

The Philosophical Foundations of the Idea of Iran in Medieval Islamic Governmentality

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Introduction

A philosophical approach to politics is a serious and purposeful endeavor. A thinker who devotes themselves to political philosophy first contemplates with the goal of uncovering the truths governing political life, and second, proceeds from the assumption that politics is not merely defined within the realm of practice but constitutes a form of philosophical life in itself. It can therefore be said that every political philosophy is necessarily a part of political thought, but not every political thought falls within the domain of political philosophy (Strauss, 1994: 2).

This article aims to explore the construction of political philosophy in post-ancient Iran, that is, the Sassanid era, around the challenging concept of governance, by attending to the nature of the political through an awareness of the transformations in political action. It further examines how this body of knowledge was transmitted to the medieval Islamic period through the Translation Movement, in order to address the crisis of Islamic governance.

Theoretical Framework

The central concern of this research is governance, which manifests in practice on the basis of specific intellectual foundations. "Governing" or "ruling" refers to a set of institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations, and techniques that enable the exercise of a particular and complex form of power. According to Foucault, this mode of operation is a tendency that, throughout the West and from ancient times, has incessantly led to the supremacy of a type of power that can be called "government." Government was a structure that, drawing upon all other forms of power, namely sovereignty and discipline, produced a coherent set of governmental apparatuses grounded in and dependent

upon knowledge. Foucault emphasizes the significance of a process in modern times that he terms the “governmentalization of the state,” which he contrasts with the “satiation of society.” The satiation of society refers to state intervention in all aspects of life, a model that aligns with the logic of sovereignty. In the model of governance, by contrast, the operative techniques aim primarily at producing a condition of “self-regulation,” or more precisely, processes of “self-constraint.”

Foucault’s concept of “governmentality” can be situated in relation to three categories, namely the state, power, and the subject, through the connections established between techniques of domination. From this perspective, Foucault introduces government as a form of power that seeks to displace domination by reconstituting the very identification of power (Dean, 2017: 135). The art of governing, in its exercise of power over a territory and its inhabitants, expresses sovereignty. The ultimate objective of politics, understood in this sense, is to establish a basis for the legitimacy of state power, which can be secured through the consent and satisfaction of those who inhabit the territory. Prevailing political theory rests on the assumption that power is embodied in state sovereignty (Ibid.: 52). Foucault, however, decouples power from the axis of sovereignty and the state. Political theories of the past two centuries have sought to locate the people as the source of the legitimacy of power, such that the people retain the capacity to dismiss the state if it deviates from agreed principles and to improve conditions through political change. Foucault rejects this view, asserting that “power should not be sought only within the realm of state sovereignty. Power is dispersed throughout all levels of society and cannot be found solely within the state apparatus” (Ibid.: 62). When addressing the smallest socio-political institution, Foucault consequently invokes the microphysics of power, meaning that he never approaches power at a macro level. Within this framework, a comprehensive theory of power cannot be reached, because power is in no way universal, timeless, or absolute; rather, it is operative in various and context-specific forms. In this perspective, sovereignty is the imposition of a law through which power is exercised, a power that inherently institutionalizes the orientation toward competence. From this standpoint, the question becomes: what theoretical understanding of governmentality, within the framework of the three elements of state, power, and subject, can be revealed as the foundation of practical action in reality? This question is explored through philosophical reflection on two historical periods, namely post-ancient Iran and the medieval Islamic era.

Genealogical Method

The genealogical method, unlike traditional historical approaches, does not seek any enduring essence, unchangeable nature, or sacred truth. Instead, it focuses on uncovering the gaps and discontinuities within the historical process. From this perspective, no fundamental or immutable rules exist; accordingly, every rule is understood as an interpretation that those in power have invested with value and practical significance within their discursive system. The further one pursues the interpretation and analysis of a text, the further one moves from any recoverable essence, arriving instead at the recognition that all interpretations have emerged from sources of power and are nothing more than constructs of a system of domination (Dreyfus, 2000: 37). Genealogy seeks to expose the historical events that have been presented as truths, to reveal the deceptions embedded in history, to trace the lineage of phenomena elevated to the status of truth, and ultimately to illuminate the role of the will to power in these historical processes. Through this approach, the strategies of power and the operations of the system of domination are dissected and analyzed. The aim is to identify the tactics, instruments, and

functions of power, as well as the network of relations through which they are governed (Ahmadpour, 2018: 483).

These relations are observable in the medieval Islamic period under the influence of the diverse ethnicities, cultures, and languages that underwent conversion to Islam. The transition from the Prophetic era to the Caliphate era, alongside the expansion of Islam into new territories, produced significant transformations in the Islamic social system and generated new formations of power in the political arena. This process shaped a series of historical events that, in the medieval period, gave rise to the intellectual and practical consolidation of Islamic governance. A genealogical re-examination of these events compels an analysis of the strategic relations of power and the system of domination operative in the late Umayyad period and at the height of the Abbasid era. Through this lens, one can apprehend the power-knowledge dynamics that manifested as a distinctive process of governance thinking. This governance thinking, embodied in the tactics, instruments, and functions of the power network, produced the knowledge necessary for managing this society. The system of knowledge that emerged from the semantic network of power relations in the medieval period gave rise to a new form of governance thinking, which this article explores through philosophical reflection on that semantic network.

Iranian Governance Thought in the Political Philosophy of the Sassanian Era

No nation or society generates thought and ideas in isolation; rather, it draws on the experiences of predecessors and the achievements of other nations. The Sassanid Empire, emerging from the social and political crisis precipitated by Alexander's invasion and shaped by its encounter with Greek and Roman ideas and cultures, sought to rethink and reconstitute the concept of Iranian governance as it had been expressed during the Achaemenid era. The fragmentation of political authority into feudal structures and the proliferation of ungrounded diversity plunged Iranian society, which was fundamentally unified beneath its diversity, into a condition of acute crisis. The limited literacy prevalent across different social classes further entrenched Iranian society within an elitist framework. Consequently, the efforts of Sassanid rulers, undertaken in collaboration with the Zoroastrian priesthood, to construct and articulate a coherent model of governance thought encountered numerous challenges and unresolved questions.

