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## Man in Early Islamic Philosophy: Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi

### Introduction

Islamic philosophy is rarely associated with philosophy of man, especially when it is compared either with classical philosophy or with modern European thought. Medieval philosophy is usually thought of as focused rather on building a general, philosophical image of the world (based on patterns derived from classical philosophy, especially from Platonism or Aristotelianism), as well as examining the relationship between God and man – which led, and quite often, to treat philosophy as an useful “tool” in dealing with certain theological questions. It is, however, too simplistic a picture, at least as far as Islamic philosophy is concerned. In the initial period of Islamic philosophy – or more precisely, in its two most outstanding representatives, Al-Kindi (c. 801–873) and Al-Farabi (c. 872–950) – we do find certain philosophical positions in the field of human philosophy.

This does not mean, however, that the considerations concerning man, found in both aforementioned authors, constituted the foundation of their philosophy, nor that they were of key importance. Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi were mainly concerned with metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of intellect and soul, as well as practical philosophy: eth-

ics and political philosophy (or politics, especially the latter).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, their positions also included views on man and his uniqueness. These views deserve closer examination; however, research and analysis should not be limited to the mere comparison of both human philosophies. We would then only deal with a purely formal analysis, because the teachings of Al-Kindi did not directly influence Al-Farabi's views (in this case, therefore, there is no question of continuing or belonging to the same school of thought). Instead of focusing only on formal similarities and analogies, we should rather pay attention to the sources and inspirations that stimulated both of these philosophers to reflect on man. Did they find their inspiration primarily in religion, or were they more influenced by the philosophical tradition with which they had the opportunity to become acquainted? Secondly, it is necessary to investigate and establish with regard to which branches of philosophy they constructed their own positions in the field of philosophy of man.

The explanation of the latter is relatively simple. While presenting their positions in the field of metaphysics, both of the aforementioned philosophers did not pay much attention to man. As for Al-Kindi, in his metaphysics, he first of all presents a philosophical concept of God (or "The Truly One"), paying attention to various issues related to unity and multiplicity, and stating that true (essential) unity belongs exclusively to Him. He also defines God as the first cause of movement (in the Aristotelian sense, i.e., the cause of all change), as the source of existence (in reference to the Neoplatonic theory of emanation), and as the only real subject of action, not being affected by anything else. Man, as it is easy to see, is by no means the most important subject of his metaphysi-

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<sup>1</sup> The philosophies of Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi have already been well researched by Western scholars. In recent years, many articles, as well as translations and studies, devoted to the achievements of these philosophers, have been published, including: Maha Alsamhori et al., "Al-Farabi between Philosophy and Religion and the Influence by Plotinus", *Journal of Social Sciences (COES&RJ-JSS)* 9/4 (2020): 1358–1371; Felix Klein-Franke, "Al-Kindi", in: *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. S. H. Nasr, O. Leaman (London: Routledge, 2020); Muhammad Ali Khalidi, "Al-Farabi on Acquiring a Philosophical Concept", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (2022): 1–21; Ida Ilmiah Mursidin, "Philosophical Thought of Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi", *Journal Al-Dustur* 3/1 (2020): 51–66; Devin J. Stewart, "Al-Kindi's Two-Volume Compendium of Aristotelian Philosophy: Al-Falsafa al-Ūlā and al-Falsafa al-Dākhila", *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 8/2 (2021): 173–208; Dheyih Tofiq, "The Sources of Philosophical Thought by Al-Kindi", *Journal of Garmian University* 8/2 (2021): 258–271; Nani Widiawati, "Reformulation of the Islamic Education Philosophy; a Study of the Epistemological Thought of Al-Farabi", *Al-Afkar. Journal for Islamic Studies* 2/1 (2019): 48–63.

cal research. At best, it can be said that (unlike the way God exists and works) man is not a true, essential unity (unity in man is always somehow related to multiplicity), and also that man is not a real subject of action (according to Al-Kindi, when compared to God, man is a subject of action only metaphorically).<sup>2</sup> Conducting his reflections in the field of metaphysics, Al-Farabi is also not particularly interested in man. It can be basically said, within his system of thought, that human soul is able to rise itself from the lower to the higher hypostases.<sup>3</sup> These remarks clearly show that in trying to describe and analyze the philosophical views of Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi on man, we should focus on other areas of philosophical reflection than metaphysics. These areas would be their epistemologies, their philosophical study of the intellect and the soul, as well as their views in the field of practical philosophy: ethics and political philosophy.

## 1. Man in epistemological considerations of Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi

The most important surviving philosophical work of Al-Kindi on epistemology is *Kitab fi al-falsafa al-ula* (*Book on First Philosophy*, hereinafter referred to as). Issues related to epistemology were discussed by the author in the second chapter of this work. It is also worth mentioning some minor works in which he deals with issues in this field, for example, the treatise *Risala fi al-'aql* (*Treatise on Intellect*).<sup>4</sup>

According to Al-Kindi, man is first and foremost someone who acquires knowledge, and scientific knowledge is of particular importance here. As he writes, gaining knowledge is associated with getting to know the causes; this is obviously a view very firmly embedded in Aristotelian philosophy. Besides, Al-Kindi, in his *Book on the First Philosophy*, mentions two kinds of knowledge. As he writes: “[...] there are two types of cognition: the sensual cognition (Arab. *wujud al-hawas*) and the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Peter Adamson, *Al-Kindi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46 *et pass.*

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Majid Fakhry, *Al-Farabi: Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism. His Life, Works and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 82–88.

