



The meaning of life from Farabi's point of view

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Abstract: In this article we study the meaning of life in the philosophy of Abu Nasr Farabi in English for the first time, in contrast to familiar works discussing his contributions to philosophy of religion, philosophical anthropology, and political philosophy. We present the findings in relation to contemporary literature in the field of the meaning of life and the divisions made by analytic philosophers. In Farabi's philosophy, there is a fundamental connection between theism and true happiness (Sa'adat) based on the knowledge of the soul and its immortality. As a philosopher who believes in God and the immortal soul, Farabi designs a system- based on which man's worldly life becomes meaningful given the supreme goal of achieving good fortune in the afterlife and in connection with God. We characterize Farabi's approach as a supernaturalist (against naturalist) theory involving both God and a soul (against only one of these) that is based on the discovery (against error theory) of a single meaning in life (against pluralism), built upon objectivism (against subjectivism), action-guiding (against knowledge merely for its own sake), and holist (against partialism).

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Intr**o**duction:

The topic of "the meaning of life" is among the most critical issues in our time. Philosophers and thoughtful people generally wonder whether life has any meaning and, if so, what confers on it. However, the fact is that in *Farabi's* intellectual setting, such a topic was not discussed in its present form, perhaps because the meaningfulness of life was taken for granted. Discussing and discovering how the meaning of life is explained from *Farabi's* point of view, as this article does, depends on investigating his intellectual and philosophical milieu to the extent that it relates to our present topic.

Farabi is of course the founder of Islamic philosophy. He had mastered the principles of philosophy salient in his time and also presented new principles and issues in different fashions. Even though some issues were repeated the same way as they were mentioned in ancient Greece, religion (Islam)

and philosophy were brought together for the first time in *Farabi's* work. Although this design is not flawless, it cannot be considered eclectic and has had enormous influence on the course of Islamic philosophy.

Farabi's concern is to design a practical philosophy that will lead man's individual and social life to "true happiness" (*Sa'adat*). In addition, philosophical reason for *Farabi* becomes the ultimate criterion of judgment in everything, and he tries to logically prove the principles of religion (Davari,1998, p. 24). In his opinion, true religion is the same as philosophy, and like the way that religion is divided into primary and secondary principles, philosophy also bifurcates into theoretical and practical wisdom. Therefore, in most of his works, after explaining the philosophical foundations and issues, he examines the practical ways to achieve what he calls "*Sa'adat*" (true happiness) in personal and social dimensions. Theoretical

philosophy and metaphysics thus are not undertaken merely for their own sake but become especially significant in understanding and even reaching *Sa'adat*. It is for this reason that we see various metaphysical discussions in *Farabi's* two important political works, *Al Siyasat Al Madaniyeh* and *Araae ahl Madinah Fazelle*.

This study investigates how *Sa'adat* can be utilized to answer the question of the meaning of life from *Farabi's* point of view. In *Farabi's* case, nothing has been done in English before in respect to life's meaning as a philosophical value distinct from piety, virtue, or justice. Some scholars of Islamic philosophy have revisited the works of the great figures of Islamic philosophy in response to the meaning of life (Khalili, 2012; Purhassan & Abdekuhi, 2012; Nazari, 2024), but, prior to this essay, no research has been conducted squarely on meaning in *Al-Farabi's* philosophy. In addition, this

study is unique for explaining *Farabi's* theory in the context of contemporary philosophical literature regarding the meaning of life.

In contemporary (analytical) philosophy, the meaning of life and the question of happiness are two different issues (Wolf, 2010 & 2014; Kauppinen, 2012; Metz, 2013;), even if there are intimate relationships between them. The significance of "meaning" in the discussion of "meaning of life" is often divided into the three concepts of "goal," "impact," and "coherence." (Martela, 2016; Seachris, 2019) Therefore, if the goal or purpose of life is examined in *Farabi's* philosophical works, they can be about the "meaning of life." In the following we focus strictly on the meaning of an individual's life, setting aside *Farabi's* possible views about what might make the human species as a group meaningful.

In re-reading *Farabi's* philosophy, in this article we provide answers to the

following questions to address the question of the meaning of life:

What does *Farabi* think about the meaning of a person's life?

In the existing classifications, which category does *Farabi's* theory fit into?