Within this context, beginning from the reign of Shapur, the Translation Movement became the primary vehicle through which the experiences and intellectual achievements of other nations were appropriated across various fields of knowledge, including politics, in order to produce a system of knowledge that would enable the rethinking and reconstitution of Iranian governance thought. This process reached its culmination during the reign of Khosrow Anushirvan, who, by virtue of his philosophical inclinations, provided systematic philosophical justification for many of the religious dilemmas and political challenges confronting the empire. This intellectual tendency was given philosophical form by Iranian Nestorian and Syriac-speaking Christian scholars, who engaged with Sassanid religious and political dilemmas through the conceptual framework of Neo-Platonism. The translation of numerous Greek philosophical works, ranging from Aristotle's logical treatises to a broad range of philosophical texts, into Syriac at institutions such as Nisibis, Edessa, and Gundeshapur gradually transformed Syriac into the preeminent scientific language of the Iranian Empire (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002: 447).

Historical Context of the Formation of Sassanian Governance Philosophy

Regarding the relationship between Iranians and philosophical knowledge, various hypotheses have been proposed, ranging from the claim that philosophical thought was absent in ancient Iran to the view that Iranians played a foundational role in its emergence. Thinkers such as Cornford, and even Plato in his theory of Forms, have been regarded as influenced by Zoroastrian conceptions of abstract entities and the spiritual realm. Moreover, Parmenides is also believed to have had intellectual connections with Iranian thought. Historical accounts further suggest that Plotinus joined the Roman army with the intention of being deployed to the eastern front in order to establish contact with Iran and gain access to its philosophical traditions. During the early Christian centuries, Zoroaster was known throughout much of the world more as a philosopher than as a prophet. Such evidence may be considered indicative of the existence and influence of philosophical knowledge in Iran (Nasr, 2011, pp. 272–273).

During the Sassanian period, a number of texts were produced from the perspective of Zoroastrian religious and philosophical thought. Works such as the *Bundahishn*¹, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*², and *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*³, as well as portions of the third and fourth books of the *Dēnkard*⁴, demonstrate traces of philosophical reflection through their engagement with metaphysical, cosmological, and ethical issues from the standpoint of practical philosophy.

In the realm of political philosophy, the *Khwadāynāmag*⁵ literature of the Sassanian era occupies a particularly important position. Drawing upon the philosophical ideas embedded in these texts, later Islamic thinkers reported and interpreted Iranian views. The division of existence into the realms of light and darkness, the perpetual struggle between good and evil in the material world, the immaterial nature of the spiritual realm, the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds, explanations of humanity's position within both realms, the effects of human actions upon spiritual existence, and

1. *Bundahišn* (*Bundahishn*):

A major Middle Persian (Pahlavi) Zoroastrian cosmological text, whose title means "Primal Creation." It presents Zoroastrian doctrines concerning the creation of the world, cosmology, anthropology, and the struggle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman.

2. *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*:

A ninth-century Middle Persian Zoroastrian work, traditionally attributed to Manuščihr, consisting of theological, ethical, and legal questions and answers concerning religious doctrine and practice. The title may be translated as "Religious Judgments" or "Religious Decisions."

3. *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*:

A Middle Persian Zoroastrian compendium attributed to the priest Zādspram (9th century CE). The work summarizes cosmological, mythological, and eschatological traditions derived from the Avesta and later Zoroastrian literature. Its title means "Selections of Zādspram."

4. *Dēnkard* (*Dēnkart*):

One of the most important encyclopedic works of Zoroastrianism in Middle Persian, compiled during the ninth and tenth centuries CE. The *Dēnkard* preserves extensive information on Zoroastrian theology, cosmology, ethics, jurisprudence, and lost portions of the Avesta. Its title is commonly translated as "Acts of the Religion" or "Religious Deeds."

5. *Khwadāynāmag* ("Book of Kings"), a lost Middle Persian chronicle of the late Sasanian period, which provided the foundation for many later Persian and Arabic histories of pre-Islamic Iran, including Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*, and preserved traditions concerning Iranian kingship, genealogy, and national history.

the relationship between time and eternity constitute examples of philosophical themes reflected in these Sassanian sources. Alongside Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism also possessed substantial philosophical dimensions. This suggests that, during the Sassanian period, intellectual challenges arising from political transformations encouraged the spread of philosophical reflection as a means of addressing political, social, and ideological problems. Consequently, movements such as Manichaeism and Mazdakism employed philosophical reasoning to justify many of their doctrines and positions.

During the reign of Khosrow I (Khosrow Anushirvan), a group of Greek philosophers sought refuge in the Sassanian Empire, creating a favorable context for articulating and legitimizing the foundations of government through the intertwined concepts of religion and politics. Anushirvan himself made considerable efforts to foster and expand philosophical learning by establishing educational institutions in Nisibis, Edessa, and Gundeshapur that were designed to address the intellectual requirements of governance (Daneshpazhouh, 1357, p. 1). The Greek historian Agathias expressed astonishment at the fact that Anushirvan was familiar with the philosophical ideas of Aristotle and Plato. According to his account, Anushirvan commissioned the translation of Greek philosophical texts into Pahlavi for his own study. One of the philosophers, Priscianus, composed a treatise entitled Priscianus' Answers to the Questions of Khosrow, the King of Kings, which reflects the king's interest in philosophical inquiry and his engagement in discussions with philosophers. An incomplete Latin translation of this work survives today (Tafazzoli, 1378, pp. 159–160).

