr* with genuine understanding,<sup>27</sup> its way of life often wins favor with the multitude, who are impressed less by its claims to knowledge or virtue than by the macho fortitude it exudes (*rajula*, 11.7). Yet so contentious a way of life appears to leave only quarrels in its wake. A distinction emerges between the manliness that most human beings envy and the gentler, more useful “humanity” acquired by philosophy (PP 13.3).

Plato concludes the section by investigating pleasure (PP 12.1–6). Like manliness, pleasure would seem to result from some of the enviable perfections,

<sup>25</sup> This interpretation involves taking sides in a philological issue, so it is only fair to explain that issue to the reader. Relying on a sole manuscript reading, Mahdi inserts *kamāl* (perfection) for *ghāyya* (end), and translates as such (PP 4.4, n3). He is understandably puzzled by the rare mention of “end,” but does his preferred reading of the more commonly used “perfection” make sense? It repeats, needlessly it seems, a term that has just been used (PP 4.3). More importantly, would Alfarabi be able to speak of the “desired end” in 11.4 without having mentioned it previously? This consideration, above all, gravitates in favor of the standard manuscript reading.

<sup>26</sup> To translate this term consistently would be terribly awkward in English, but probably necessary for grasping Alfarabi’s whole meaning. Mahdi translates it as “end” on lines 5, 7, 15, “extreme” on lines 9 and 10, “limit” on line 11, and “far away” on line 15. I would consider the translation “end in hypocrisy,” “end in sophistical persuasion,” and “end in contentiousness” intelligible enough in English and more revealing of Alfarabi’s meaning.

<sup>27</sup> The word *amr* recurs in 11.8: “this way of life” is more accurately rendered “this matter.”

such as soft skin and many lovers (PP 3.4–6). Yet Plato does not include envy in his brief investigation. He also replaces “this desired perfection” with “the desired perfection,” which might refer to genuine perfection (PP 11.4, 12.1, 4.3–4, 7.4). Unlike manliness, pleasure seeking straddles the line between imagined and genuine perfection. Pleasure covers so much ground because it divides into many distinct types: the way of life (*sīra*) of those who pursue manliness is spoken of in the singular, while both the ways of life (*sīr*) and pleasures (*ladhāt*) of the pleasure seekers are spoken of in the plural (PP 12.1, 11.5). Alfarabi elsewhere defines the most widely pursued pleasures as food, drink, sex, imagination, and play.<sup>28</sup> While these pleasures do not contribute to the attainment of desired perfection in any way, true pleasure arises from the practice of that perfection. This pleasure is ascribed to Socrates (PP 12.2–6).<sup>29</sup> Plato determines that the life of his teacher Socrates, if pursued without any hindrance, is the pleasant life, in contrast to the envied but turbulent life of sophists and potentates or soft and insecure life of hedonists.<sup>30</sup> Plato is now on the cusp of discovering philosophy, as the art that provides the desired knowledge (PP 12.14). The discussion of pleasure and its various forms is therefore the final, indispensable step toward reaching Plato’s initial goal.

Plato’s investigation has at the same time advanced and come full circle. It began by enumerating the enviable ways of life, followed by the conclusion that not they but knowledge provides happiness. Plato stated this conclusion, but did not prove it. Realizing that only art could offer a precise definition of knowledge and happiness, Plato turned to an investigation of the liberal arts such as poetry and dialectic. They helped Plato advance along the way toward philosophy, by attuning his mind to the variety of methods, things, and beings, but proved unable to investigate the human good. Plato therefore turned to the humble practical arts, whose goal is concrete human gain. Yet the gain that the vast majority of humans obtain through these arts is tentative and indefinite. The practical arts are not self-sufficient, or satisfied with their own ends. Instead, they are usually pursued for the sake of macho display or pleasure, the two ends for which the multitude of humans yearn. This leads Plato back to the enviable things that he listed, but did not fully understand, at the beginning of his search. He now perceives the motives

<sup>28</sup> See Alfarabi, *The Political Writings*, vol. 2, trans. Charles Butterworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 77–78.

<sup>29</sup> I take this ascription somewhat more literally than Strauss: see Strauss, “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 385. Strauss is right to argue that Plato disagrees with Socrates, but that disagreement is yet to manifest itself at this point.

<sup>30</sup> Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, 2:78.

behind the goods that most humans seek, and the contribution, positive or negative, that they might make to his philosophic quest. His redefinition of these goods as manliness and pleasure is once again followed by the subject of knowledge, this time understood as philosophy. Human rather than manly, pleasant rather than hedonistic, philosophy emerges as the only true good. It is only by means of the thorough understanding of ordinary human pursuits that philosophy finally comes into view.