Is he a naturalist or a supernaturalist?

Is he an objectivist or a subjectivist?

What can we learn about the meaning of life from *Farabi's* philosophy, at least for those working within the Muslim tradition? If we believe that our meaning of life lies centrally in its purpose, who determines this purpose?

Is the purpose defined within a person's Earthly life itself, or does realizing it require a world outside itself?

In the following we draw heavily on *Farabi's* analysis of

Sa'adat to answer these and related questions.

To address the above questions, we primarily refer to *Farabi's* original works and texts, and, depending on the needs of the discussion, we draw on translations and studies related to *Farabi*. It should be noted that we do not, in any way, intend to defend any views of *Farabi*. Our sole aim is to explore his works as thoroughly as possible to uncover his response to the question of the meaning of life and to demonstrate how such interpretations of *Farabi's* philosophy might be possible.

To this end, we first explain the status of God, the soul, and life after death. Then, by elucidating the concept of happiness in *Farabi's* philosophy, we will show what answer he would have offered if he had been confronted with the contemporary question of the meaning of life.

1. God

We begin the discussion by examining the role of God in the

meaning of life for two reasons. First, the research conducted in this area in the first division is categorized into supernaturalist and naturalist approaches (Metz, 2002, 2013 & 2021; Seachris, n.d), and so we need to show which category *Farabi's* theory falls into. In addition, we know that *Farabi* is a supernaturalist as he has built his philosophical system on the role of God while attempting to prove the existence of God. What adds to the importance of the subject is that the explanation of God by Muslim philosophers differs from the explanations often given by Christian theists in the English-speaking world. The subtleties present here are less commonly seen in similar viewpoints. This is also true regarding the afterlife. Therefore, examining and studying the role of God and the soul in the meaning of human life is essential to grasp *Farabi's* perspective.

Farabi tries to prove the God of religion by applying logical methods and

philosophical principles. According to *Farabi*, God's essence is necessary for existence. It does not need a cause because He is the first cause of the existence of things and is free from any defect; He is the absolute perfect, and any concept that indicates defects and limitations has no place in Him. God is thereby one and has no partners or opposites. God's existence is eternal (Fakhouri 1994, p. 411), and thus, his essence is sufficient for the survival and durability of his existence. In *Farabi's* thought, God is simple, and there is no way to combine with him. Therefore, he cannot be defined in the sense of analyzed in terms of parts.

In discussing divine attributes, the Second Teacher, as *Farabi* is often called, supports the view that God's attributes are one with his essence. Since God's essence is perfect, His attributes are also perfect, and He is characterized by everything called perfection. It should also be added that God

is unique in His essence and attributes; therefore, no perfection in the world can be compared to His perfection, and any description and perfection cannot delimit God. In all His attributes and descriptions, God is quantitatively and qualitatively unique and is not limited in any way.

Farabi's God is the truth in every sense, and anything devoid of God is void (against the truth). According to this opinion, everything other than God is invalid. In *Farabi's* philosophy, the foundation of the world system is established based on the theory of grace. He placed the foundation of the world on creation and explained the existence of beings through the means of issuing and grace (Al-Farabi, 2000, a, p. 89). Grace means overflowing in terms of fullness and applying grace to the world as a verb issued from "*Wajib-al-Wujud*." This means that the world or Being as a necessary verb is inseparable from His essence. In this theory, "*Wajib al-Wujud*" is

considered a complete subject with knowledge and will, whose action is necessary and inseparable from him, and the source of that knowledge is God's care for beings.

In short, from the knowledge (reasoning) of *Wajib-al-Wujud*, by its nature, the possibilities (contingent entities in the world) are issued *through* unity. Therefore, God does not need a tool to issue creatures, and movement has no meaning in His acts of issuance. According to *Farabi*, issuing and gracing entities and things do not add any form of perfection to God because He does not need them in His actions (Al-Farabi, 2010, pp. 77-78).

Farabi's emphasis is on the point that God, or the primal creator, does not have a goal outside of his essence from imparting existence to entities. The Almighty's aim is precisely his essence; other entities and beings exist according to His existence, and their goal is the same; therefore, beings that are

God's actions are neither the cause nor the end of his existence, nor do they add perfection to him. If we consider any aim outside God's essence, He will no longer precede everything, and something must precede him (Al-Farabi, 2000, a, p. 202).