Furthermore, Ibn al-Nadim refers to sources describing exchanges of philosophical ideas between the Iranian and Roman monarchs. According to these accounts, the Roman king would send philosophical questions to the Iranian king through Hippocrates. The flourishing of scientific activity and the growing interest in philosophical debate facilitated political relations among states during this period. For example, in 532 CE, Anushirvan issued a decree granting Iranian philosophers' freedom of passage to Rome (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002, p. 450).

Revisiting Sasanian Political Philosophy Focused on the Iranian Concept of Governance

When social challenges attain sufficient magnitude, they create the conditions for philosophical reflection and systematic thought. Thinking through a problem of this order is an effort to resolve it, an intellectual orientation that guides and organizes political action on the basis of considered reflection. The rise of the Sassanid dynasty on the Iranian plateau was directed toward the revival of an idealized conception of monarchical governance, an objective that was itself a response to the social, political, and religious challenges generated by the encounter with Greek political thought. The most consequential of these challenges were the fragmentation of centralized power and the emergence of competing interpretations of Zoroastrianism, developments that undermined public welfare and severed the organic bonds between society and political authority. When the Sassanids sought to consolidate power, they confronted a series of intersecting crises, chief among which were those of legitimacy and governmental effectiveness. A society that had lived for centuries under feudal arrangements found it difficult to accept the unification of authority under a singular religious interpretation, particularly given that the Seleucid and Parthian periods had substantially disrupted the established class system. The attempt to reinforce an idealized monarchical order premised on a hierarchical, class-based worldview provoked resistance from subordinate social groups, as evidenced by movements such as those associated with Mazdak and Mani.

In this theoretical approach to power, the primary focus falls on the intellectual justification of the constructs through which a particular worldview is sustained. Ontological, epistemological, and anthropological conceptions, that is, those frameworks that explain and legitimize the existence of a centralized governmental structure organized around the institution of the monarchy, are central to this inquiry. The relationship between multiplicity and unity, and more specifically the question of how multiplicities proceed from unity or are integrated into a singular entity, can be understood as a constitutive problem in the construction of Iranian political authority. Equally significant is the task of justifying the position of the king and his relationship with the transcendent realm and with Ahura Mazda, within the context of the interplay between the material and the spiritual worlds. The nature and attributes of the spiritual world, its relationship with the material world, the mechanisms through which these two realms interact, and the process by which Ahura's grace is transmitted to the material world, all constitute philosophical questions that were systematically addressed during the Sassanid era.

Philosophical Foundations of Sassanian Political Thought

Religion constituted the most significant organizing framework of human thought during the traditional era, in the sense that all matters were interpreted through the lens of religious and metaphysical teaching. The crisis in the interpretation of religion that emerged during the Sassanid period therefore struck at the most fundamental element of political legitimation. The Sassanid era, drawing upon Zoroastrian teachings in theology, ontology, and anthropology, entered into a dialectical engagement with Greek philosophical thought, an engagement oriented toward the generation of new conceptual resources for explaining and justifying the epistemological foundations of political thought.

Ontological Foundations

The Iranian worldview, from an ontological perspective, rests on two opposing forces. The concepts of Giti⁶, that is, the material world, and Minu⁷, that is, the spiritual world, are central to Iranian thought concerning existence. Giti denotes the tangible, material world, while Minu denotes the intangible, invisible, and spiritual realm. The relationship between these two forms of existence is grounded in material existence; the epistemological movement from Giti to Minu constitutes the foundation of the Iranian worldview. As recorded in the Yasna: "At the beginning, there were two twins, two spirits, each with its own specific actions." This formulation implies that each force acts independently of the other. A further distinction in the Yasna reads: "Of my two spirits, the one that is more beneficial created all of the holy creation with words." The essential point is that existence and non-existence arise from these two forces or spirits.

6. *Gētīg* (Giti):

In Zoroastrian cosmology, the material and visible world, as opposed to the spiritual realm (mēnōg). The term denotes the physical dimension of creation in which the cosmic struggle between good and evil unfolds.

7. *Mēnōg* (Minu):

The spiritual, invisible, and transcendent realm in Zoroastrian thought, contrasted with the material world (gētīg). It refers to the non-material dimension of existence inhabited by divine and spiritual beings

Paul of Persia, drawing upon Aristotle's logic in his work *Gamma*⁸, articulates the fundamental principles of this question in the following terms: "One who has knowledge about things as such must be able to explain the most fundamental principles of everything. Such a person is a philosopher, and the most fundamental principle of all is one where deception has no place... Now we say, what is this principle: that being and non-being cannot both apply to the same thing at the same time and in the same respect." He elaborates on this principle with a slight modification: "In existing things, there is a principle about which one cannot be mistaken... and that is that the same thing cannot simultaneously be both 'being' and 'non-being'." Paul of Persia treats Zoroastrian dualism as a philosophical problem amenable to analysis from this standpoint, and accordingly attempts to resolve this ontological conflict through a Neo-Platonic framework.

The spiritual world is itself divided into a dualistic and antagonistic space. Spenta Mainyu⁹ represents the pure spirit or individual intellect. In the Avesta, intellect and pure spirit are identified with the meaningful soul, which signifies the source of thought and perception. Pourdavoud employs the term *gohar* or *johar*¹⁰ for greater conceptual clarity. By contrast, Angra Mainyu¹¹ represents the dark spirit, or Ahriman. In Iranian thought, both Minu and Giti are constituent parts of existence within the material world.

