

GREEK ESSENCE AND ISLAMIC TOLERANCE:
AL-FARABI, AL-GHAZALI, IBN RUSH'D

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THE PERIOD FROM AL-FARABI to Ibn Rush'd is arguably the time of the greatest philosophical debate, if not achievement, within Islamic thought. Whether Islamic reflection on revealed law can accept the Greek notion of essence is central to this debate and to the question of tolerance; indeed, the various positions taken with regard to essence determine the nature and limits of political tolerance. The most tolerant position is the complete political rejection of essence and religion in Al-Farabi's second-best option of democracy. Least tolerant is Al-Ghazali's religiously motivated rejection of essence. The philosophical affirmation of essence by Al-Farabi (his preferred position) and Ibn Rush'd allows for toleration of religion as an inferior but necessary way of life for most human beings. Since both Al-Farabi's democracy and his political regime based on essence achieve varying degrees of tolerance by subordinating religion, the choice is between tolerance and the superiority of religion; that is, all agree that it is not possible to reconcile the supremacy of religion with a broad political tolerance.

I

Al-Farabi. Al-Farabi (870–950 A.D.) consciously adopts the Greek notion of essence. It is “Greek” inasmuch as he sees Plato and Aristotle as having one philosophy, precisely because essence is that which unifies human intellects. According to Al-Farabi, the question of tolerance, like the questions of politics in general, centers on the natural differences among human beings in their ability to grasp

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essence.¹ Very few—only philosophers—attain essence; most people are limited to images of intelligible reality:

Most men, either by nature or by habit, are unable to comprehend and cognize those things; and these are the men for whom one ought to represent the manner in which the principles of the beings, their ranks of order, the Active Intellect, and the supreme rulership, exist through things that are imitations of them.²

Since essence is one, philosophers must be in agreement with each other; since images can only be like but never be the essence, there is no one, true image, and the necessary plurality of images means that nonphilosophers can never reach the consensus of philosophers.³ The particularity, mutability, and contingency of images can only produce an approximation of the unity rooted in the universality, immutability, and necessity of essence.

Religion, for Al-Farabi, is therefore an imitation of philosophy because it never reaches beyond images of essence; it is an imaginative depiction that can be like but never be the essential reality that the philosopher knows:

Now when one acquires knowledge of the beings or receives instruction in them, if he perceives their ideas themselves with his intellect, and his assent to them is by means of certain demonstration, the science that comprises these cognitions is philosophy. But if they are known by imagining them through similitudes that imitate them, and assent to what is imagined of them is caused by persuasive methods, then the ancients call what comprises these cognitions religion. And if those intelligibles themselves are adopted, and persuasive methods are used, then the religion comprising them is called popular, generally accepted, and

¹ “The principles of the beings, their ranks of order, happiness, and the rulership of the virtuous cities, are either cognized and intellected by man, or he imagines them. To cognize them is to have their essences, as they really are, imprinted in man’s soul. To imagine them is to have imprinted in man’s soul their images, representations of them, or matters that are imitations of them.” Al-Farabi, *The Political Regime*, trans. Muhsin Madhi, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Madhi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 40.

² Ibid.

³ “Now while the meaning and essence of those things are one and immutable, the matters by which they are imitated are many and varied. Some imitate them more closely, while others do so only remotely. . . .” Ibid.

external philosophy. Therefore, according to the ancients, religion is an imitation of philosophy.⁴

Philosophy is one because essence is one, but religions are necessarily many because there is no one, true image. The philosopher is naturally fit to rule because he grasps both essence and images—what happiness is and what is like happiness.⁵ The natural inability of the vast majority of human beings to know essences forces the philosopher not only to tolerate the existence of religions but to rule the multitude through religion. Tolerance of religion follows upon the almost universal limitation of human beings to imaginative knowledge.

Some images, and hence some religions, are better than others, but the inherent plurality of religion is also compounded by the natural imaginative differences among believers in their ability to receive images. Most human beings are limited to religious belief through images, and the faculty of imagination, which is located in the brain, is limited by its physical make-up as well as by human habituation. There are, in fact, national “imaginings” produced by purely natural causes such as geography and diet, by mixed natural and conventional causes such as language, and by purely conventional habituation:

The absolutely perfect human societies are divided into nations. A nation is differentiated from another by two natural things—natural make-up and natural character—and by something that is composite (it is conventional but has a basis in natural things), which is language—I mean the idiom through which men express themselves. As a result, some nations are large and others are small.

The primary natural cause of the differences between nations in these matters consists of a variety of things. One of them is the difference in the parts of the celestial bodies that face them. . . . From this follows the difference between the parts of the earth that

⁴ Al-Farabi, *The Attainment of Happiness*, in *Al-Farabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 44.

⁵ “To be a truly perfect philosopher one has to possess both the theoretical sciences and the faculty for exploiting them for the benefit of all others according to their capacity. Were one to consider the case of the true philosopher, he would find no differences between him and the supreme ruler.” *The Attainment of Happiness*, 43–4.