<sup>4</sup> For the contemporary, collective edition of the Al-Kindi books and treatises (in the original language, Arabic), cf. Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il al-Kindi al-falsafiyah*, ed. Muhammad Abu Ridah (Cairo: Al-Qahirah Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1950–1953); for English translation of Al-Kindi's work see: Peter Adamson, Peter E. Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindi* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

rational one (Arab. *wujud al-'aql*) – as we are dealing with both ‘general things’ (Arab. *al-ashya' kulliyya*), and with ‘particulars’ (Arab. *al-ashya' juz'iyya*). [...] Concrete, material beings fall under the knowledge of the senses, while genres and species are not subject to sense cognition, [...] but are cognized by [...] human soul, which [...] is called the human intellect (Arab. *al-'aql al-insani*)”.<sup>5</sup> In another passage, Al-Kindi mentions that the latter may be also called the perception of the soul – a perception that is not of a sensual nature, but “which [...] does not need to be mediated in anything”.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Kindi additionally divides intellectual cognition into two types: intellectual cognition partially related to the senses (e.g., knowing the shape of a thing) and intellectual cognition not related to them at all (for instance, considering whether the universe is spatially limited or not). He states that the most valuable knowledge – assuming that real knowledge is knowing general concepts – comes from pure perception of the intellect. At the same time, he emphasizes the dissimilarity of the rational comprehension and the sensory cognition, related to the soul and the body, respectively. Since the body limits the proper functioning of the soul, in its epistemology Al-Kindi seems to minimize the role of sensory perception with regards to gaining knowledge. Objects of sense cognition, strongly opposed by him to objects of intellectual knowledge, cannot even be considered as the foundation of knowledge, since knowledge includes general concepts. They may only lead the rational soul of man to the discovery of objects of intellectual knowledge, already contained in it.<sup>7</sup> This view, of course, is most strongly associated with the Platonic theory of anamnesis in *Phaedo*.<sup>8</sup>

In his philosophy of the intellect, Al-Kindi primarily refers to Aristotle. According to the Stagirite, it is the intellect that man owes which gives the unique position he occupies among other creatures.<sup>9</sup> Without it, the human speech, the functioning of societies or the knowledge of moral life would be impossible. Aristotle also distinguishes the actual intellect from the potential one. The intellect will not act until it receives the appropriate impulse or (to use the Aristotelian term) a form that will

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il*, 107–108.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il*, 109–110.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book III; *Metaphysics*, Book XII, ch. 7–10. Cf. also Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7–10, 44–73.

take the intellect out of the state of mere potency into act. This active intellect (Greek *nous poiêtikos*), which is the causative agent, must therefore be found in the rational soul itself, Aristotle writes.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotelian influences may be found, for instance, in Al-Kindi's *Risala fi al-'aql* – a work that initiated the tradition of research on the intellect, as well as tradition of defining its various types, in the Islamic culture. Al-Kindi's treatise devoted to the intellect set a path that was followed by other philosophers of the Islamic world, including Al-Farabi, Avicenna or Averroes. In this work, Al-Kindi lists four types of intellect: the active intellect (otherwise: the first intellect, Arab. *al-'aql alladhi bi-al-fi'l abadan*); the potential intellect (Arab. *al-'aql alladhi bi-al-quwwa*); the acquired intellect (literally: the intellect that has passed in the soul from potency to actuality, Arab. *al-'aql alladhi haraja fi an-nafs min al-quwwa ila al-fi'l*) and “the visible intellect”, activity of which is related to the senses (in other words: “intellect resembling acting through the senses, because it is close to the human senses”, Arab. *yumatil al-'aql bi-al-hiss li-qurbi al-hiss min al-hayy*).<sup>11</sup> The last three types of intellect mentioned by Al-Kindi are not so much different intellects, but the same human intellect, the activity of which can be manifested in three ways. From the ontological point of view, the discussed treatise distinguishes two types of intellect: human reason and the first intellect, which is transcendent to the human soul, always in act. The first intellect not only constantly thinks about everything, but also possesses knowledge about species and genres, or in other words, it contains knowledge of the universals. And because it causes the transition of human reason from the state of only being capable to the state of actualization of knowledge, must be an external cause; according to Al-Kindi, it should not be equated with the human soul.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding man as – in the first place – the subject of cognition, Al-Kindi does not limit himself to listing only the intellect and senses as cognitive faculties. According to him, man also has some kind of “inner senses”, which include imagination, memory (also to be found in animals) and “thought” (the ability to think, Arab. *al-quwwa al-fikriyya*). Here, also, Al-Kindi clearly follows Aristotle. As for the last of the aforementioned “inner senses”, its subject is by no means intellectual forms, but rather sensual forms. When it comes to memory, Al-Kindi lists two types of memory: *al-hifdhiyya* (ability to remember permanently) and *al-*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Davidson, *Alfarabi*, 3–6.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il*, 353–354.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