In the *Bundahishn*, which forms part of the Avestan corpus, it is stated that the spiritual world, divided into Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu, subsists in a condition of stability and without commingling. These two forces intermingle and contend with one another only within the material world. According to this account, Zoroastrian ontology posits two worlds in which forces of good and evil are present, with the distinguishing feature that the spiritual world is governed by stability and the non-commingling of opposites. Everything occupies its proper place. In the material world, however, the force of evil contends with the force of good: evil strives to assert its dominance, while the force of good defends existence and resists it. In Iranian cosmology, a dualistic conception of the cosmos is accepted, one that regards material existence as inherently good and understands evil and impurity as

8. *Gamma* (Γ , γ):

A letter of the Greek alphabet, the third in order, used in a wide range of scholarly and scientific contexts. In mathematics and physics, γ commonly denotes variables such as the gamma function in analysis, the Lorentz factor in relativity theory, or radiation types in nuclear physics. In philological and textual studies, it may also appear as a conventional symbol for classification or notation within critical apparatuses.

9. Spenta Mainyu:

"The Beneficent Spirit" in the Avesta, representing the creative and life-affirming aspect of Ahura Mazda. In Zoroastrian theology, Spenta Mainyu embodies goodness, truth, and the divine agency responsible for the creation and preservation of the world.

10. *Gohar* (or *Johar*):

A Persian term meaning "essence," "substance," or "intrinsic nature." In philosophical and theological contexts, it is often used to denote the underlying reality or essential nature of a being, comparable to the Aristotelian concept of substance.

11. Angra Mainyu (Aṅra Mainyu):

In Zoroastrian theology, the destructive or "hostile spirit," representing the ultimate principle of evil, falsehood (*druj*), and cosmic disorder. In the earliest Avestan sources, Angra Mainyu is the antithetical force opposing Spenta Mainyu and Ahura Mazda's creation, responsible for corruption, death, and the distortion of cosmic order (*asha*). In later Zoroastrian tradition, especially Middle Persian texts, he is fully personified as Ahriman, the adversary of Ohrmazd in a dualistic cosmological framework.

external forces that assail the world, transforming it into a battleground between good and evil. Material life, given this conflict, acquires a quality of practical endurance against malevolence. This view stands in contrast to Manichaeism, which held that the cosmos is fundamentally dualistic in a manner that renders the world itself an embodiment of evil and impurity, producing a condition of universal wretchedness.

Philosophical Thinking on Government Based on Neoplatonism

The Sassanid interest in Plotinus' ideas stemmed from his engagement with two questions that were equally fundamental to Sassanid political thought, namely religion and philosophy, both of which required rational justification in the face of pressing intellectual and political challenges. Religion served as the foundational basis for the organization of governance in Iran and stood in need of rational validation, while philosophy provided a rational apparatus for explaining and justifying intellectual positions. In the domain of religion, Plotinus reflected on how the soul might return to its original purity. In Neo-Platonic philosophy, the soul is analogous to the human spirit in Zoroastrian thought, that is, a spirit that has separated from its existential origin in Minu and assumed a material body in Giti in order to combat evil. Philosophical inquiry involves understanding how the world is constituted and how its constitution can be rationally justified. The pursuit of the origin of the universe, which Plotinus regarded as the goal of philosophical contemplation and the ultimate aim of human endeavor, thus led Zoroastrian thinkers to address the question of human destiny through the framework of governance (Zanjani, 2010: 36).

Philosophical Thinking on Ideal Kingship

In the Iranian worldview, the cosmos is conceived as a unified whole, governed by order and stability. This order is, however, challenged by Angra Mainyu within the material world. In order to secure order and stability for human well-being, Ahura Mazda extends his power into the material world through the concept of kingship, in Persian shahriyari. The concept of kingship is central to the organisation of social relations and the mechanisms of power in material existence. Ideal Iranian kingship manifests as an ideal city in the material world, in the sense that through virtuous leadership and governance, the material world can attain stability and order, thereby reflecting asha¹².

In the *Shkand Gumanig Vazarg*¹³, that is, the Doubt Destroyer, it is stated in the sixth chapter, in the course of explaining material existence and the necessity of Ahura Mazda's guidance: "...It is clear that different things, due to having different essences and forces, cannot always be uncreated or without a creator; rather, they have a manager, creator, and doer. They have an impetus that moves and organ-

12. Asha:

A fundamental Zoroastrian concept signifying truth, righteousness, cosmic order, and the divinely established principle governing the universe. It stands in opposition to druj (falsehood, deceit, and disorder) and serves as a central ethical and cosmological doctrine in the Avesta.

13. *Škand Gumānīg Wizār (Shkand Gumanig Vazar):*

A ninth-century Middle Persian Zoroastrian apologetic and polemical treatise attributed to Mardānfarrox, son of Ohrmazddād. The title means "The Doubt-Dispelling Explanation." The work defends Zoroastrian dualism and critiques rival religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Manichaeism.

ises them from one action to another, from one state to another, and from one time to another, not as the will and desire of the artifacts dictate but as the will and desire of the creator dictates” (Amouzgar, 2017: 466). This cosmological argument attempts to render philosophically coherent the existence of opposing forces in the cosmos and the situation of humanity within it, justifying the conflict of forces through the overarching management of a creator, Ahura Mazda. The text continues: “This world has no manager other than the wise and omnipotent deity” (Ibid.: 467). Having established the existence of God, the text proceeds to posit a manager for the world.

This divine power is embodied in the concept of *kshatra vairya*¹⁴ in the Gathas. This term refers to the divine sovereignty and kingship in the cosmic order, encompassing both *Minu* and *Giti*, which manifests as ideal or desirable rule in the material world. It signifies the ideal kingship of Ahura Mazda as exercised in material existence. Kingship is consequently envisioned as the human aspiration toward the highest attainable level of well-being and happiness, which is what renders it an ideal kingship (Mahmoudizadeh Dehbari: 293).