It is thus clear that in *Farabi's* opinion since God is the first, the creation of things has no purpose other than giving and endowment. In addition, God is the end because beings' real purpose is to reach *Sa'adat*, that is, to reach His essence (Al-Farabi 2013, p. 132), which we explain in more detail below when we consider *Sa'adat* and meaning in life directly. *Farabi's* God does not create to reach perfection or satisfy his needs, and nothing outside his inherent perfections causes the creation of beings. He does not need to set a goal for them and impose on them or tempt them with the promise of reward (Heaven) and threaten them with punishment (Hell). This thought does not even consider

love and affection between God and His creatures as the divine aim. Instead, their aim is simply God himself.

2. *Nafs* (soul) and life after death

Farabi carefully analyzes and examines the human being from both physical and spiritual dimensions. Despite the importance and originality that *Farabi* considers for the two dimensions of human existence, the ultimate goal of human life for him is a spiritual matter, and the importance of the physical dimension is merely that it underlies his spiritual evolution (Al-Farabi, 1892, pp. 20-21). We therefore need to spell out *Farabi's* understanding of *Nafs* and its powers, to be able to address his account of meaning in life.

There is no exact equivalent for the word *Nafs* in English, and words such as "soul," "self," "ego," etc. do not convey the exact meaning of *Nafs*, although "soul" is probably the closest. *Nafs* is a simple essence

and an identical substance with the physical body, which at the same time has a union with it but is not the same as it. The truth of *Nafs* is one, yet it has different degrees and powers in its unity. These forces have longitudinal relationships or, in other words, are causal.² These forces directly relate to the body, and physical interactions are realized under their influence. Some of these forces, however, work independently of the body. In any case, the unity of the *Nafs* is preserved despite the multiplicity and diversity of forces (Al-Farabi, 2000a, pp. 151-158; Fakhoury, 2004, pp. 420-425).

In *Farabi's* philosophical system, the powers of *Nafs* are divided into the first division into perception powers and driving powers. Among the powers enumerated by *Farabi*, the rational faculty is what distinguishes human life from other beings. If meaning is to be inculcated in human life, the characteristics of this power, which is the basis of humanity

and human nature, must be addressed.

The thinking power or, in *Farabi's* expression, the intellectual power is either theoretical or practical. The theoretical intellectual faculty is a portal "through which a person acquires knowledge" (Al-Farabi 2000a, p. 49), that is, it acquires knowledge of those theoretical sciences that are not located in the field pertaining to decision-making. The practical intellectual faculty is the power through which one acquires knowledge about things that affect will and action. According to *Farabi*, the intellectual faculty, or simply reason within the order of theoretical intellect, consists of four longitudinal orders:

1. Potential intellect (Intellectus possibilis) >
2. Actual intellect (Intellectus in actu) >
3. Acquired intellect (Intellectus adeptus) >
4. Active intellect (Intellectus agens)

Farabi introduces potential intellect as a sheer ability to

abstract the form or essence of an entity to recognize similar sensory images. As soon as this level of intellect is qualified, its potentiality turns into an actuality. In this way, the second order of reason, i.e., the actual intellect is (gradually) formed. When the intellect achieves this goal, it loses its other potential effects and becomes actuality or reality. Only at this stage does the mind reach its maximum capacity for reasoning. This is the sign of reaching the third stage of reason: acquired intellect and its utility. Because all faculties have now been actualized and activated, at this stage, the human intellect, to some extent like other single intellects, includes and unites with the active intellect. As a result, in this state, one cannot only understand oneself and the understandings he has obtained from material things, but he/she can also comprehend the active/actualized intellect and other abstract essences (Nasr, 2004, p. 316).

In the first two stages, the intellect does not understand things separated from matter, and it necessarily needs matter, so much so that if the matter is destroyed, the senses of those matters will also be destroyed. However, at the stage of applied intellect or common sense, the intellect reaches a level in which it can directly take different senses from the active intellect, and, not needing the matter, these senses will not disappear when the matter is destroyed.