*dhikriyya* (ability to recall content already remembered).<sup>13</sup> Among the aforementioned “inner senses”, the Arab philosopher pays the most attention to the imagination (Arab. *al-tawahhum, al-fantasiya*). Thanks to the imagination – which is something located between the senses and the intellect, although closer to the senses – it is possible for the forms (Arabic: *al-suwar*) of sensually cognized objects to be stored in memory. In addition, it is the activity of the imagination that is associated with the formation of dreams (Arab. *ru'yah*); and this, in turn, is significant in terms of religious worldview, because – according to the teachings of Islam – prophets receive revelation from God through dreams.<sup>14</sup>

For Al-Farabi, just as for Al-Kindi before him, man is first and foremost subject of cognition. He has written several works addressing various issues related to epistemology. Al-Farabi deals with issues related to the possibility and conditions for gaining unquestionable, scientific knowledge in his *Kitab al-burhan (Book of Demonstration)*, which is a paraphrase of Aristotle's *Analytica Posteriora*, as well as in *Kitab shara'it al-yaqin (Book on the Conditions of Certitude)*. Additionally, a few more of his works on epistemology should be mentioned. Those are *Kitab al-siyasa al-madaniyya (The Principles of Existing Things, also known as The Political Regime)*, *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinah al-fadilah (The Principles and Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City)*, and *Risalah fi al-'aql (The Treatise on the Intellect)*.<sup>15</sup>

Al-Farabi focuses on the intellect, which includes analyzing how Aristotle and the mutakallims (representatives of the rationalist, speculative branch of Islamic theology) spoke about it.<sup>16</sup> Like Aristotle's earlier commentators before him, Al-Farabi focuses on the active intellect. The active intellect – which causes the potential intellect to become some-

<sup>13</sup> Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il*, 294, 296–297.

<sup>14</sup> All issues related to dreams and dreaming were considered important in the Arab-Muslim culture, which was related to the belief in prophetic dreams. According to Islamic theology, the dreams of prophets are always true, contain revelation and guidance from God. According to Islam, prophetic dreams can also be shared by ordinary persons (i.e., persons who are not prophets), provided that they are believers. For more on dreams in Islam cf., for instance, Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 192–211.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Farabi, *Al-Siyasah al-madaniyah* (Beirut: Fi al-Taba'at al-Katholikiyah, 1964); *Ara' ahl al-madinnah al-fadilah* (Beirut: n. p., 1959); *Risalah fi al-'aql* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq Sarl, 1938). Cf. also: Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Fakhry, *Al-Farabi*, 70–72.

thing actual – is regarded as an immaterial form; according to Al-Farabi, this type of intellect is also immortal.<sup>17</sup> The relation of the active intellect to the potential one is compared in Al-Farabi to the relation of the sun to the eye (and things perceived by it). As he writes, the eye is potentially unable to see as long as there is darkness; and just as sunlight “releases” vision, the active intellect “transforms” the potential intellect into something actualized.<sup>18</sup> It should not, however, be assumed that the active intellect is something that is possessed by man. On the contrary, Al-Farabi, who is a Neoplatonist, believes that it is subordinate to the First Principle, from which all that exists emanates. This First Principle is identified by him as the Neoplatonic One, or God. All this means that in his pursuit of knowledge, man is dependent on a principle that goes beyond his own self and his own cognitive faculties. Al-Farabi also pays a lot of attention to the “inner senses”, and especially to the imagination – which is motivated by his desire to “scientifically examine” all issues related to the ability of the human mind to receive knowledge from God, or Divine prophecy.

According to Al-Farabi, imagination is something between sensuality and rationality. Its main task is to preserve the sensory images, and also to allow them to be combined or separated. Imagination can also influence both rational cognition and everyday human behavior; its influence, therefore, according to Al-Farabi, is quite significant. While rational forms are not directly perceived by the imagination, imagination itself, nevertheless, allows contact with the sensual representations that simulate them.<sup>19</sup> In addition, it is susceptible to certain emotions (e.g., desire, hate) and is able to mobilize certain organs in a person that serve these emotions (for instance, the sexual organs can be stimulated by actual desire, but also by something only imagined).<sup>20</sup> Imagination also makes it possible to receive revelation as it can represent (simulate) certain details both in dreams and in reality. It cooperates simultaneously with the active intellect, which enables perceiving present and future events, as well as perceiving beings or creatures normally inaccessible to human cognition (angels, etc.).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, 45–46.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 73–75.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Friedrich Dieterici, *Al-Farabis Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1976), 88–95.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Fakhry, *Al-Farabi*, 87.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Farabi, *Ara' ahl al-madinah al-fadilah* (Beirut: n. p., 1959), p. 47 *et pass.*



## 2. Philosophical reflection on the soul in Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi

Elements of Al-Kindi's philosophy of man can also be found in his teachings regarding the soul, which was strongly influenced by Aristotle's views, and especially by his treatise *On the Soul* – in which the Stagirite presented the already fully mature and independent position. According to Aristotle, the soul is not a principle of motion, nor is it a body. It constitutes only a form of matter, and more precisely an entelechia, that is a substantial form of a living body, which means it is something that determines the nature or essence of man. Aristotle also describes the soul as the first act (to distinguish it from the normal activities of the body, known as secondary acts). Al-Kindi, however, is not only influenced by Aristotelianism itself. His position – similarly to the position of the majority of later representatives of *falsafa*, or the so-called Arabic Aristotelianism, including Al-Farabi – was marked by clear syncretism.