Fathollah Mojtabai, attending to this rational ideal of kingship, draws a comparison with Plato’s philosopher-king. In his work *Plato’s Beautiful City*¹⁵, Mojtabai discusses the influence of Iranian wisdom on Plato; however, setting aside the question of this influence and the specific intellectual challenges of the Sassanid period, the philosophical position of the Shah in relation to his role in existence and his eternal intellect, understood as Ahura Mazda-like in character, renders him genuinely comparable to Plato’s philosopher-king. The ideology of Sassanid kingship is grounded in the concept of ideal kingship, a conception not unlike that of Plato’s philosopher-king (Mojtabai, 2020: 54). Whether this resemblance exerted an influence on Plato or was elaborated independently during the Sassanid era does not alter the substance of the matter. The Iranian king, by virtue of characteristics such as eternal wisdom, possesses awareness of the “law of universal reason,” which, according to the Iranian model, ensures human well-being and happiness in the material world (Rajai, 2019: 20). This model, grounded in a metaphysical understanding of the basis of well-being, makes its practical application in the material world possible.

Islamic Political Thought in the Realm of Political Philosophy

Political philosophy constitutes one of the most significant intellectual domains within Islamic governance thought during the medieval period. This body of knowledge emerged through the Translation Movement and addressed the complexities of political thought that arose during the Abbasid era. The necessity of providing rational justification for Islamic principles in relation to politics rendered the turn toward practical wisdom, or political philosophy, indispensable. The question at stake was how human reason-based political knowledge, grounded in the divine, could be reconciled with re-

14. *Khshathra Vairya* (*Kshatra Vairya*):

One of the six *Amesha Spentas* in Zoroastrianism, commonly translated as “Desirable Dominion” or “Ideal Sovereignty.” It represents the divine principle of just rule, legitimate authority, and righteous governance, and is closely associated with the ideal exercise of power under Ahura Mazda’s order

15. *Plato’s Beautiful City and Ideal Kingship in Ancient Iran*, a comparative study by Fathollah Mojtabai, examining the relationship between Plato’s *Kallipolis* and the Iranian conception of ideal kingship in ancient Persian political and religious traditions.

vealed authority, a question that arises directly from the effort to integrate Islamic political thought, which rests on the dual foundations of religion and politics, and to harmonize these two dimensions.

Historical Foundations of Islamic Political Philosophy Centered on Iranian Ideas

Iranians contributed to the development of Islamic philosophy in several interconnected ways, most significantly through the introduction of Greek thought into the Islamic world by means of translation, first from Greek into Pahlavi and subsequently from Pahlavi into Arabic. This process unfolded across two successive translation movements, the first during the Sassanid period and the second during the Islamic era. Greek philosophy, through its transmission to the Alexandrian school, gave rise to the development of Neo-Platonic philosophy, which was subsequently transferred to Iran through Syriac Christians and the Translation Movement, where it came to bear upon the ideological and philosophical challenges confronting the Sassanid order. The intellectual product of this philosophical engagement was Hikmat Khusrawani¹⁶. During the Islamic medieval period, the involvement of Iranians in power structures made the creation of a new political order and a renovated political thought both necessary and urgent, thereby generating the conditions for a new translation movement. Sustained engagement with the intellectual achievements of other nations produced diverse interpretations and schools of thought in relation to religion. This intellectual environment necessitated the philosophical articulation of a new social order, one that reflected the presence of both Arab and non-Arab Muslims within the new political formation and through which Iranian philosophical elements were introduced into the Islamic world.

Revisiting Islamic Political Philosophy through the Lens of Iranian Political Thought

If we accept that the challenges arising within a given region are the primary generative forces behind fundamental questions, and that thought is constructed through the essential questions that a society poses to itself, then it is evident that Iran has functioned, throughout its long history, as a land of problems, questions, and civilization-building ideas. This capacity to think through challenges across successive historical periods enabled Iranians to sustain their cultural and intellectual continuity by drawing upon the scientific and intellectual achievements of other nations.

Confronted with the necessity of self-redefinition within the Islamic world, Iranians succeeded in sustaining and redefining themselves within the Islamic framework. From the late first century AH onward, Iranians opened a new intellectual path in the Islamic world, one that contributed to a golden age of intellectual and cultural flourishing for Muslims through the Translation Movement. Even during periods of decline, Iranians did not abandon philosophical inquiry but sought, through philosophical means, a way beyond deterioration. Of particular significance is the fact that the shared philo-

16. *Hikmat-e Khusrawani* (*Hikmat-i Khosrowānī* / *Wisdom of the Kings*):

A term used in later Iranian intellectual and philosophical traditions—especially in the *Ishraqī* (Illuminationist) school of Suhrawardī—to denote an ancient Iranian “royal wisdom” associated with pre-Islamic Persian sages and philosopher-kings. It refers to a form of sapiential knowledge grounded in light metaphysics, ethical rulership, and the idea of a divinely inspired kingship, often contrasted with purely discursive or Aristotelian philosophy. In modern scholarship, it is frequently interpreted as a reconstructed or idealized tradition linking ancient Iranian political theology with philosophical mysticism.

sophical concerns between Iranian and Islamic thought illuminate the impact of Iranian philosophical experience on Islamic intellectual challenges. Questions such as the division of the world according to the principles of light and darkness, the struggle between good and evil, the abstract nature of the angelic realm, the relationship between the material world and the spiritual realm, the significance of human action in determining one's ultimate fate, and the continuity of divine governance through the superior human being as a channel of divine grace, all constitute shared philosophical concerns between Iranian and Islamic thought (Khurasani, 2014: 403).