One of the most crucial components in the philosophical system of *Farabi* and his followers is "active intellect." The active mind is responsible for bringing perception into reality or actuality. In its tripartite levels, intellect does not become fully realized without connecting to the active intellect. The active intellect, the bearer of images and in which the senses are present, conveys something to the thinking power through which the intellect, via different stages, comes into actuality (Al-

Farabi, 2000b, p. 186). According to *Farabi*, the active intellect is "*Ruh al-Amin*" or "*Ruh al-Quds*," separate from matter. The active intellect is responsible for bringing man up to his ultimate perfection, i.e., reaching the level of active intellect. This is achieved when *Nafs* is separated from the body and does not need physical (material and lateral) affairs in its consistency and stability, reaching a level whereby, through intellectual perfection, it can remain. The active intellect, unity in essence, includes all perfect *Nafs*es who have achieved ultimate *Sa'adat* (Al-Farabi, 2000b, p. 181).

It is necessary to pay attention to two points. Firstly, in *Farabi's* theory of knowledge, following Aristotle, knowledge begins from the world of senses, and "man attains the perception of the whole because s/he perceives the part, and the potential *Nafs* is the world, and the senses are the means through which *Nafs* attains knowledge (Al-Farabi,

2016, 3-4). Secondly, according to *Al-Farabi*, *Nafs* is not clearly immortal and eternal, except when it becomes independent from matter and attains the power to connect with active intellect. Only after leaving the body, it becomes divine (spiritual) (Sharif, 1986, p. 167). In other words, after the destruction of the body, the *Nafs* (soul) remain after reaching the level of intellect (Al-Farabi, 1892, p. 21).

3. *Sa'adat*

So far, in this article we have expounded two metaphysical ideas that are central to *Farabi's* account of meaning in life, viz., the nature of God and of *Nafs*. This long section now focuses on what it means to perfect *Nafs* in relation to God as the ultimate purpose of human life. It proceeds by first defining the term "*Sa'adat*" and distinguishing types of it, after which it analyzes *Sa'adat* in relation to salient aspects of human life such as freedom, pleasure, and sociality.

The closest word that is used for the translation of “*Sa’adat*” is “happiness.” However, this word only conveys parts of the meaning of “*Sa’adat*.” The concept of *Sa’adat* is different from the concept of happiness, which often suggests a positive state of the brain in terms of pleasure or satisfaction. *Sa’adat* has a much deeper meaning and includes not merely a positive state of mind, but also truth, goodness, and beauty. The word “*Sa’adat*” (the original Arabic term) is used throughout this article.

A human person is a wise and perfectible being who cannot achieve his/her highest goals except through social life (Al-Farabi, 2010, p. 145). Nevertheless, its final perfection is not social or physical but instead spiritual or intellectual, which relates to the knowledge and understanding of the truth, which, as we have seen for *Farabi*, is God. For more explanation, the highest perfection of us, which leads to our *Sa’adat*, is to reach the

highest intellectual position, that is, knowledge and recognition of the truth, which is achieved via connecting to the active intellect. *Farabi* connects *Sa’adat* to the highest degree with the celibacy of *Nafs* and freedom from the worldly body. For this reason, he analyzes and investigates human happiness in accordance with dependence on the supernatural world. In *Farabi's* words, *Sa’adat* is the highest goal that the origin of creation had envisioned for human beings (Al-Farabi, 2000b, p. 244).

3-1 Definition of *Sa’adat*

Farabi believes that the primary purpose of the human person is to achieve *Sa’adat*. He defines *Sa’adat* with two key characteristics (Al-Farabi, 2000b, p. 237): “*Sa’adat* is the absolute goodness and a goodness that is free from all ties” (Al-Farabi, 2010, p. 183).

1. *Sa’adat* is the absolute good. It means that it is the most perfect and the highest good.

2. It is self-sufficient, which means it is valuable, by itself, and by its nature as opposed to dependent on anything else. It is something we want for its own sake; it is not a means of achieving something else, i.e., it is itself the end.

3-2 Types of *Sa'adat*

This system of thought divides *Sa'adat* into true *Sa'adat*, which is inherently desirable, and unreal or merely apparent *Sa'adat*. True *Sa'adat* is something a person aptly wants for himself and not to achieve something else, but unreal *Sa'adat* is not *Sa'adat* at all. However, the latter may be desirable in the eyes of the public. According to *Farabi*, the condition for achieving true *Sa'adat* is to remove the veil created for humans by the body and material things (Davari, 1998, p. 101). He introduces the desires to achieve things like wealth, fame, and pleasure as forms of unreal *Sa'adat* (Al-Farabi, 1991, 52).