“So let it be clear to you that the idea of the Philosopher, Supreme Ruler, Prince, Legislator, and Imam is but a single idea.” *Ibid*, 47.

are the nations' dwelling-places. . . . From the difference between the parts of the earth follows the difference in the vapors rising from the earth; since each vapor rises from a certain soil, it is akin to that soil. . . . From all these differences, in turn, follows the difference in the plants and in the species of irrational animals, as a result of which nations have different diets. From the difference in their diets follows the difference in the materials and crops that go into the composition of the individuals who succeed the ones who die. From this, in turn, follows the difference in the natural make-up and character.⁶

Thus the religion that is best suited for one nation is not necessarily the best for another; the natural cannot be changed, and the habitually conventional cannot easily be changed, so tolerance of diverse religions is necessary.

Tolerance of a plurality of religions, however, is the responsibility only of the philosopher ruler; religious believers are themselves incapable of it.⁷ Philosophers can be tolerant of the plurality of religions because they see the difference between essence and image and the impossibility of identifying any one religion with philosophy. Believers, on the other hand, cannot rise above the particularity of their religion to see how limited those images are. While philosophers tolerate only one philosophy, they tolerate many religions; religious believers cannot be tolerant toward other religions, nor can they be expected to understand or tolerate philosophy.

There are also limits to the philosopher ruler's toleration of religion. The philosopher ruler does not only recognize the plurality of nations and religions, he must also judge what a nation is capable of achieving.⁸ It is the duty of a philosopher ruler to move a nation by

⁶ *The Political Regime*, 32–3.

⁷ "No one can discover what is most noble according to the followers of a particular religion unless his moral virtues are the specific virtues of that religion." *Attainment of Happiness* I.2, 32.

⁸ "Then he [the supreme ruler] should inquire next into the different classes of nations by inquiring into every nation and into the states of character and the acts for which all nations are equipped by that nature which is common to them, until he comes to inquire into all or most nations. He should inquire into that in which all nations share—that is, the human nature common to them—and then into all the things that pertain specifically to every group within every nation. He should discern all of these, draw up an actual, if approximate, list of the acts and states of character with which every nation can be set aright and guided toward happiness and specify the

persuasive or warlike compulsion to the best religion of which it is capable.⁹ There is, then, a tension between the necessity of the philosopher ruler to respect the natural limitations of a people and his obligation to bring them to the highest possible degree of perfection. This dilemma can be resolved only by the prudential judgment of the philosopher ruler, who weighs the possibilities of force against the natural and conventional resistance of those being compelled.

In sum, religious tolerance comes at the price of the subordination of religion to philosophy. Religious faith, for Al-Farabi, does not reach God but only an image of God. Moreover, if religious believers could tolerate other religions, they would be philosophers, who may appear in public as believers but who, in fact, have no need for religion other than to rule those incapable of philosophy; religious tolerance belongs to philosophers because of their superiority to religion. Finally, since philosophy should rule and since there can only be one philosophy, there could be no political tolerance of dissenting philosophy because there can be no dissenting philosophy.

II

Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 A.D.) interprets the Greek notion of essence and its effect on Islamic thought through the lens of Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037 A.D.). For Ibn Sina, all essences other than that of God are possibilities that need a cause of their actual existence; they are, however, uncaused with respect to their potentiality.¹⁰ Essence, for Ibn Sina, is the intelligibility that the human

classes of persuasive argument (regarding both the theoretical and practical virtues) that ought to be employed among them. He will thus set down what every nation is capable of. . . ." *Attainment of Happiness* I.3, 39. See also n. 5 above.

⁹ "The latter is the craft of war; that is, the faculty that enables him to excel in organizing and leading armies and utilizing war implements and warlike people to conquer the nations and cities that do not submit to doing what will procure them that happiness for whose acquisition man is made. For every being is made to achieve the ultimate perfection it is susceptible of achieving according to its specific place in the order of being." *Ibid.*, 37

¹⁰ "We will now return to what we were [discussing] and say: There are specific properties that belong individually to each of the Necessary Existent

intellect discovers as simply given. What is possible for the human intellect to conceive intelligibly (universally and unchangingly) can be. Although what is possible in thought is possible in being, that is, we can pass from the universal definition in the intellect to possible being, there is no Platonic passage from the universal definition to the actual existence of essence.

For Al-Ghazali, there are two obvious problems with this notion of essence which show that Ibn Sina did not sufficiently escape the limitations of Greek thought. First, essence as actually existing is caused to be, but essence as possible—essence as essence—is uncaused. Essence as possible is the “matter” from which God creates the world through intermediaries; in other words, essence is an intelligibility and a metaphysical possibility that is given to God as well as to the human intellect. Second, God is limited by the causal necessities inherent in essence. For Ibn Sina, when the essences of fire and cotton meet, burning is a necessary effect. God’s causality ultimately makes the essences of fire and cotton to be rather than not to be, but he cannot make fire and cotton to act other than according to their essences, and thus God is neither a creator *ex nihilo* nor omnipotent.