In his philosophical study on the soul, Al-Kindi strives to harmonize two great ancient philosophical traditions: Platonism and Aristotelianism. Such an attempt can be found, for example, in his *Risala fi annahu tujad jawahir la ajsam* (Arab. *Treatise on the Existence of Immaterial Substances*).<sup>22</sup> In this work, Al-Kindi defends the title thesis about the existence of immaterial substance, which, according to him, is the soul; he uses a number of arguments. According to him, there must be a source of life external to the body, because the body is not inherently alive. As we read, “[...] the body that we see, whether it is alive or dead, is still a body, because although life has been separated from it, its materiality (Arab. *jismiyyatuhu*) has not been destroyed”.<sup>23</sup> The principle of life in the body (Arab. *mahiyya al-hayat fi al-jirm*) is, therefore the soul.<sup>24</sup> According to Al-Kindi, it should be assumed that the soul is by no means an accidental trait, but a separate, immaterial substance.<sup>25</sup>

This element of the concept of the soul he proclaims clearly deviates from the position of Aristotle, and relies much more strongly on Plato. As the author of *Phedo* previously did, Al-Kindi defines the soul as a simple substance. He also mentions, just as Plato did, the functions,

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<sup>22</sup> Another work presenting Al-Kindi's views on the soul is also his *Kalam fi al-nafs mutasar wajiz* (*Word on the Soul: Short Abridgement*), which is possibly part of a larger, lost work. Cf. Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il*, 281–282.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, 266.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 267.



or the abilities, of the human soul (Arab. *al-quwwan al-nafsiyya*): appetite, spirit and reason. He addresses these issues in his another work on soul, *Risala fi al-qawl al-nafs* (*Treatise on Opinions Concerning the Soul*).<sup>26</sup> Here, he uses an interesting metaphor, reminiscent of fragments of Platonic dialogues. According to the Arab philosopher, the three abilities of the soul resemble, in turn: a pig, a dog and an angel, with the first animal symbolizing the appetites (Arab. *quwwa al-shahwaniyya*); the second – the spirit (Arab. *quwwa al-ghadabiyya*), and the last one – the intellectual faculty (Arab. *quwwa al-aqliyya*).<sup>27</sup> This division undoubtedly resembles the ninth book of *The Republic*, in which Plato also presents a comparison of the three abilities of the soul to certain creatures – albeit different from those to be found in Al-Kindi (in Plato: an undefined animal, a lion and a man). According to both the Athenian and Al-Kindi, the most perfect faculty of the soul is obviously its intellectual (rational) abilities – which, by the way, should exercise power over the other two. The same position is also expressed by Al-Kindi in his *Risala fi al-ibana 'an sujud al-jirm al-aqsa* (*Treatise on the Explanation of the Obedience of the Most Distant Celestial Body*).<sup>28</sup>

Like Plato, Al-Kindi believes that only the rational part of the soul can be regarded as “the soul itself”. His affirmation that the human soul also functions after the death of the body is also of Platonic origin. As Al-Kindi writes, in his *Risala fi al-qawl al-nafs*, the soul, after disconnecting from the body, returns to the intellectual sphere, also known as the “world of divinity” (Arab. *halfa al-falak fi al-'alami ar-rububiyya*), which exists outside the sphere of celestial bodies. Al-Kindi also turns to certain Neoplatonic ideas. He proclaims, for instance, that such a return of the soul to the “world of divinity” would take place gradually: by joining successively with each celestial sphere, the soul would gradually purify itself until it was completely free from corporeality.<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt that such a view would be extremely difficult to reconcile with both Aristotle’s philosophy and classical Islam. According to Al-Kindi, although the human soul is immortal, it will not remember anything after the death of the body. The Arab philosopher rejects such a possibility, claiming that it is impossible to recall objects of sense cognition, since a soul is no longer endowed with senses. Therefore, after death, the soul is able to remember only what it has known

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 270–280.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 274.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 255.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 277–288.

rationally, i.e., general ideas or concepts. This does not mean, however, that Al-Kindi was not influenced by Islamic theology at all. First of all, he believed that the human soul is something that nature comes directly from God. The Divine origin of the immortal soul, or the spirit of man (Arab. *ruh*), is clearly mentioned also in the Quranic verses.<sup>30</sup> Al-Kindi addresses these issues both in his *Treatise on Opinions Concerning the Soul*, as well as in his *Book on First Philosophy*. In the first of the mentioned works writes that “[...] the soul is separated from the body [...]; and its [i.e., soul’s] nature is Divine, spiritual [Arabic: *jawharuha min jawhar al-bari*] – which shows the nobility of its nature and its opposition to rashness and the lusts that characterize the body”.<sup>31</sup>

Al-Farabi presents his philosophical teaching about the soul in his following, already mentioned works: *Kitab al-siyasa al-madaniyya* (*The Principles of Existing Things*, also known as *The Political Regime*), *Mabadi’ ara’ ahl al-madinah al-fadilah* (*The Principles and Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City*) and *Risalah fi al-’aql* (*The Treatise on the Intellect*). In these works, he discusses such issues as the nature of the soul and its cognitive capacities.