In the context of this period of intellectual flourishing, the proposition advanced by the Mu'tazilites concerning the createdness of the Quran, and its subsequent adoption as a government-supported ideology under the caliphate of al-Ma'mun, generated an acute intellectual conflict between rationalists and traditionalists. Having become the official ideology of the Islamic government, opposition to this position was rendered indistinguishable from intellectual resistance to the state itself. Consequently, those who rejected the doctrine of the createdness of the Quran faced severe hardships and punishments. Despite the Mu'tazilites' reputation for free inquiry, this situation imposed significant constraints on Islamic scholars. The government's insistence on the "creation of the Quran" as a continuous state policy, directed against those under its authority who opposed this doctrine, shaped a crisis of governmental legitimacy in the minds of believers. Protest movements arising within religious and ideological debates simultaneously posed a threat to state security (Mohsen, 2006: 10).

Masudi records the ideological shift of the government in the following terms: "In the year 234, the theologian ordered the abandonment of the debates and controversies of the periods of al-Mu'tasim, al-Wathiq, and al-Ma'mun, and compelled people to submission and imitation, instructing prominent hadith scholars to promote the hadith and the Sunni and communal tradition" (Masudi, 2017: 304). Iranians, who had entered the political arena in the late first century AH with innovative ideas grounded in the Iranian model of governance thought, now confronted a profound challenge as a result of this ideological transformation. They sought to resolve this crisis with the aid of philosophy. Philosophy, which had initially occupied a marginal position within the Translation Movement, became a salvific form of knowledge at the onset of decline. The achievements of theological rationalism, which had formed the intellectual foundation of Islamic governance, faced destruction as a consequence of the ideological shift toward traditionalism and the closure of the space for independent intellectual and juristic inquiry. Farabi, recognizing this crisis, undertook a fundamental rethinking of Islamic political theory from a philosophical standpoint. He devoted considerable effort to the philosophical articulation of the intellectual foundations that had shaped Muslim political thought. Many of the principles of Islamic thought as reflected in the Quran and Sunnah were given philosophical form on the basis of the harmony between religion and reason, producing the ontological, theological, and anthropological frameworks necessary for a coherent political philosophy. He then advanced an ideal model of a state with appropriate governance. His works *Al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*¹⁷ and *Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila*

17. *Al-Fārābī, Al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya (The Political Regime / Civil Politics):*

A major political-philosophical treatise by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950 CE), in which he develops a systematic account of political organization grounded in metaphysics and psychology. The work outlines the structure of the virtuous city (al-madīna al-fāḍila), the classification of non-virtuous regimes, and the conditions required for achieving human perfection through political association.

present the ideal political theory of Muslims. This model of political practice, elaborated during a period of decline, emerges as a means of attaining the ultimate happiness. Farabi's philosophical engagement with Muslim political theory is marked by sustained attention to the constructed model of the Abbasid era. The idea Farabi develops in political thinking constitutes an extension of the Iranian concept of governance (Mahdi, 1990: 74).

Philosophical Foundations of Islamic Political Thought in the Medieval Period:

In this historical phase, the Islamic system of knowledge had ceased to develop productively in the fields of jurisprudence and political theory. The need to reconstruct this system of knowledge on new intellectual foundations had become apparent. Philosophy came to be regarded as the only available means of rethinking power relations and arresting the decline of political thought, thereby preserving the achievements of the Islamic civilization's golden age.

Among the philosophers of this period, Abu Nasr al-Farabi occupies a distinctive and formative position in the history of Islamic political philosophy. Al-Farabi pursued the study of logic and philosophy under prominent scholars, including Yohanna ibn Haylan, the foremost logician of his time. His significance lies in his mastery of the teachings of his Syriac mentors in logic and philosophy, and in his capacity to reorient those teachings toward the intellectual challenges confronting the Islamic world, thereby establishing Islamic philosophy as an independent tradition (Fakhri, 2016: 10). He was the first Muslim philosopher to transcend the limits of the Syriac tradition in the study of Aristotelian logic, applying those aspects of it that Syriac Christians had avoided on religious grounds to Islamic philosophical reflection. In doing so, he guided the trajectory of logic and philosophy from Greece through Alexandria and Iran into the Islamic intellectual sphere. Accordingly, Seyyed Javad Tabatabai has argued that philosophy in the Islamic world both begins and ends with Al-Farabi: all who came after him interpreted, elaborated upon, and commented on his views in various languages and from various standpoints, but the intellectual process that began with Al-Farabi remained, in its essential character, his own and did not advance beyond him (Tabatabai, 2017: 180).

Ontology

Al-Farabi, having established the foundational aspects of philosophical thought on Neo-Platonic grounds, articulates his political theory through the depiction of an ideal hypothetical government. The Madina al-Fadila¹⁸ represents an ideal model of governance grounded in religious teaching, one capable of serving as an orienting framework for overcoming crises through rational approaches within Islamic political thought. Al-Farabi's political philosophy takes as its point of departure the concept of politics itself. According to him, the ultimate goal of human life is the happiness of the soul, and politics is accordingly the practice through which citizens can attain this happiness. Al-Farabi states: "Politics consists of actions that arise from the practice of governance, including the creation

18. *Al-Fārābī, Ārā' Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍila (Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City):*

A foundational work of Islamic political philosophy by al-Fārābī, presenting a comprehensive vision of the ideal state. It integrates Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements with Islamic intellectual traditions, describing the metaphysical hierarchy of existence, the role of the First Cause, and the function of the philosopher-prophet as ruler of the virtuous city. The text is central to classical Islamic theories of political order and happiness (sa'āda).

of actions, virtues, and qualities in society and the preservation of these. This type of politics is acquired through the knowledge and experience specific to politicians” (Al-Farabi, 1967: 54). In common with the Iranian perspective, Al-Farabi regards politics as a specialized knowledge belonging to a particular class or group, though in his social context, rigid social stratification is not a prevailing feature. Nevertheless, he does not treat politics as a commonly accessible activity but as a form of knowledge practiced by specific individuals for the purpose of cultivating virtues and qualities within society. He states: “Politics is that through which politicians and citizens attain virtues that cannot be achieved otherwise” (Al-Farabi, 1971: 92).