Al-Ghazali’s philosophical critique applies Ibn Sina’s first principle to Ibn Sina’s essence itself in order to show the incoherence of created essence. Ibn Sina’s first principle claims that the conceivable is the

and the possible existent. We thus say: The things that enter existence bear a [possible] twofold division in the mind. Among them there will be that which, when considered in itself, its existence would be not necessary. It is [moreover] clear that its existence would also not be impossible, since it would not enter existence. This thing is within the bound of possibility. There will also be among them that which, when considered in itself, its existence is necessary.” Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham University Press, 2005) Book I, Chapter 6, pages 29–30.

“If its quiddity is sufficient for either of the two states of affairs [existence or nonexistence] to obtain, then that thing would be in itself of a necessary quiddity, when [the thing] has been supposed not to be necessary [in itself]. And this is contradictory. If [on the other hand] the existence of its quiddity is not sufficient [for specifying the possible with existence]—[the latter] being, rather, something whose existence is added to it—then its existence would be necessary due to some other thing. [This,] then, would be its cause.” *Ibid.*, 31.

possible, but, says Al-Ghazali, one can think of what is called the “cause” without the “effect.” One can think of fire introduced into cotton without it burning, or, likewise the cotton turning to ash without fire being introduced. The separation of “cause” and “effect” is possible in thought, and so their separation is possible in being:

The connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary, according to us. But [with] any two things, where “this” is not “that” and “that” is not “this” and where neither the affirmation of the one entails the affirmation of the other nor the negation of the one entails negation of the other, it is not a necessity of the existence of the one that the other should exist, and it is not a necessity of the nonexistence of the one that the other should not exist.¹¹

There is no necessity to think of “cause” and “effect” together, and so there is no necessity that they be together. The apparent necessity of “cause” and “effect” is not observable and is, in fact, a feeling produced by the habitual experience of the sequence in which fire is followed by cotton turning to ash.¹² The cause of the cotton turning to ash is not the essences of fire and cotton; rather, it is the will of God.¹³

¹¹ Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham University Press, 2000), Part II, Discussion 17, page 166.

¹² “For what proof is there that it is the agent? They have no proof other than observing the occurrence of the burning at the [juncture of] contact with the fire. Observation, however, [only] shows the occurrence [of burning] at [the time of the contact with the fire] but does not show the occurrence [of burning] by [the fire] and [the fact] that there is no other cause for it.” Ibid., 167.

¹³ “[F]or example, quenching of thirst and drinking, satiety and eating, burning and contact with fire, light and the appearance of the sun, death and decapitation, healing and the drinking of medicine, the purging of the bowels and the using of a purgative, and so on to [include] all [that is] observable among connected things in medicine, astronomy, arts, and crafts. Their connection is due to the prior decree of God, who creates them side by side, not to its being necessary in itself, incapable of separation. On the contrary, it is within the [divine] power to create satiety without eating, to create death without decapitation, to continue life after decapitation, and so on to all connected things. The philosophers denied the possibility of [this] and claimed it to be impossible.” Ibid., 166.

This denial of essence eliminates Al-Farabi's subordination of religion to philosophy, and so, rather than philosophy tolerating a plurality of religions, religion conditionally tolerates philosophy. Religion can tolerate philosophy only if its errors are removed, and Al-Ghazali notes twenty principal errors, seventeen of which render Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina heretics and three of which render them infidels.¹⁴ The fundamental error of Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, however, is the attempt to incorporate the Greek notion of essence. Essence must be understood as contingent not only in its existence but in its intelligible structure. What philosophers call essence is a possibility entirely contingent upon the will of God, and, since God's will can change, the intelligible structure of essence can change. Ibn Sina's critique of Greek essence did not go far enough: Ibn Sina denied that essences were identical with the necessity of existence; Al-Ghazali extends that critique to deny an internal necessity in essence grounding its intelligibility and causality.

For Al-Ghazali, God, unlike creatures, does have an essence that religion—more precisely prophecy—can reach. Contrary to Al-Farabi, religion reaches the essence of God; philosophy is at best about God and as far from the reality of God as knowing about drunkenness is from being drunk.¹⁵ Sufism, like prophecy, is a direct experience of God analogous to perception:

In human life, the intelligence is only one stage in which a person gains a new faculty of perception which allows him to take in all kinds of rational knowledge and things unknown to the realm of the senses. It is similar with prophets, who have, as it were, an extra

¹⁴ See Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error and Mystical Union with the Almighty: Al Munquidh Min Al-Dalal*, ed. Nurshif Abdul Rahim Rif'at, trans. Muhammad Abulaylah (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001), 78–9.