#### PHILOSOPHY: SCIENCE, ART, OR WAYS?

Plato introduces philosophy as the “theoretical art” that “supplies the knowledge of the beings” (PP 12.11), or the novel art that succeeds where all the generally accepted arts have failed. The long-sought art has finally been discovered, and the science of the beings revealed. But the triumph feels somewhat hollow: it is hard to escape the impression that something does not add up. The “knowledge or science [*ilm*] of the substance of the beings” has long been dangled as the prize, yet the way to it fails to define substance or being, or investigate any of the particular sciences. To strengthen our suspicion, we note that neither science nor even art is mentioned with any great frequency in the rest of the treatise. Is this because their value for philosophy has already been established, or because Plato begins to doubt it?

Plato never again suggests that philosophy provides the desired science. “This science” does return in the context of the best city, but it is no longer supplied, or even investigated, by the philosophers. The philosophers, who are “the highest part of the city,” stand equally aloof from “the succession of men” whose role in the city is to investigate the sciences, and the “rulers” who combine the theoretical and practical sciences (PP 20.10, 20.16–20, 21.3–5). The philosopher who manages to flourish in the imperfect cities does not seem to possess science either, or seek to guide his fellow humans toward it. Instead, he focuses on gradually reforming their opinions, laws, and ways of life, directing them toward the true and virtuous without ever reaching it (PP 22.15–23.7). The final sections of the *Philosophy of Plato* do indeed vindicate philosophy, but not its science-bearing role.

The demotion of science is accompanied by a growing emphasis on the philosopher himself. Plato discovers that the activity most characteristic of this kind of human is not science or even art, but reveling (PP 14.4–15.17). Along these same lines, the “other faculty” (*quwwa*) required by the philosopher in addition to dialectic is probably not demonstration, over which

Plato passes in silence, but the “faculty of love” (*quwwa ‘ala al-mahabbah*)<sup>31</sup> possessed by Socrates (PP 22.5, 9.8). The philosopher is characterized less by his narrow scientific rigor in the pursuit of truth than by his capacious enthusiasm for it. Indeed, we may ask if an enthusiastic, potentially disorderly activity, which the majority of humans might identify with madness (PP 14.13), goes together with the relative orderliness of science or even art.

Plato’s most immediate and consequential attempt to restore some order to a philosophy on the verge of dissolving into wild revelry involves the use of “ways” (PP 15.18). Plato promptly investigates three pairs of ways: division and bringing together, rhetoric and dialectic, and oral instruction and writing (PP 16.1–7). The first pair is necessary for the “man who aims at philosophy,” and thus part of the way to it. This pair would seem to describe, in retrospect, what Plato himself was doing when he classified and distinguished the various arts according to certain qualities. The second pair, rhetoric and dialectic, were initially investigated as independent arts, but become useful for philosophic instruction only when transformed into versatile ways that are subordinate to the demands of philosophy. One aspect of this newfound flexibility lies in the philosopher’s willingness to use both elements of a third pair, speech and writing. Plato suggests that both methods of communication have value, but that the former should be employed first. The character of philosophic instruction thereby evolves as it proceeds. Four distinct ways of instruction emerge: rhetorical speech, rhetorical writing, dialectical speech, and dialectical writing. Taken together, Plato suggests these ways do form a novel kind of art, but one that cannot be classified among the conventional arts (PP 16.11–12). Plato thereby salvages the notion that philosophy is some kind of art, although after this statement he does not mention the word art again.<sup>32</sup>

Toward the end of the treatise, Plato reiterates and broadens his flexible approach to philosophic instruction by introducing a fourth pair of ways: in order to fully succeed in his dealing with his fellow humans, the philosopher needs to master both the “way of Socrates” and the “way of Thrasymachus” (PP 22.1–8). The former involves “scientific investigation” of the virtues for the sake of the elite, while the latter consists of “formation of character” of the youth and the multitude, presumably through nonscientific methods.

<sup>31</sup> Mahdi translates this phrase “power of love.”

<sup>32</sup> There are some parallels between this passage and the first half of the *Attainment of Happiness*. There, too, Alfarabi announces the importance of “ways” or “methods” (*turuq*). He then urges his contemporaries to better understand the methods that they are using to treat each problem, arguing that a heterogeneity of methods is necessary owing to the heterogeneity of problems: taken together, knowledge of these ways constitutes an “art” (*Attainment of Happiness*, 3.4–19 [49–50]).