This account implies that everything manifests in the cosmos, from metaphysics to physics, originates from a rational and coherent order. The creator and ruler of the cosmos is a singular entity that generates diverse multiplicity on the basis of pure rationality. Existence is therefore an organized multiplicity subsisting under the domain of a single creator. The theory of emanation reflects the differentiation of existence from a singular entity; a differentiation achieved through the active intellect and resulting in a spectrum of being that proceeds from the one.

The Concept of Islamic Political Thought in Political Philosophy

Al-Farabi, having established the foundational aspects of philosophical thought on Neo-Platonic grounds, articulates his political theory through the depiction of an ideal hypothetical government. The Madina al-Fadila represents an ideal model of governance grounded in religious teaching, one capable of serving as an orienting framework for overcoming crises through rational approaches within Islamic political thought. Al-Farabi’s political philosophy takes as its point of departure the concept of politics itself. According to him, the ultimate goal of human life is the happiness of the soul, and politics is accordingly the practice through which citizens can attain this happiness. Al-Farabi states: “Politics consists of actions that arise from the practice of governance, including the creation of actions, virtues, and qualities in society and the preservation of these. This type of politics is acquired through the knowledge and experience specific to politicians” (Al-Farabi, 1967: 54). In common with the Iranian perspective, Al-Farabi regards politics as a specialized knowledge belonging to a particular class or group, though in his social context, rigid social stratification is not a prevailing feature. Nevertheless, he does not treat politics as a commonly accessible activity but as a form of knowledge practiced by specific individuals for the purpose of cultivating virtues and qualities within society. He states: “Politics is that through which politicians and citizens attain virtues that cannot be achieved otherwise” (Al-Farabi, 1971: 92).

Al-Farabi also devotes sustained attention to the terms *siyasa madaniyya*, that is, civil politics, and *ilm madani*, that is, civil science. In *Al-Madina al-Fadila*, he employs *ilm madani* in two senses, sometimes as the science of happiness and at other times as the science of power. In *Ihsa’ al-’Ulum*, civil science is treated as an independent discipline, which Al-Farabi defines in *Al-Huruf* in contradistinction to the natural sciences. This science concerns the rational dimensions of human volition, encompassing the various voluntary actions, virtues, qualities, and habits from which human behavior proceeds (Al-Farabi, 1990: 67). From Al-Farabi’s perspective, politics is therefore an activity constitutively related to the madina, that is, the city or community. The madina Al-Farabi envisions draws on historical paradigms, most notably the transformation in social and communicative relations that occurred with the Prophet’s migration to Yathrib, through which tribal and ethnic bonds gave way to civil relations

grounded in law. This fundamental reorientation of social relations is directed by Al-Farabi toward a philosophy compatible with divine law. Just as post-ancient Iranians in the Sassanid era apprehended existence as subject to metaphysical or divine laws through Platonic perspectives, Al-Farabi situates material existence under the governance of metaphysical elements administered by a divine, abstract, and rational intellect, a governance that is communicated through divine revelation to the Prophet and made manifest as law.

From its inception through to the period of Al-Farabi's active engagement with its development, Islamic political thought centered on law, understood as a synthesis of divine law, that is, shari'a, and human law, that is, nomos. The former is grounded in revelation and oriented toward God, while the latter is grounded in human reason and oriented toward the rational person. During the formative period, by virtue of the Prophet's presence at the helm of political authority, shari'a and nomos existed in harmony. As political thought developed, however, the expression of divine law took institutional form through jurisprudence. This divine law, at its highest level, governs Muslim rule. Al-Farabi addresses this effort to provide rational justification for the organization of human relations in a crisis-ridden society by arguing that virtuous actions and customs do not persist among people unless they are institutionalized within cities and nations. No one attains governance or leadership without the force of service and qualities accepted by the people, what he terms kingship, and this produces what he defines as politics. Al-Farabi distinguishes between two forms of happiness, genuine and illusory, and correspondingly divides leadership into virtuous and ignorant types. Virtuous leadership guides people toward true happiness through the cultivation of virtuous actions, customs, and qualities; such a city is called Madina Fadila and its people Umma Fadila. Ignorant leadership, by contrast, directs people toward conduct and ethics that yield only illusory happiness (Tabatabai, 2017: 189).

Al-Farabi's philosophical engagement with the challenges of the Islamic world in the domain of political theory should be understood as a continuation and deepening of the traditions of Shari'a scholarship and political treatises. The political theories developed by Shari'a scholars and political thinkers were grounded in the idealised model of Iranian kingship. Al-Farabi, drawing simultaneously on their intellectual efforts and on the Greek philosophy that had been assimilated and reoriented in Iran, offered a refined model of governance suited to a period of decline. His philosophical rethinking aimed to restore political theory to the correct path, one capable of regenerating an era of intellectual and cultural flourishing.

In Al-Farabi's view, whenever virtuous leadership loses its animating wisdom as a result of the separation between theory and practice, the virtuous government undergoes a rupture. The values of virtuous governance become distorted, and political vices, which are in the nature of diseases within virtuous politics, are mistaken for virtues under leadership devoid of wisdom. The connection between government and wisdom is thereby severed, producing political instability and decline. In *Ihsa' al-'Ulum*, Al-Farabi links the stability of the virtuous city to the adherence of rulers to consistent and principled conditions, warning against discontinuity and stagnation in the succession of virtuous rulers. He argues that rulers lacking wisdom are unworthy of leadership because they do not engage in either theoretical or practical philosophy. Ignorant rulers, through imitation of their predecessors, pursue self-interested ends such as pleasure and ostentation (Al-Farabi, 1405: 79). Al-Farabi thus appears to evaluate the relationship between wisdom and governance against the standard set by the Iranian model.