¹⁵ "But it became clear to me that what is proper to it can be learnt only through savoring or experiencing the mystic states of the soul, and the exchange of attributes (or behavioral attitudes). With regard to health and satisfaction, consider what a difference there is between, on the one hand, simple knowledge of their respective definitions, causes and conditions, and, on the other hand, the reality of being oneself in good health or satisfied, or between the reality of being drunk and academic knowledge of the definition of drunkenness as the state caused by vapors rising from the stomach to the brain." Ibid., 91.

eye which can perceive things which are invisible and beyond rational understanding.¹⁶

The Sufi can achieve a suprarational perception that is as superior to rational thought as rational thought is to sensory perception. It is a suprasensory perception because it is not limited to the objects of sensation; it is suprarational because it is immediate intellection rather than demonstrative.

Now a toleration of multiple religions may seem to follow from the analogy of prophetic and mystical experience to perception, since a perceiver is always limited by his perspective and by what the perceivable manifests. If a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences is possible, then there could be a multiplicity of prophecies and religions, particularly since God is free to make Himself perceptible or not and by whatever degree. Nevertheless, Al-Ghazali is clear that over and above the multiplicity of religious experiences stands the Qur'an, which is eternal, unchanging, and uncreated:

The Qur'an is read by tongues, written in books, and remembered in the heart, yet it is, nevertheless, uncreated and without beginning, subsisting in the Essence of Allah, not subject to division and or separation through its transmission to the heart and paper. Musa—upon him peace—heard the Speech of Allah without sound and without letter, just as the righteous sees the Essence of Allah Most High in the Hereafter, without substance or its quality.¹⁷

There are no necessary essences in creation; the Qur'an, however, is simply given and judges not only philosophy but religious experience. As for Al-Farabi there is one philosophy because essence is one, so for Al-Ghazali there is one true religion because the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated. No mystical experience can contradict the Qur'an, and the prophetic experience of Muhammad is thus a universal, unchanging, and necessary standard.

Recently Frank Griffel has argued that, in the seventeenth discussion of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Al-Ghazali does not

¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁷ Quoted from Ahmad Ibn Naqib Al-Misri's *The Reliance of the Traveller*, ed. and trans. Noah Ha Mim Keller (Evanston: Sunna Books, 1991) book v, 1.8.

deny the existence of secondary causes or created essences.¹⁸ Indeed, Al-Ghazali proposes two positions that are compatible with the omnipotence of God and the possibility of miracles: one denies the existence of essences and secondary causality and the other affirms the existence of essences and secondary causality. Al-Ghazali's first position, which we have already seen, negates essence. The second position is between the utter contingency of essence (Al-Ghazali's first position) and its universal necessity with regard to intelligibility and causal power (Ibn Sina's position): essence is and has a causal necessity within a possible world, but that possible world is merely one possibility and thus not universal or necessary.¹⁹ In this world, fire burns cotton; in another possible world, it may not. Essence is limited to a possible world, and yet within that limited context it has an intelligible structure and causal power. In this second position, the contingency would seem to belong principally to the possible world of which the essence is a part, and that is sufficient to preserve the omnipotence of God and the possibility of miracles.

Michael Marmura argues that Al-Ghazali does not himself ascribe to the second position; that is, Al-Ghazali does not remain neutral about the two possibilities.²⁰ The purpose of the second

¹⁸ "A close reading of the seventeenth discussion shows, however, that on its two dozen or so pages, al-Ghazali does not deny the existence of causal connections—and thus of causality—and he certainly does not argue that efficient causality as an explanation of physical change is false." Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 147.

"The seventeenth discussion leaves open whether al-Ghazali subscribes to any one of them. Although the first of his alternative explanations denies the existence of natures, meaning the unchanging character of the relation between cause and effect, the second alternative accepts that natures do exist." Ibid., 150

¹⁹ "For Avicenna, there can be no world alternative to the one that exists.

". . . [A]l-Ghazali wishes to express that God could have chosen to create an alternative world in which the causal connections are different from those of this world. Al-Ghazali upholds the contingency of the world against the necessitarianism of Avicenna. For al-Ghazali, this world is the contingent effect of God's free will and His deliberate choice between alternative worlds." Ibid., 173.

²⁰ "This necessarily negates the second causal theory, the modified Aristotelian theory, introduced in the *Tahafut*. Whatever other reason there might be for introducing it in the *Tahafut*, it is clearly introduced there for the

position is to show the absurdity of the philosopher's denying miracles; that is, even if one were to accept the existence of essences and their causal powers, miracles are not impossible. If one begins with the philosophers' premise of essence, one cannot conclude to the impossibility of miracles or the omnipotence of God. The purpose of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* is negative—to refute the philosophers. Al-Ghazali's own account appears in the sequel, *Moderation in Belief*, in which he unambiguously denies the existence of essences and their causal powers.²¹

Even if one accepts Griffel's interpretation, there is minimal effect on the account of tolerance. Ibn Sina says that we can view essence in three ways: (1) absolutely, that is, in itself, (2) in things, and (3) in the mind. Al-Ghazali's second position in the seventeenth discussion of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* effectively adds a fourth: essence viewed within the context of a possible world. Essence viewed from this perspective loses its universality, unchangingness, and necessity. The world as merely one possible alternative that is dependent upon the will of God introduces possibility into the nature of essence: fire need not burn cotton. What stands above all possible worlds and all intelligible and causal contingency is the Qur'an, which alone is unqualifiedly universal, unchanging, and necessary. Al-Ghazali thus remains the reverse of Al-Farabi: the inferiority of religion to essences is replaced by the

sake of argument, to demonstrate that even if one allows a measure of causal efficacy in things, one can still allow the possibility (denied by the philosophers) of certain kinds of miracles." Michael Marmura, introduction to *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, xxv.