According to Al-Farabi, the human soul has certain abilities related both to the functioning of the body (eating, body sensitivity) and the acquisition of knowledge (ability to imagine, reasoning). Each of these faculties has organs that serve it – e.g., human senses, liver, kidneys, etc. – which in turn are subordinate to the main organ, the heart. It is at the heart that the reason (which guides the lower abilities: imagination, feeling or nutrition) is found.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Al-Farabi distinguishes in man the will which chooses (or not) what has been presented to the senses or to the imagination. According to him, human activities consists in knowing an object through intellectual, imaginative or sensitive abilities, and then in choosing it (by human will). The choice is good when the will is guided by the power of reason, assisted by the lower powers of the senses, imagination, and desires – and directed towards achieving true happiness. On the other hand, choice is wrong when the imagination or the faculty of reason remain ignorant of true happiness and the will is directed towards inferior goods, such as, for example, bodily pleasures.<sup>33</sup>

Al-Farabi also reflects on the interrelationship between the organs of the body and the various abilities or functions of the human soul. He con-

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Qur’an 38: 71–72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 273.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Al-Farabi, *Al-Madinah*, 67–79.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 67–70.

cludes that the aforementioned main organ, i.e., the heart, is a source of natural heat, and this in turn is the principle of life. According to him, the proper activities of human imagination, reason and memory is possible only when the warmth of the heart is of a certain degree – when it is neither excess nor insufficient. This, in turn, depends on how the body itself functions. For example, male organs produce more heat (it is easier for a man to generate certain emotions, like anger), while female organs produce less of it (which more often causes other emotions, like compassion).<sup>34</sup> This is an interesting element of his philosophy of man, because in advocating such a view, Al-Farabi – as would be present also in European philosophy, later, in La Mettrie for instance – makes a clear dependence of the states of the human soul on the current state of the body.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Man in the ethics of Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi

As an author, Al-Kindi was not simply a Muslim believer who, in ethical matters, referred only to the Qur'an and other strictly religious texts. Undoubtedly, he thought of ethics as an area of philosophical reflection, which is shown by the analysis of his preserved works. He also proclaimed that philosophy as such does not contradict revelation, but actually perfects the religious worldview, leading to the moral elevation of man.<sup>36</sup> It was an important declaration at a time when the Islamic world was just beginning to become acquainted with the philosophical legacy of antiquity.

The study of Al-Kindi's philosophical ethics must be associated with some challenges or difficulties, nonetheless. As for his preserved works, we can rely on just one treatise entirely devoted to ethical considerations. This work is *Risala fi dafa'i al-ahzan* (*The Treatise on the Removal of Sorrows*, hereinafter referred to as).<sup>37</sup> Fortunately, some information is also provided by excerpts from several other works, such as the already mentioned *Treatise on Definitions*, or the *Book on the First Philosophy*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–40.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il*, 97, 172.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Al-Turayhi, Muhammad, *Al-Kindi. Faylasuf al-'Arab al-Awwal. Hayatuhu wa siratuhu* (Damascus: Dar Ninawa, 2009), 110–125. Cf. also: Helmut Ritter, Richard Walzer, "Uno scritto morale inedito di al-Kindi", *Memorie della Reale Accademia nazionale dei Lincei* 8/1 VI (1938): 47–62.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Al-Kindi, *Rasa'il*, 81–162.

In the first of the aforementioned works, the author presents, for instance, several definitions of the term “philosophy”, which provide us with some information about his views on the ethical side of being human. In one of these definitions, philosophy is directly related to morality; as Al-Kindi writes, by practicing philosophy, “[...] we want man to be morally perfect”.<sup>39</sup> The connection between philosophy and the practice of life is also shown by the definitions of the term “virtues” (Arab. *al-fada’il*), being “the characteristics of a man worthy of praise [...]. As for the part [of virtues] in the human soul, it is divided into wisdom (Arab. *al-hikma*), courage (*al-najda*) and self-control (*al-’iffa*).<sup>40</sup>

In this definition, one can easily find the influence of concepts expressed in Plato’s *Republic*, where three functions (or abilities) of the soul were distinguished, as well as three types of virtue: wisdom (in relation to philosophers), courage (characterizing guards), and self-control (in relation to craftsmen).<sup>41</sup> In defining the term “virtue”, Al-Kindi also refers to Aristotle. He mentions, for instance, that there are two extremes to virtue; the first one comes from immoderation, and the other one from scarcity [...].<sup>42</sup> The influence of the Aristotelian doctrine of the golden mean, discussed in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, is clearly visible here. The philosophical ethics of Al-Kindi is characterized by the call for rationalism – understood as a life attitude, and also as a kind of moral signpost. It is not true that by making man the subject of his philosophical reflections, Al-Kindi does not pay attention to the emotional or affective side of human life. In spite of everything, however, he always emphasizes that in man it is the intellect that should guide, not emotions. Thus, he negatively refers to man’s impulsiveness, describing it as not coming from the soul (which is essentially rational), but from the body. A rational soul should oppose impulsiveness and lustfulness of man rather than succumb to them.<sup>43</sup>