True *Sa'adat* has different levels, and the most desirable level is called "*Sa'adat Qusvai*," the highest happiness. To reach this level of *Sa'adat*, a person must acquire true wisdom. *Farabi* equates true wisdom with wisdom in its specific sense, which means that a person acquires knowledge about the supreme principles of all beings (Al-Farabi, 1970, p. 11).

The human soul has many talents to reach the desired perfection. Suppose all the talents hidden in the human soul reach from potentiality to actuality so that no state of possibility or expectancy remains in the soul, and the human intellect reaches from the state of beastly intellect to active intellect. In that case, the highest level of ultimate *Sa'adat* (*Qusvai*) has been achieved. In such a state, *Nafs* finds the ability and complete readiness to connect with different beings (Al-Farabi, 1966, p. 8). *Farabi* mentions that some actions and affairs provide the basis for

achieving *Sa'adat* by *Nafs* (Al-Farabi, 1987, p. 81), for instance actions such as gaining knowledge and helping others.

Farabi discusses the worldly *Sa'adat* and *Sa'adat* in the hereafter, although the real and ultimate *Sa'adat* pertains to the hereafter when one has shed one's physical body. When human virtues become the attributes of people, their *Sa'adat* in this world and, most importantly, the hereafter will be realized (Sharif, 1986, p. 166).

3-3 *Sa'adat* and the concept of good

The essence of *Sa'adat* in its different levels is based on the concept of the good; that is, *Sa'adat* is something that we rightly consider to be the highest good. Goodness or "the good" in anything is a factor that motivates action in a person so that "through this factor (goodness) the rank and truth of his/her existence reach the stage of completion" (Al-Farabi, 2013, p. 386). Elsewhere,

Farabi illustrates the concurrency of the true good and existence, claiming, "The true good is the perfection of existence, and the self-existent [God] and the true evil also entail the lack [or negation] of this perfection and existence" (Al-Farabi, 2013, p. 385).

From *Farabi's* perspective, the good appears in different degrees and levels. The origin of this multiplicity and distinction between different degrees of goodness is rooted in the end, which indicates the rank of the correspondent good. With this hindsight, two categories of goodness can be distinguished: the goodness that motivates people to achieve other forms of goodness (the good for others) and the goodness that is desirable for *Nafs* (good for itself) (Al-Farabi, 2011, p. 49).

The targeted goods are divided into two types: total and non-total. What are meant by total goals are things that a person does not need to increase when they are achieved, and the

chief example here is *Sa'adat*. Non-total goals are things that a person still wants to increase when achieved, and examples can be wealth and (political or social) status.

According to *Farabi*, the good that is the source of man's achieving *Sa'adat* is natural or voluntary. Heavenly bodies have created natural benevolences, but volitional benevolences are based on human will. "The voluntary good and evil, which are the same as beauty and ugliness, only come from human beings. Man, issues voluntary goodness and comes from one source" (Al-Farabi, 2000b, p. 238). *Farabi* also places the emotional and imaginative faculties at the service of the practical power of thinking and believes that they motivate people toward voluntary goodness. "At this moment, everything that comes from a person is good, and thus the voluntary good only comes from this aspect" (Al-Farabi, 2000b, p. 238).

3-4 *Sa'adat* and *Fitrah*

Can all people achieve *Sa'adat*?

This section answers this question in the context of the concept of *fitrah*, which is a nature, essence, or character that is an inseparable and innate part of people's psyche that they carry with them from birth. *Fitrah* is a supernatural concept and is different from genetic characteristics. According to *Farabi*, *fitrah* is the same at birth among all human beings.

However, since humans have different talents, they are at different levels in receiving reasonable information from the active intellect; therefore, achieving happiness through the same means and to the same extent is not possible for everyone. Only those who fully receive the reasonable from the active intellect and utilize it in the right direction will achieve the highest degree of *Sa'adat*. On the other hand, *Farabi* considers the perception of *Sa'adat* and goodness innate, in accordance with *fitrah*, and believes that the foundation of

happiness lies in all human beings' common natures and *fitrah*. This shared nature is the basis of all the joint work they do.