The same arguments can be found in Michael Marmura, "Al-Ghazali's Second Causal Theory in the 17th Discussion of his *Tahafut*," in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Delmar, New York: Caravan, 1981), 85–112.

²¹ "To which, then, of the two theories does al-Ghazali actually subscribe? It is here that the *Iqtisad* provides the answer. For in it al-Ghazali affirms without any equivocation the Ash'arite causal theory. Divine power is pervasive and is the direct cause of each and every created existent and each and every temporal event." Marmura, introduction to *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, xxv.

"In the *Tahafut* al-Ghazali intended to refute and negate; in the *Itqisad*, to build and affirm what he declared to be the true doctrine, a point to which I shall shortly return." Ibid., xviii.

inferiority of essences (and hence philosophy) to religious revelation. The Greek features of essence have been transferred to the Qur'an, the unsurpassable guide to what can and cannot be tolerated.

III

Ibn Rush'd (Averroes). Ibn Rush'd's (1126–1198 A.D.) *Decisive Treatise* claims to resolve definitively the conflict between philosophy and religion, or more precisely between philosophers and theologians, but it does so from a legal argument within one particular religion rather than from Al-Farabi's more universal approach to philosophy and religion.²² Instead of treating the relationship of philosophers and theologians directly to each other, he treats both in relation to the Qur'an and shows there that the law tolerates both philosophy and religion because it commands each according to a person's natural capacity.²³

Whereas Al-Farabi emphasized the difference in the objects of philosophy and religion—essence and images—Ibn Rush'd stresses their unity in the Qur'an as a law that governs both. Like Al-Farabi, he clearly argues for the superiority of philosophy over faith, and this superiority gives the philosopher the freedom to interpret the Qur'an allegorically when the literal meaning contradicts the necessary conclusions of philosophical demonstration: "The reason an apparent and an inner sense are set down in the Law is the difference in people's innate dispositions and the variance in their innate capacities for assent."²⁴ He concludes that philosophers deserve special tolerance within Islam for two reasons. First, their conclusions are necessitated by demonstrative reasoning, and so philosophers are compelled to obey the authority of reason that the Qur'an has assigned

²² "Now, the goal of this statement is for us to investigate, from the perspective of Law-based reflection, whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is permitted, prohibited, or commanded—and this as a recommendation or as an obligation—by the law." Ibn Rush'd, *Decisive Treatise* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2001), 1.

²³ "And it is evident that this manner of reflection the Law calls for and urges is the most complete kind of reflection by means of the most complete kind of syllogistic reasoning and is the one called 'demonstration.'" Ibid., 2–3.

²⁴ Ibid., 10.

to them.²⁵ Second, philosophers often investigate theoretical matters, such as the three areas in which Al-Ghazali found Ibn Sina to be an infidel, where there is no unanimity in interpretation of the Qur'an, and so the philosopher's allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an in nonmoral matters ought to be tolerated.²⁶ The same tolerance does not apply to ordinary believers, who must always interpret the Qur'an literally. This tolerance of philosophy, however, is conditioned upon its being hidden. Philosophers (and theologians) should not divulge philosophical methods or privileges to ordinary believers; if philosophers use their freedom correctly, believers will be unaware of philosophical reasoning and allegorical interpretation.

Ibn Rush'd goes on to introduce the notion of essence in the *Decisive Treatise*, not as the basis for differentiating philosophy and religion, but as a way of reconciling the differences between philosophers and theologians; essence, properly understood, will allow for mutual respect and tolerance between philosophers and theologians. According to the theologians, the orthodox position, especially with regard to the question whether the world is eternal or created, is radically different from that of the philosophers; this, says Ibn Rush'd, is an exaggeration:

As for the question whether the world is eternal or has been generated, the disagreement between the Ash'arite dialectical theologians and the ancient sages almost comes back, in my view, to a disagreement about naming, especially with respect to some of the Ancients. That is because they agree that there are three sorts of existing things: two extremes and one intermediate between the extremes. And they agree about naming the two extremes but disagree about the intermediate.²⁷

²⁵ "And we affirm definitely that, whenever the demonstration leads to something differing from the apparent sense of the Law, that apparent sense admits of interpretation according to the rule of interpretation in Arabic." Ibid., 9.

²⁶ "Because of this idea, Muslims have formed a consensus that it is not obligatory for all the utterances of the Law to be taken in their apparent sense, nor for all of them to be drawn out from their apparent sense by means of interpretation, though they disagree about which ones are to be interpreted and which are not interpreted." Ibid., 10.