In his philosophical ethics, Al-Kindi praises the ascetic life, because according to him only such a pattern of life allows man to turn (fully) to the sphere of pure concepts of intellect. Here, therefore, he is

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, 162.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, 177.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Plato, *The Republic* (Kensington: Clydesdale Press, 2018), 370 a *et pass.* The fact that Al-Kindi’s understanding of the term *al-fada’il* (Arabic: virtues) is in line with Platonic philosophy, is also mentioned by Ivry; cf. Albert L. Ivry, *Al-Kindi’s Metaphysics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974), 131.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1106b *et pass.*

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Al-Kindi, *Rasa’il*, 273; cf. also: Adamson, *Al-Kindi*, 114–115.

not only influenced by Platonism and Aristotelianism, but by the Stoic philosophy.<sup>44</sup>

The stoic inspirations are particularly evident in his *Treatise on the Removal of Sorrows*, as well *The Treaties on Definitions*. In the latter, Al-Kindi writes, that two types of death can be distinguished: the natural death, which we deal with when the soul leaves the body, and another type of “death”, which consists in “putting to death” own desires of the body – and it is the kind of death which some philosophers find crucial. In other words, seeking for pleasures is evil, at least for one who has chosen the way of the intellect for himself.<sup>45</sup> In his *Treatise on Definitions*, Al-Kindi also relates to human freedom in a stoic way. It is always limited, he writes, and being free means the possibility of shaping own soul in accordance with the demands of the intellect. In other words, freedom covers rather the sphere of consciousness, manifesting itself in following the reason and in rejection of all affects.<sup>46</sup>

In his *Treatise on Removing Sorrows*, Al-Kindi strongly refers to Epictetus's *Encheiridion* – a work that was paraphrased several times in the ancient period.<sup>47</sup> This stoic Roman philosopher, as Al-Kindi later did, describes human existence using the allegory of a ship at sea and its passengers. Having not yet completed their journey, passengers briefly disembark – say, an island in the middle of the ocean – and then continue their journey. The key and most interesting here are their different attitudes during that brief stay on the island. Some of the passengers – after meeting their needs, e.g., after replenishing the supply of drinking water, etc. – immediately return to the ship, because they remember that this is not the final destination yet and that they have a way forward.<sup>48</sup> Thanks to the quick return to the ship, they occupy the best, most comfortable places. Others on the island are attracted to the beautiful views, which means that when they return to the ship, they notice that only uncomfortable, worse places are left for them. There are

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Adamson, *Al-Kindi*, 150.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 162.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Kindi writes about the necessity in a work that has survived only in the form of a Latin translation: *De radiis stellarum (On Star Rays)*; cf. Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, Françoise Hudry, “Al-Kindi. De Radiis”, *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 61 (1974): 139–260. Cf. also: Al-Kindi, *On the Stellar Rays*, eds. Robert Zoller, Robert Hand (Berkeley Springs: Golden Hind Press, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Gerard Boter, *The Encheiridion of Epictetus and Its Three Christian Adaptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Epictetus, *Selections from the Discourses of Epictetus with the Encheiridion*, ed. George Long (Philadelphia: H. Altemus, 2009), 94–95.

also those who go deep into the island where they face various dangers. Moreover, when the captain calls everyone to return to the ship, some of them do not hear the call and remain there forever; their journey therefore ends in total disaster.<sup>49</sup> The moral conclusions and lessons from both Epictetus and Al-Kindi are obvious here. One should not be deluded by making the desires for the world of the senses the genuine goal of human existence.<sup>50</sup> We should also focus on the inner self and strive for self-improvement.<sup>51</sup>

Al-Kindi – which may have been related to his aristocratic origin – also clearly distinguishes the morality of the sage from the morality of the common people, thus continuing a certain way of thinking initiated by Heraclitus of Ephesus, later also found in Plato and the Stoics. The sensory world we experience is available to everyone; however, being bound only to the sensual realm ultimately leads to unhappiness. A philosopher should not imitate the morality of people deprived of an exalted spirit, unloving truth and not using the intellect properly; nor should he be sad when he loses something material.<sup>52</sup> Al-Kindi's claim that living according to reason (and own nature) is the *sine qua non* of being happy is also completely consistent with the ethics of the Stoics.<sup>53</sup>

Referring to ethical issues, Al-Farabi, unlike Al-Kindi, links individual's existence (and morality) with functioning within a community, or a society. In his best-known works on social philosophy, we can read that no man can attain perfection – that is, fully develop, also on the moral plane – unless he functions within a political association; and this is because everyone needs the help of other people to meet own basic needs. Al-Farabi lists human communities that differ in their size: the world (Arab. *mamurah*), the nation (*ummah*), and the smallest: city-state (Arab. *madinah*, the equivalent of the Greek *polis*).<sup>54</sup> There is, however, something much more important than size that distinguishes human communities: the different and diverse purposes these communities serve or pursue. According to Al-Farabi, their goals may be good and right behavior (for example, striving to please God and gaining a good fate in the afterlife); or, on the contrary, wrong and con-

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Turayhi, *Al-Kindi*, 120–122.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 93–98.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Epictetus, *Selections*, 97–98.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Turayhi, *Al-Kindi*, 120–122, 110–112.