Drawing upon a profound understanding of the philosophical precedents established by Plato and Aristotle, as well as Iranian thought and the Islamic political tradition, Al-Farabi reconstructs and develops the concept of governance grounded in prophetic wisdom as a solution to political disorder. Interpretations of Al-Farabi's political system have nonetheless varied considerably. Some scholars approach him through the lens of Greek philosophy, while others situate him within a Shi'ite framework. Reza Davari, for instance, raises the question of how a philosopher of Al-Farabi's standing constructed a political system congruent with the principles and foundations of the Shi'a Imams (Davari, 1374: 243). A crucial question concerns what objective Al-Farabi sought to achieve through his political system at the height of decline in the caliphate and under conditions of absolute monarchy. It appears that Al-Farabi did not intend merely to affirm the principles of Shi'ite Imamate but instead advanced an idealised Islamic reinterpretation of Iranian political thought. The ideal Iranian king, who in Al-Farabi's thought serves as the mediating figure between the divine and earthly realms, is transformed into a philosopher-prophet. Since, however, the Iranian conception of ideal kingship implies a continuous chain of rulers, in Islamic thought the philosopher-prophet is regarded as the founder alone; his successors are not in a position to establish new laws on the basis of his principles.

Al-Farabi's aim was to place constraints on the absolute caliphate and on Muslim rulers by giving this idealized political theory a philosophical form. He held that the element most conspicuously absent from Islamic governance was law and lawfulness, since intellectual and cultural advancement in the medieval period was understood to be predicated on legal order. Consequently, the foundational knowledge of this political theory was jurisprudence, which was intended to organize social and political structures around the principle of unity in diversity. Al-Farabi specifies roles and powers for distinct levels of government on the basis of lawfulness, as is evident in the five levels of governance delineated in *Al-Madina al-Fadila* and *Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila*. Without this framework, Al-Farabi would appear as a proponent of absolute despotism in Islamic political theory, a characterization inconsistent with his political thought, since the continuity of prophetic governance was not premised on unconditional Iranian political principles but on a rational governance bound by accepted legal and customary norms.

In examining the structure of governance in Al-Farabi's political philosophy, one encounters a multi-tiered model of leadership consisting of several distinct layers.

The first is the First Leader, the *Rais Awal*, who, comparable to a prophet or philosopher-king, is connected directly to the Active Intellect, that is, to divine revelation. Within Al-Farabi's framework, this leader is the legitimate and absolute ruler of the ideal city, the *Madina Fadila*. Titles such as Imam, Prophet, King, Philosopher, and Lawgiver are employed to designate this leader, though not with the intention of implying a Shi'ite perspective. Rather, these titles draw from Iranian traditions and reflect a model of ideal kingship. The *Rais Awal* is the foundational figure who embodies the unity of divine revelation and reason, serving as the mediating link between the divine and earthly realms.

The second tier comprises the Secondary Leaders, the *Rusa' al-Mutabi'ah*, who may be characterized as Imams of Guidance or Rulers of the Righteous. These leaders are connected to the Active Intellect through their own form of divine favor or infallibility, *fara'izadi*, though they do not possess the direct and primary connection to the Active Intellect that belongs to the *Rais Awal*. They uphold the principles established by the *Rais Awal* and administer the city in accordance with his teachings, resembling the Iranian model of governance in their adherence to law.

The third tier is the Scholar-King, the Fuqaha or King of Sunnah, whose leadership is exercised by jurists or scholars who rule on the basis of jurisprudential principles rather than direct prophetic or philosophical insight. This model reflects a debate present in both Iranian and Islamic political thought regarding whether the sovereign should himself be a religious scholar or should instead rely on the expertise of scholars. In this framework, the ruler's legitimacy derives from the capacity to interpret and apply Islamic law, that is, shari'ah, rather than from the possession of innate divine wisdom.

Al-Farabi also contrasts these three models with a council-based form of governance in his works, one that includes the governance of the Rulers of Tradition, the Rusa' al-Sunnah, in which leadership may be shared between a philosopher and a jurist, or between two jurists, for the purpose of governing in accordance with the shari'ah and the principles established by the earlier models of leadership.

Al-Farabi's political philosophy thus reflects a nuanced understanding of leadership in which the ideal city is governed by a hierarchy of leaders, each with distinct roles and connections to divine wisdom and law. His model embodies a sophisticated synthesis of philosophical, religious, and legal principles, drawn from both Iranian and Islamic traditions.

Conclusion

Political philosophy in both the Iranian and Islamic worlds emerged as a response to political crisis and the imperative of legitimate governance, opening new pathways in political theory. This philosophy, which initially travelled from Greece to Alexandria and thence to Iran through Syriac-speaking Christians, profoundly shaped the relationship between religion and the state. Iranian political philosophy, confronted with the legitimacy challenges posed by religious movements such as those of Mani and Mazdak, developed responses to questions of political authority that were subsequently revisited by Farabi in the Islamic period, in order to advance an ideal model of governance and arrest political decline.

Farabi's philosophical analysis, rooted in both Greek and Iranian traditions, was directed toward the improvement and elevation of political and philosophical systems. His work, which reinterpreted Greek and Iranian political philosophy within an Islamic context, sought to address and rectify political decline by advocating a form of government grounded in reason and law.

Farabi's philosophy, examined through the lens of both Greek and Iranian intellectual traditions, foregrounds the shared understanding of the laws governing the material world and the orientation of humanity toward happiness through the extension of divine management into material existence by the perfect human being, directing the struggle between good and evil toward the ultimate reign of light. This philosophical contribution, which reflects the assimilation and transformation of Greek philosophy through the Iranian context, should be regarded as a significant historical intellectual experience that shaped the formation of Islamic political philosophy. Understanding Islamic political philosophy therefore requires a genealogical approach, one that traces and incorporates the insights derived from Iranian philosophical traditions.

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