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

Mediating the dispute like a judge, Ibn Rush'd begins by establishing the points of agreement and disagreement. The philosophers and theologians agree that there are three basic classes of beings, and they are in complete accord on the two extremes among these classes. Disagreement is limited to the intermediate class. Moreover, this disagreement is in fact more linguistic than real, and he believes that correct definitions will go a long way towards resolving the dispute.²⁸

The first extreme among these three classes consists of sublunar bodies. There are three characteristics of this class of beings: (a) their existence is caused, (b) they are produced from matter, and (c) their existence is preceded by time.²⁹ Theologians and philosophers call this class of beings "originated." The opposite extreme is God, and the opposite characteristics apply to Him: (a) His existence is uncaused, (b) He is not produced from matter or from anything at all, and (c) His existence is not preceded by time.³⁰ Theologians and philosophers also agree that this class should be called "eternal." The intermediate class refers to the world as a whole.³¹ It is characterized by the fact that (a) its existence is caused, (b) it is not produced from matter or from

²⁸ Beyond the contention with regard to names, there is also disagreement about the temporal duration of the past. For both philosophers and theologians, future time is infinite. Theologians and Plato, however, maintain that past time is finite, while the Aristotelians hold that past time is infinite. This, then, is a real rather than a verbal disagreement. Nevertheless, Ibn Rush'd contends that its significance is minimal and that the agreement of philosophers and theologians is more important, especially with regard to the view held by philosophers and theologians that the existence of the world is caused.

²⁹ "One extreme is an existent thing that exists from something other than itself and by something—I mean, by an agent cause and from matter. And time precedes—I mean, its existence. This is the case of bodies whose coming into being is apprehended by sense perception, plants, and so forth. The Ancients and the Ash'arites both agree in naming this sort of existing things 'generate.'" Ibid.

³⁰ "The extreme opposed to this is an existent thing that has not come into existence from something or by something and that time does not precede. About this, too, both factions agree in naming it 'eternal.' This existent thing is apprehended by demonstration; it is God . . ." Ibid., 15.

³¹ "The sort of being between these two extremes is an existent thing that has not come into existence from something and that time does not precede, but that does come into existence by something—I mean, by an agent. This is the world as a whole." Ibid., 15.

anything, and (c) it is not preceded by time. Here there is no agreement about naming.

Confusion stems from the similarity of the intermediate position to both extremes.³² The intermediate class—the world as a whole—has in common with God that it is not produced from matter and that it is not preceded by time. It has in common with the opposite extreme—material substances—that its existence is caused. The result of this similarity to opposite extremes is that the philosophers emphasize the similarity of the world as a whole to God, and consequently they call it “eternal.” Theologians, on the other hand, stress the similarity of the world as a whole to material things, and thus they call it “generated.” The solution to the dispute between philosophers and theologians concerning the temporal classification of the world as a whole is now obvious: both philosophers and theologians must balance the similarity of the world as a whole to the opposite extremes with consideration of its uniqueness.

The intermediate class, however, that Ibn Rush’d describes is actually much closer to Ibn Sina’s understanding of essence than it is to his own more Aristotelian approach. For Ibn Sina, (a) the existence of essence is caused, and (b) it is not produced from matter, although it is produced from essence as possibility, and it is (c) eternally caused to be by God’s essential activity. At the very least, Ibn Rush’d’s own view is that matter is eternal and uncreated; if the world comes to be, it comes to be from matter. Avicennian essence is a potentiality that is not matter, and thus it better reconciles the philosophical view that the world cannot come to be from nothing with the religious view that God does not create the world from a preexisting matter.

Although Ibn Rush’d uses Ibn Sina’s essence in the *Decisive Treatise* as a means of achieving consensus between philosophers and theologians, he clearly rejects Ibn Sina’s account of essence in his

³² “So it is evident that this latter existent thing has been taken as resembling the existing thing that truly comes into being and the eternally existing thing. Those overwhelmed by its resemblance to the eternal rather than to what is generated name it ‘eternal,’ and those overwhelmed by its resemblance to what is generated name it ‘generated.’ But, in truth, it is not truly generated, nor is it truly eternal. For what is truly generated is necessarily corruptible, and what is truly eternal has no cause.” Ibid., 15.