<sup>53</sup> On the influence of the Stoics on the ethical position of Al-Kindi cf.: Peter S. Groff, "Al-Kindi and Nietzsche on the Stoic Art of Banishing Sorrows", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 28 (2004): 139–173.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Fakhry, *Al-Farabi*, 92–102.

temptible activities (for example, the pursuit of pleasure, the pursuit of wealth, etc.). As a result, we live either in virtuous cities, or non-virtuous and immoral ones.<sup>55</sup>

Al-Farabi writes that the ultimate goal of human action is happiness (Arab. *sa'adah*), and to this end leads to the acquisition of virtue. According to him, there are four types of virtue: theoretical, reflective, moral and political. The acquisition of knowledge leads man, one way or another, to acquire virtues of the first two types; and the culmination of knowledge is to know the ultimate cause of all things, God.<sup>56</sup> In Al-Farabi's philosophy, reaching the highest level of theoretical knowledge is synonymous with union with the active intellect, which is *sine qua non* of the ultimate happiness of man.<sup>57</sup> For Al-Farabi, the pattern of an ideal life is life devoted to knowledge, or a contemplative life. The implementation of such a model of life takes place primarily through acquiring knowledge, and not through, for instance, being a believer and practicing religion. Al-Farabi, therefore, seems to significantly depart from the purely religious understanding of the purpose of man's existence (according to Quranic verses, man exists merely to worship God).<sup>58</sup>

Regarding the non-intellectual virtues, especially the moral virtues, the acquisition of knowledge is understood as a *sine qua non* condition, since for everyone it is necessary to be able to distinguish right from wrong. Certain human actions deserve praise and other rebuke and criticism, but this would not be possible if man did not have some sort of moral sense. The ability to do so is in fact rational, and using it should become a habit. According to Al-Farabi, a person who lives in this way – that is, consciously and not accidentally using this ability to distinguish between good and bad – follows the path leading to happiness and, moreover, perfects own character.<sup>59</sup> Like the Stagirite, he argues that knowledge, choice (related to the will), and constant good character are necessary to speak of good action. Following Aristotle, he also proclaims the doctrine of the golden mean, arguing that one should always strive for moderation (Arab. *tawassut*). Al-Farabi also gives certain examples of moderation: courage, which is something between cowardice and recklessness; generosity, which is somewhere between wastefulness

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<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, 105–111.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Al-Farabi, *Tahsil al-sa'adah* (Beirut: Al-Indlis, 1983), 63 *et pass.*

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Fakhry, *Al-Farabi*, 73–75, 92–93.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Qur'an 51: 56.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Fakhry, *Al-Farabi*, 92–100.



and stinginess; continence, which is somewhere between exaggerated seeking pleasure and utter numbness.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusions

Comparing the elements of philosophy of man in Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi we observe that their views in this area of thought are much more connected than divided, and we are not dealing here only with formal analogies. The similarity of these philosophies is based on the fact that they result from a very similar, though not identical, theoretical inspirations. We are dealing with the continuation of the philosophical considerations undertaken by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and other representatives of classical philosophy, and then developed in later periods – both in pre-Christian philosophy, and in the early Christian thought. Al-Kindi's and Al-Farabi's positions are also, to some extent, based on the concepts and solutions of Islamic provenance, but most often it is the influence of a certain religious culture rather than that of strictly religious content.

The reliance by Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi on the philosophical tradition rather than the source texts of Islam includes both their theoretical philosophy (epistemology) and their practical philosophy (ethics, political philosophy). Both philosophers do not pay too much attention to man in their considerations in the field of metaphysics; here, they are mainly interested in God and His relationship to the world, as well as in general philosophical approach to the structure of reality. Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi relate to man much more within their epistemologies, also dealing with certain issues in their philosophies of the intellect and the soul. According to them, man is first and foremost someone who acquires knowledge, and assuming that real knowledge is the knowledge of abstract ideas (Al-Kindi), the most valuable knowledge comes from the pure perception of the intellect. Of course, this approach differs significantly from the purely religious, Islamic concept of man – understood primarily as a creature of God, who can and should recognize “signs (Arab. *ayat*) of God”, i.e., His revealed word (Qur'an), but also signs “written” directly in the work of God, i.e., in the world, or Nature, created by him and in the creatures that inhabit it. On the surface, it may seem that we are dealing with not a strong difference here, because both in the philosophical tradition (continued by Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi) and

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Al-Farabi, *Tahsil*, p. 50 *et pass.*

in Islam, one of the key issues is knowledge of the truth, as well as attitude towards it on the part of man. However, while in Islam knowledge is gained by the mind (soul) of man subject to God's will, recognizing the revealed Word and being aware of His "traces", in philosophy the intellect of man is left to itself, relying "only" on sense data and on logical thinking. Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi, therefore, initiate a certain new tradition on the basis of Arab-Muslim culture, which is not contradictory (or at least not clearly contradictory) with Islam as such, but nevertheless constituting a separate path for the activity of the human mind, as well as the search for meaning both in the world and in man himself.