How can people share a common understanding of *Sa'adat* and goodness, but not all of them receive the understanding of the reasonable that leads to achieving goodness and *Sa'adat* to the same extent? It is essential to pay attention to the role of *fitrah* in understanding the reasonable judgment that comes from the active intellect. The key to solving this conflict is how human *fitrah* works. In *Farabi's* thought, *fitrah* does not force a person to do something but is only the imperfect cause to do things; that is, *fitrah*, along with other cognitive factors, becomes the contributory cause of the realization of a blissful and good action.

Perhaps concerning *Farabi's* supplementary explanations, these two issues can be summed up in this way: the human being, in its natural

state and without external factors making any obstacle for him/her, automatically moves towards doing the thing that is the prerequisite for realizing good and worthy deeds. In other words, people with a healthy *fitrah* will accept knowledge and the reasonable through it and act on its basis. However, it is also possible that external factors and stimuli encourage people to act against their *fitrah* in such a way that they develop a tendency toward them and perform that act despite the difficulty and disgust and perhaps by way of emergency (Al-Farabi, 2000b, pp. 240-245).

Accordingly, it can be inferred that in addition to this common aspect (*fitrah*), each person has his/her specific characteristics, which, under the influence of external factors – such as active intellect and natural and unnatural obstacles – do not exist in other human beings. As mentioned earlier, people's understandings are not the same, quantitatively and

qualitatively; for this reason, each has his/her actions and deeds (Farabi, 1379, p. 187).

3-5 *Sa'adat* and the role of intellect

In *Farabi's* view, the principal virtues are intellectual and theoretical; therefore, perfection involves an intellectual perception. In this philosophical system, science is the principle of the existence of beings and the guardian of the system of the world and the universe. Just as that level of *Sa'adat*, which *Farabi* considers to be man's highest goal, at the outset relies on recognition, understanding, intellectual perception, and the power of thinking, in the end it is spiritual and is realized within man's intellectual realm. Therefore, although knowing the virtues and their role in achieving the ultimate *Sa'adat* is necessary, more is needed. Achieving *Sa'adat* in this world and hereafter depends on the cultivation of human virtues. These virtues include theoretical, intellectual, and

behavioral virtues as well as practical creativity (Al-Farabi, 2011, p. 50).

3-6 *Sa'adat*, will, and freedom

The Second Teacher considers the basis of all volitional, sensory, and intellectual activities to be the faculty of desire, "although it does not explain what real motivation is like" (Nasr, 2004, p. 315). This faculty is the driving force *Nafs* controls and utilizes the body in its desired direction (Al-Farabi, 2000a. p. 100).

To explain the role of will in human *Sa'adat*, *Farabi* enumerates three powers for *Nafs*: sense, imagination, and thinking. According to him, each of these powers has its natural power that forms three types of will in human beings. The first is at the level of senses, the second is at the level of imagination, and the third is at the level of thinking responsible for actualizing various human actions.

The word "free will" can be applied only to the third form of

will, and this third will, unlike the first two wills that may appear in non-thinking animals, is the cause of the realization of ugly and beautiful acts in humans. If a person does not realize the third will, talking about *Sa'adat* or misery is preposterous and meaningless. Only through this will a person become the subject/doer of ugly and beautiful acts or be characterized by beautiful and ugly temperaments or happy and wretched characteristics (Al-Farabi, 2013. p. 47). Therefore, will, in the third sense, is a necessary condition and an imperfect cause for achieving *Sa'adat*.

From *Farabi's* point of view, the achievement of *Sa'adat* and goodness depends on human actions and behaviors, and it generally has a practical aspect. However, it should be noted that *Sa'adat* is not achieved through actions and behaviors that are neither praiseworthy nor condemnable. *Sa'adat* and good fortune are obtained by performing actions

and behaviors that are praiseworthy and by abandoning reprehensible actions. Therefore, if someone steps into the right path without any intention and rehearsal and obtains the correct beliefs, then *Sa'adat* cannot be said to be achieved by him/her. Good (beautiful) deeds might happen unintentionally, or sometimes a person is forced to do a good deed. *Sa'adat* and good fortune do not appear this way, i.e., by accident or external compulsion. In contrast, it is achieved only by doing good deeds that are done purposefully and voluntarily.