Philosophy cannot be called a science because the term applies to only some of its methods, and even those Socratic methods that are scientific are said to investigate, but not to prove (PP 22.2). The deft maneuverings and many ways of philosophy must be aware of their own limits. An obstacle to certain knowledge that looms large in the *Philosophy of Plato* is its incomplete understanding of substance: Plato recognizes the conventionality of the notion of substance presented in the linguistic art but does not return to the subject. His strongest hint about the character of philosophic knowledge is unfortunately lost in translation: when mentioning the “things that a man ought to know in order to become a philosopher,” Plato employs the root ‘*a-r-f*’ instead of ‘*a-l-m*’, just as he did when describing the familiarity acquired by poetry and its value for being human (PP 16.8, 7.18). Knowledge of the beings has been replaced by familiarity with the things. Philosophy has the broadest grasp of the phenomena, natural, imaginary, and contrived,<sup>33</sup> but does not claim scientific knowledge of them.

#### WHAT JUSTIFIES PHILOSOPHY?

I wish to conclude by revisiting once again the question raised so forcefully by Christopher Colmo: Can Platonic philosophy, in Alfarabi’s view, justify itself? Colmo argues that for Alfarabi’s Plato, philosophy cannot supply knowledge of anything, including itself and its way of life.<sup>34</sup> On the basis of our analysis, I would rephrase this question as follows: Even though philosophy does not provide complete knowledge of the beings, does it provide satisfactory knowledge of the desired way of life?

The investigation of philosophic reveling and its ways leads to the conclusion that philosophy is an unconventional art and, even more emphatically, the “truly virtuous way of life” (PP 16.12). Colmo’s intricate analysis does not fully reckon with this unusually direct statement.<sup>35</sup> The subsequent investigation concerning Socrates’s choice of death over a vicious, brutish way of life that rejects philosophic inquiry, as well as its conclusion in defense of its choice (PP 16.14–19.11), makes little sense unless the virtue and humanity of the philosophic life has been proved beyond a reasonable doubt. As Muhsin Mahdi observes, Alfarabi’s Plato ultimately “says a great deal about the desired way of life...but tells you very little about the desired science.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Or, to use Alfarabi’s Arabic terminology, with the *mawjudāt*, *ashyāʾ*, and *umūr*.

<sup>34</sup> Colmo, *Breaking with Athens*, 72–74.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–77.

<sup>36</sup> See Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation*, 198.

Colmo makes the plausible objection that Alfarabi's definition of "true" virtue and philosophy is obscure, so that much of what he says about the philosophic way of life is negative. Yet Colmo's prolonged and inconclusive reflections on the meaning of "true" risk failing to see the wood for the trees.<sup>37</sup> Certain positive features of the philosophic life can be gleaned simply from assessing the *Philosophy of Plato* as a whole. The philosopher approaches the heterogeneous problems posed by the investigation of beings and virtues through disparate ways and methods, in both instruction and practice. The final section provides a concrete illustration of how the philosopher should practice his craft in the imperfect cities in which he is forced to reside. "The perfect human, the human who investigates, and the virtuous"<sup>38</sup> should be able to profitably engage his fellow humans by writing discrete letters seeking only incremental reform of the corrupt laws and customs of the particular communities best known to him (PP 22.14–23.6). The philosopher's skepticism, devotion to truth, and acceptance of the imperfect societies of his time allows him to gradually guide his compatriots, without stirring up dangerous passions against himself or others, or promising the complete knowledge of the substance of the beings that lies beyond our ken.

For the present author, along with others who may never become perfect philosophers, what does Alfarabi's account of the ways to philosophy mean? His description of its variability and flexibility ought to be useful in guiding all students of philosophy. Since philosophy is not a science but a combination of ways, which adapt themselves according to subject, audience, and circumstance, the paths to it are multiple. This view is reflected in the tripartite structure of the trilogy. Alfarabi, Plato, and Aristotle were three philosophers each of whose path appears at first glance to have little in common with that of his peers. In the end, however, "their purpose is the same, and they intended to offer one and the same philosophy" (AH 47.9–10 [97–98]). Each found his own way to philosophy on the basis of his distinct experience, education, and milieu. We, the readers, are invited to do the same. I conclude just as Alfarabi concludes the trilogy: "Therefore philosophy must necessarily come into being in every human in the manner possible for him" (PA 133.2–3).

<sup>37</sup> Colmo, *Breaking with Athens*, 78–83.

<sup>38</sup> That is to say, philosophers "who have reached the goal of philosophy": see Strauss, "Farabi's *Plato*," 381.