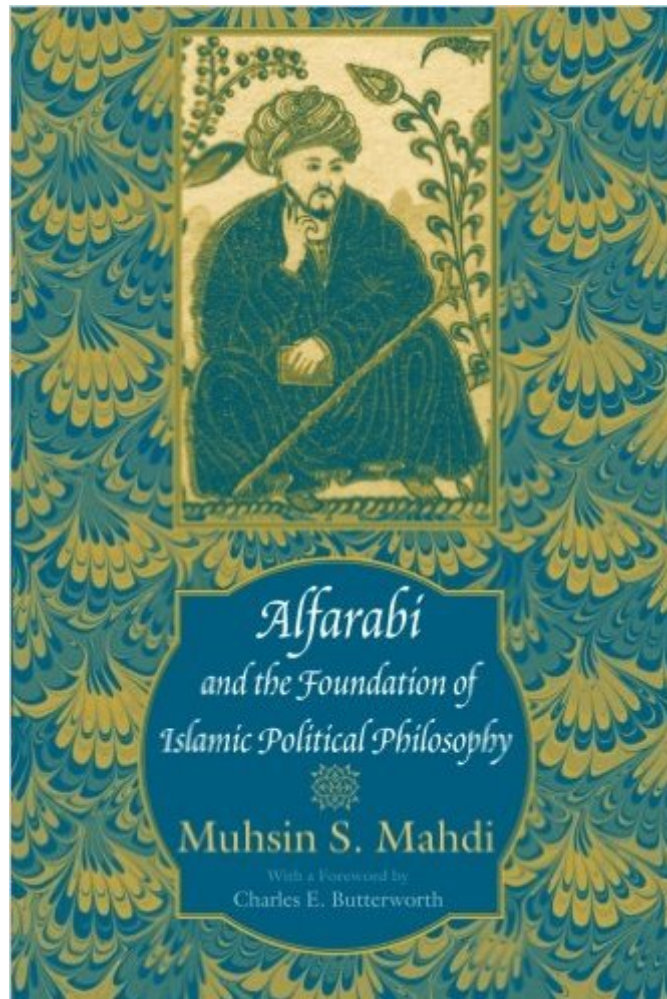


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Alfarabi And The Foundation Of Islamic Political Philosophy



Synopsis

In this work, Muhsin Mahdi "widely regarded as the preeminent scholar of Islamic political thought" distills more than four decades of research to offer an authoritative analysis of the work of Alfarabi, the founder of Islamic political philosophy. Mahdi, who also brought to light writings of Alfarabi that had long been presumed lost or were not even known, presents this great thinker as his contemporaries would have seen him: as a philosopher who sought to lay the foundations for a new understanding of revealed religion and its relation to the tradition of political philosophy. Beginning with a survey of Islamic philosophy and a discussion of its historical background, Mahdi considers the interrelated spheres of philosophy, political thought, theology, and jurisprudence of the time. He then turns to Alfarabi's concept of "the virtuous city," and concludes with an in-depth analysis of the trilogy, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*. This philosophical engagement with the writings of and about Alfarabi will be essential reading for anyone interested in medieval political philosophy.

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Customer Reviews

The radicalism and centrality of (philosophical) politics for the Muslim philosopher Farabi (around 900 CE) is the first thing that greets you, like the bristling edge of a row of thorn-bushes, in this amazing book; that uncomfortable impression never leaves you. Mahdi situates Farabi in the midst of neoplatonic philosophers intent upon harmonizing Plato and Aristotle. "Yet the complete absence from his [Farabi] authentic writings of the central Neoplatonic philosophic doctrines -of the One,

Intellect, and Soul- should have been sufficient to suggest to students of Islamic philosophy who read him that they were in the presence of a philosopher who made use of certain elements drawn from the Neoplatonic philosophic tradition but whose Neoplatonism must remain suspect."We are shown how Farabi denies(!) that revealed religion is in any real sense an innovation and we are also shown the underlying similarity between pagan and monotheistic religion. "Alfarabi's treatment of these subjects in his works on political philosophy and religion is not an innovation. It points to the similarity between the virtuous royal craft or art and the art of the lawgiver, between the virtuous city as envisioned by Plato and the religious community based on revelation." It seems that Mahdi is here indicating that Farabi said (of the Prophet) what Machiavelli said (of Moses in 'The Prince', chapter 6) many hundreds of years later. ...They were great political (and/or philosophical) innovators, nothing more. Now we find ourselves nervously wondering, has (political) philosophy then made everything? But why does (political) philosophy make what it does?

No book could be timelier: published six weeks before September 11th 2001, it is billed as the summation of the long career of the leading expert on the thought of Alfarabi, a key Muslim thinker referred to as 'The Second Master' who combined Greek philosophy with Islamic religion and established Islamic political philosophy. The death of the author last year - largely unnoticed - adds a special poignancy. Sadly, the book has numerous flaws which diminish its effect. For a start, it is not a newly-authored work distilling decades of extraordinary scholarship (as the blurb claims), but a collection of articles dating from 1963 to 1999. Mahdi's central chapter on Alfarabi's most important work, 'The Virtuous City' is a piece that first appeared in 1963 as an essay on Alfarabi in the 'History of Political Philosophy' edited by Mahdi's guru, Leo Strauss. It is therefore intended for students of politics rather than Arabist scholars. Other chapters are from specialist journals or publications and are detailed readings of Alfarabi's main political works, some of which have been translated by Mahdi but have a totally different focus to this brilliant chapter. Mahdi concentrates on Alfarabi's political thought, but surely at least some account of his epistemology and ontology should have also been presented? And if Alfarabi is a political thinker, then surely a historical context of his actual political circumstances should have been presented to amplify the dense concentration on the texts? And what of Alfarabi's influence on subsequent Islamic political thought? Netton (Alfarabi and his School, Routledge 1992) talks of an "age of Alfarabism" (CE 870-1023) and a school of Alfarabi. Nothing of this emerges in Mahdi - Alfarabi lives in a vacuum.

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