Long Commentary on the Physics,³³ where the world's potentiality is defined through matter.³⁴ God's existence, Ibn Rush'd claims, can only be proved in physics, and Ibn Sina distorted Aristotle and philosophy by confusing it with religion when he proved the existence of God in metaphysics through the necessity of a cause of the existence of essence. Ibn Sina's notion of essence is useful to Ibn Rush'd as a mediator between the philosophers and the theologians, but Ibn Rush'd is in fact critical of what he sees as the theological innovation in Ibn Sina's notion of essence. This mixture of religion and philosophy is precisely what Ibn Rush'd thinks must be avoided and yet, since Ibn Sina is the chief opponent of Al-Ghazali, Avicennian essence is rhetorically useful as a means of arguing that philosophy and religion are not so far apart. Implied, then, is also the understanding that a strictly philosophical approach to essence is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with religion. The necessity in essence that makes the world intelligible for philosophers is contrary

³³ "Metaphysics accepts its first principles of motion from physics, and in no way does metaphysics demonstrate the existence of a first mover; rather, it accepts that as proved by physics. That which Avicenna thought, i.e., that metaphysics ought to demonstrate the existence of the first principle, is false. And his method, which he imagined that he discovered and that he used in his book—Al-Ghazali likewise following him—is tenuous and in no way demonstrative." *Aristotelis de physico auditu libro octo cum Averrois Cordubensis variis in eosdem*, vol. 4 of *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis*, Venetiis: Apud Juntas, 1662-1574 (Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1962), book VIII, textus 3 (my translation).

³⁴ "[I]t is necessary, therefore, that potentiality to that which is generated exists in it before it is generated. For example, that which is burnt and becomes fire was naturally able to be burnt. And that potentiality not only precedes according to time the passion existing in the patient, but it also precedes according to time the active power in the agent. For that which burns will be naturally able to burn before burning. . . . I say, according to this exposition, that Al-Farabi and others understood this chapter such that he [Aristotle] applied this definition of motion in order to state that potentiality is prior to actuality. And this is not proper to motion insofar as it is motion, but it is proper to the new event insofar as it is a new event, i.e., as potentiality, and possibility precedes the new according to time. . . . And in accord with this, we find Alexander in his book on principles applying the definition of motion in order to declare that motion is eternal." *Ibid.*, book VIII, textus 4 (my translation).

to the degree of contingency that is required by the religious believer's literal reading of the Qur'an.

IV

Al-Farabi and democratic tolerance. Al-Farabi provides a second—indeed a second-best—approach to tolerance through his account of democracy in *The Political Regime*; that is, a purely artificial political unity is possible without regard to created or uncreated essence that tolerates, within limits, both philosophy and religion. A truly philosophical political unity is impossible because few human beings are capable of knowing essences. Religious unity is likewise problematic because of the natural differences among peoples and nations in their imaginative capacities. Democracy resolves these problems through an artificial unity of tolerance that allows all philosophy and religion by politically excluding philosophy and religion, that is, by excluding all created and uncreated essences as a basis for law.

The virtuous regime, which guarantees the greatest possible degree of happiness to its citizens, is based on the perfection of human nature; the human essence is the “law” by which the philosopher ruler governs. Ignorant regimes are unaware that the final cause of the human being is intellectual and moral virtue; some ignorant regimes place happiness in mere sufficiency, others place it in wealth, or sensual pleasure, or honor, or despotic power. Democracy is one of the ignorant regimes, but it rejects any final cause other than freedom; each individual is the judge of what constitutes happiness:

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. Its citizens are equal and their laws say that no man is in any way at all better than any other man. Its citizens are free to do whatever they like; and no one, be he one of them or an outsider, has any claim to authority unless he works to enhance their freedom. Consequently, they develop many kinds of morals, inclinations, and desires, and they take pleasure in countless things. . . . This city brings together

the groups—both the base and the noble—that existed separately in other cities.³⁵

Contrary to the natural inequality of human beings, democracy celebrates equality. Contrary to the rule of nature by natural rulers, in democracy there is really no rule and no rulers because the principal task of the democratic rulers is to ensure that neither philosophy nor religion rule.³⁶ The law preserves the freedom of the individual to choose a final cause, and so the democratic city is not so much a city as a plurality of cities in which one individual pursues the necessities of life, another wealth, another sensual pleasure, and so on. Hence there is more good and more evil in a democracy because there is more of everything.³⁷ That there is no natural religious unity based on imagination in a democracy is proven by the high degree of immigration and intermarriage. Philosophers are tolerated so long as they do not claim the natural authority to rule. Nothing is recognized as prior to the political unity built around tolerance. Al-Farabi's democracy rejects created essences, but, unlike Al-Ghazali, this political rejection of essence establishes toleration of all philosophies and religions.

Although Al-Farabi's democracy tolerates both philosophy and religion, it is probably more acceptable to Al-Farabi's philosopher than

³⁵ Al-Farabi, *The Political Regime*, 50.

³⁶ "Those from among the multitude of this city, who possess whatever the rulers possess, have the upper hand over those that are called their rulers. Those who rule them do so by the will of the ruled, and the rulers follow the wishes of the ruled. Close investigation of their situation would reveal that, in truth, there is no distinction between ruler and ruled among them. However, they praise and honor those who lead the citizens of the city to freedom and to whatever the citizens like and desire, and who safeguard the citizens' freedom and their varied and different desires against [infringement] by one another and by outside enemies; and who limit their own desires to bare necessities." Ibid.