In addition, if a person does good deeds for a short period, s/he will not be *Saeid* (e.g., someone who possesses *Sa'adat* or happiness); doing good should be permanent and continuous, and one should choose good deeds in all aspects of life. Therefore, from *Farabi's* point of view, a *Saeid* (happy) person is a person who voluntarily chooses and performs good and beautiful

human actions and moral virtues in the three spheres of his existence throughout his life (Al-Farabi, 2000a, p. 188).

3-7 *Sa'adat* and pleasure

One of the concepts related to *Sa'adat* is the concept of pleasure. In addition to being good, *Sa'adat* is also a pleasure to achieve. Pleasure, one of the most essential characteristics of a material being in its innate nature, has been undisputed in some ways. Isn't the purpose of life to achieve pleasure, obviously central to happiness?

According to *Farabi*, pleasure is not the end of life. However, because *Sa'adat* is desirable and something desirable is pleasurable, we can conclude that *Sa'adat* is pleasurable. It means that *Sa'adat* is fully desirable and desirable in part because it is pleasurable. Human *fitrah* is such that it is attracted to pleasurable things, and *Sa'adat* is the highest pleasure man should want. It should be noted that in the context of *Farabi's*

thought, not every pleasure leads to *Sa'adat*; the relationship between pleasure and *Sa'adat* is one-way. Every *Sa'adat* is enjoyable, but not every pleasure is blissful; therefore, there is no invariable correlation between pleasure and true or the highest happiness.

As can be inferred from *Farabi's* arguments, pleasure is achieved because of *Sa'adat*, while *Sa'adat* is not achieved merely because of pleasure. Just as *Sa'adat* has different levels in accordance with different faculties of the soul, pleasure also has different degrees and levels; so, pleasure varies in different perceptive faculties of *Nafs*, and each faculty perceives its pleasure. In *Fusus Al-Hekmeh*, the highest degree of pleasure of the power of thinking is realized when a person reaches the stage of confident *Nafs* and intuitively realizes³ the existence of God with his/her whole being (in a disembodied afterlife). This degree of pleasure is the

ultimate man's *Sa'adat Qusvai* (Al-Farabi, 2013. p. 65).

3-8 *Sa'adat* and community

Every human being needs society to survive and achieve his/her highest human perfection. With people living together socially, villages and cities are formed over time. For people who gather to live in Medina, *Sa'adat* depends on the *Sa'adat* of the group. With this assumption, the best city is the one whose people do the deeds that bring them *Sa'adat*, and this city is the city of virtue. *Farabi* thus calls such a city "the ideal city" (or *Utopia*) and calls a nation that has such cooperation in all its cities "the ideal nation" (Fakhoury, 2004. p. 436).

For *Farabi*, the ideal city does not constitute an ultimate goal in itself; rather, it functions as an instrument through which an individual's *Sa'adat* may be attained. The meaning he attributes to *Sa'adat* is inseparable from the purification of the soul and the cultivation of human virtues.

Accordingly, the path toward *Sa'adat* depends on moral and intellectual development, which must be fostered within a properly ordered social context. Such a society provides the necessary conditions for the formation of virtue, a task that ultimately falls upon the ruler of the city (Daviri, 1998, p.74).

Farabi evaluates an individual's *Sa'adat* in the context of society and its *Sa'adat*, and the criteria for distinguishing true *Sa'adat* from unreal *Sa'adat* depends on membership and cooperation in the *Utopia*. The role of *Utopia* is that it provides the means of growth and the actualization of good and beautiful attributes. It is also interesting that *Farabi* explains the difference between *Utopia* and other cities with the attitude and understanding of their members about *Sa'adat*.

The people of *Utopia* have commonalities concerning science and practice. However, each of them has a particular expertise based on their personal characteristics and

individual talents, and, by developing those special characteristics, they demonstrate their virtues.

Utopia is a general scheme for an ideal society whose main feature is the intentional and systematic promotion of scientific and practical virtues. *Farabi* has summarized all that is necessary for forming such a good society in virtuous actions based on rationality. However, he has not paid attention to its essential material and natural aspects, including the geographical location and natural and human resources. *Farabi's Utopia* should be able to solve its various problems using rationality in any situation; hence, it remains an abstract plan in the realm of ideas (Davari, 1998, p. 105), inviting a fuller articulation.