In their deliberations on the intellect, both philosophers refer primarily to Aristotle and his later interpreters, with particular attention being paid to the active intellect. In Al-Farabi, the active intellect is subordinated to the First Principle (identified by him as the Neoplatonic One, or God) from which all that exists emanate. Describing man as the subject of cognition, Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi, however, do not limit themselves to mentioning only the intellect and senses as cognitive abilities. According to them, man also has some kind of "internal senses", and that include imagination and memory. Imagination arouses particular interest in both philosophers, because thanks to that faculty it is possible to receive Divine revelation.

Both Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi devote a lot of attention to issues of interest to an Islam-dominated culture, like the existence of the soul, for instance, but, again, their solutions are based much more strongly on philosophy than on Islamic source texts, the Qur'an and hadith. Their views on the soul have a lot in common. The soul is regarded as the principle of life in the body, which is only accidentally connected with it. The most perfect faculty of the soul is, of course, the intellect (Al-Kindi), which should exercise power over the other two: the spirit and the appetites. The soul cooperates with the body only when its activity requires it – including when a person gains cognition through his senses, when one imagines something, or when he is influenced by desires and emotions, etc. In addition, Al-Kindi in his works also emphasizes that the body can have a negative impact on the soul, especially if a person is overly focused on the sensual world. The actual area of involvement of the human soul is, therefore, the area of knowledge, not the area of desires or of what the senses experience. Al-Farabi, unlike Al-Kindi, pays more attention to human corporeality. According to him, each of the aforementioned faculties of the soul has organs that serve it (e.g., human senses, liver, kidneys, etc.), and which in turn are subordinate to the

main organ, which is the heart. It is at the heart where the reason, which guides the lower abilities, is found.

Both Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi pay a lot of attention to a certain dynamism related to man, his life, his cognition and the choices he makes; Al-Farabi seems to be paying slightly more attention to these issues than his predecessor, though. They both distinguish in man the will that chooses (or not) what has been presented to the senses or to the imagination. Human activity is therefore based on knowing the object – through intellect, imagination or through human senses – and then making a choice. A choice is good only when the will is governed by the reason, and not, for example, when man follows the pleasures.

To sum up, both Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi were not simply religious Muslims who referred only to the Quran and other strictly religious texts – on matters related to general worldview, seeking knowledge or ethics. Both believed that philosophy as such does not contradict the Divine revelation, or even perfects the religious life (Al-Kindi), and moreover, they sought inspiration mainly in the philosophical tradition. This remark applies also to practical reason. For example, when defining the term “virtue”, Al-Kindi refers to Plato (wisdom as a virtue) and to Aristotle (virtue as moderation in action). Their ethical postulates, according to which man should become independent from own desires in order to improve his soul (in accordance with both, the reason and the nature), are the postulates of a stoic provenance. In his practical philosophy, the goal of human activity is by no means entering *Janna*, or the Paradise, mentioned in the Qur’an, but rather to make human worldly life more bearable and less burdened with suffering.

Considerations in the area of theoretical philosophy seem to be strongly combined – in Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi – with postulates in the area of practical philosophy, especially ethics. As an example, the views of Al-Farabi should be mentioned, for whom reaching the highest state of theoretical knowledge is synonymous with union with the active intellect – and this is ultimately the ultimate happiness of man. This means that the pattern of an ideal life here is a life devoted to knowledge. Only such a pattern of life makes it possible to turn fully, completely to the realm of pure – Platonic, one may say – ideas of the intellect. It is, of course, a completely different model than the purely religious, Islamic one, in which the perfect human being is the one who recognizes the revelation coming from God and submits himself fully to God’s will, to lead a life devoted to practicing religion (serving God, his Maker). Both Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi should, therefore, be definitely referred to

as Islamic philosophers, bearing in mind, however, that in proclaiming their philosophies, including their views in the field of philosophy of man, they were admittedly influenced by Muslim culture, although at the same time, much more influenced by the tradition of Greek philosophy – with its rationalist ethics and conceptions of the soul and the intellect of man.

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## Summary

Man was, neither for Al-Kindi, nor for Al-Farabi, a clearly isolated object of philosophical reflection. This does not mean, however, that both Islamic philosophers were not at all concerned with the uniqueness of man, his nature or the purpose of his existence. In order to understand and analyze in depth the philosophies of man voiced by Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi, one must focus primarily on their epistemologies, on their philosophical views on intellect and soul, as well as on their practical philosophies: ethics and (in Al-Farabi) politics. In developing their philosophies, both Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi used notions of classical philosophy (mainly Aristotle and the Platonic tradition) and, to a lesser extent, religious, Islamic content – and therefore their positions are characterized by a very clear syncretism. For Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi, man is above all a subject of cognition, endowed with senses and will, but also with intellect, which should rule over his entire life. According to them, the highest goal of man is to contemplate the truth, not to succumb to the impulses coming from his own body, nor to concentrate only on a sensual experience.

**Keywords:** Al-Farabi, Al-Kindi, Arabic philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Islam, human philosophy, philosophical anthropology