³⁷ "Consequently, it is quite possible that, with the passage of time, virtuous men will grow up in it. Thus it may include philosophers, rhetoricians, and poets, dealing with all kinds of things. It is also possible to glean from it certain [men who form] parts of the virtuous city. Therefore, this city possesses both good and evil to a greater degree than the rest of the ignorant cities. The bigger, the more civilized, the more populated, the more productive, and the more perfect it is, the more prevalent and the greater the good and evil it possesses." Ibid., 5.

to Al-Ghazali's believer. Even in the virtuous regime, Al-Farabi's philosopher cannot rule through essence, that is, as a philosopher; he has to rule through religious images, which he does not need and in which he does not believe. In other words, he must adapt to most human beings' natural inability to be united with each other directly through essence. If even in the virtuous regime the philosopher must resign himself to matter's resistance to form, the freedom to pursue philosophy in a democracy frees him from the burden of ruling, although it also prevents him from attaining the perfection of perfecting others. The philosopher must always accept that human nature both commands perfection and limits the ability of most people to achieve perfection.

For Al-Ghazali, there is no such resistance of matter to form; nature cannot resist or limit the divine command to perfection. Al-Farabi's democratic regime creates a wholly artificial world in which the human being stands in the place of God. For Al-Ghazali, the natural world is, from the divine perspective, one set of possibilities among many that can be chosen and unchosen by God. Inside Al-Farabi's democracy, what are given to the individual human being are possibilities that can be chosen and unchosen. According to Al-Ghazali, the Qur'an, however, is not a possibility; rather, it is that which is eternally and unchangingly given. Al-Farabi's philosopher can see democracy as second best—as adapting to the human nature that is common to all and yet unequal in all—but Al-Ghazali's believer sees no such necessity to which he or the divine command must adapt.

In his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, Ibn Rush'd concedes that the virtuous regime can arise from democracy.³⁸ Nevertheless, he sees tyranny as much more likely:

He [Plato] said that the democratic cities mostly change into tyranny and the tyrannical cities. . . . [T]he cause of the change of democratic lordship into the tyrannical lordship is only excess in quest of freedom and the limitless increase of it. For whatever is

³⁸ "Unless strengthened by virtue or honor, it perishes rapidly, as is the case with democratic cities existing in this time of ours and in that which preceded [it]. Out of this city will come forth the virtuous city and the other kinds of these cities because they exist in it potentially since all the states of the soul exist in this city." *Ibn Rush'd on Plato's Republic*, trans. Ralph Lerner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), third treatise, pages 127–8.

done in excess goes beyond its measure and is changed into the opposite.³⁹

Unguided by essence, the individual in a democracy passes through the flux of possibilities aimlessly choosing and unchoosing. Since the absence of essence means that there is no limit or measure to one's choices, democracy becomes its opposite—tyranny. Total freedom becomes total slavery because there is no essence to preserve the freedom. Ibn Rush'd thus does not share the modicum of hope that Al-Farabi has for democracy; the tolerance of philosophy and religion that democracy allows through the absence of essence will become intolerance.

V

Conclusion. For Al-Farabi, all religions are inferior to philosophy (although some are closer than others) because essences are superior to images; philosophers ought to tolerate religion because nature limits most human beings to religion, and philosophers ought to tolerate a multiplicity of religions because neither religion nor the capacity of a people to receive images is universal. Tolerance of other religions by a believer is impossible, because believers cannot rise above the particularity of their own religion. For Al-Ghazali, philosophy is inferior to suprarational religious perception, and yet philosophy should be allowed insofar as it is not false—so long as it does not affirm created essence as a limit to divine omnipotence. According to Ibn Rush'd, the Qur'an not only allows but commands pursuit of both superior philosophy and inferior belief. He is doubtful about the possibility of religious tolerance of philosophy; believers cannot understand philosophy and so the only way that they can be tolerant of it is to be ignorant of it. Philosophy must remain hidden (as essence is), and peace between philosophers and theologians depends upon diverting attention from the degree to which the Greek notion of essence is incompatible with the literal meaning of revelation. In Al-Farabi's democracy, negation of essence as a standard for law and political unity allows pursuit of any religion or philosophy, since there

³⁹ Ibid., 130.

is no longer any public standard for truth. Such tolerance is neither philosophical nor religious—it originates in neither philosophy nor religion—but is purely political.

Thus the political question of tolerance centers on the intersection of epistemology and metaphysics with regard to essence. In Al-Farabi's account, essences are the content of human intellectual knowledge and guides to the human activities that result in happiness; as such, they are grounds for compulsion rather than tolerance. In addition, however, Al-Farabi argues that there are natural epistemological limits to the attainment of essence, and these are grounds for tolerance. For Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, there can be no such essential or natural metaphysical limits, since there are no created limits to the divine will, but the Qur'an is a supraessential limit that guides human knowledge and action. It follows that the only epistemological limits that could ground tolerance are ignorance of the Qur'an and the degree of tolerance mandated by the Qur'an itself. Al-Farabi's democracy is based on a political rather than a natural ignorance of essence; that is, democracy is a communally willed, artificial ignorance of essence that allows an almost limitless toleration of philosophy and religion.

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