Undoubtedly, a city with such utopian characteristics has never been realized anywhere in the world. If human *Sa'adat* generally depends on it, as *Farabi* explains, then it can be

said that no human being has ever attained true *Sa'adat*.

However, this implication is contrary to *Farabi's* belief about prophets and philosophers. He envisions them at the peaks of *Sa'adat*, while, according to history's testimony, none of them lived in *Utopia*. *Farabi* may have deemed prophets and philosopher's exceptions, but this must be clarified. In any case, the dependence of *Sa'adat* on *Utopia*, although it seems logical on the surface, faces serious challenges.⁴ Perhaps we can say that *Sa'adat* has been rare and difficult compared to what would be possible with *Utopia*.

4. The meaning of life

The close link between theism and *Sa'adat* in *Farabi's* thought allows the present study to explain the meaning of life for him as a supernatural view centrally composed of the concepts of *God*, *Nafs*, and *Sa'adat*. *God*, the immortality of *Nafs* (soul), and the analysis of the concept of *Sa'adat* as the

ultimate goal of human life are our presuppositions in re-reading and analyzing *Farabi's* thoughts as they pertain to twenty-first century philosophical reflection on the meaning of life. Providing any interpretation of *Farabi's* conception of life's meaning without considering each of these three components is thus incorrect. Human *Sa'adat* is the continuation and evolution of *Farabi's* metaphysics. Therefore, as we have seen in the above sections, he starts discussion, for instance in the book *The Opinions of Ahl al-Madinah al-Fadzelah*, with the topic of the first existence or self-existence (*Wajib al-Wujud*) and its attributes and the quality of issuing multiple phenomena of existence. He continues with the human *Nafs*, the powers of *Nafs*, and the quality and manner of its various functions in discussing *Sa'adat* as the ultimate goal of creation.

It was mentioned in the introduction to this study that investigating the concept of

Sa'adat is related to the ancients' thought; even so, *Sa'adat* as the ultimate goal of life is one of the concepts that brings us closer to a possible standpoint regarding the contemporary question of the meaning of life. As it has turned out, *Sa'adat* is the main focus of theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom in *Farabi's* thought; therefore, it is considered that, in response to the question of the meaning of life, *Farabi* advances achieving *Sa'adat* as the supreme goal of life that bestows the greatest meaning upon human life.

This goal, which lies as an inner desire in human nature, is not always achieved; that means that someone or something outside of that aspect of human nature has made it impossible for him to achieve *Sa'adat*. Even though this innate desire is mixed with (other aspects of) human nature, understanding and receiving it is not taken for granted and requires rational discovery.

From *Farabi's* point of view, the meaning of human life must be generated particularly through a person's intellectual effort that is realized in practice. This self-sufficient inner labor is enough to move a person toward excellence and evolution, to give meaning to his life. Every virtuous action that is formed based on rational perception takes the person a step forward in the direction of reaching the goal and is therefore meaningful; so, not only the overall goal of life is meaningful, but also the individual actions that are effective in reaching the goal are considered meaningful and valuable, at least as a reliable means if not as incomplete manifestations of *Sa'adat*. With this perspective, non-virtuous actions are meaningless.

Drawing on distinctions prominent in recent analytical-philosophical thought on life's meaning, *Farabi's* view on the meaning of life can be well described as follows:

1. Supernaturalist: Considering the vital position of God and *Nafs* (soul) in *Farabi's* philosophy and the role they play in the design of the system of being, undoubtedly *Farabi's* answer to the meaning of life is grounded on his spiritual beliefs about God and soul. Although some real *Sa'adat* is possible during an earthly life, that is only because of being in the right relationship with God as the ground of truth. If God did not exist or if we lacked the spiritual nature that could connect with God, i.e., if only physical nature existed, then our lives would be utterly meaningless, for *Farabi*. His view contrasts with those of naturalists such as Wolf (2010), Trisel (2016), and Landau (2017).

2. Eschatological: From *Farabi's* point of view, the meaning of human life lies in achieving certain purposes. Some of these goals are desired by the human *Nafs* (for himself), and some are pursued to reach higher goals (for others). The meaningful

ones are those involving the achievement of *Sa'adat*, understood roughly as the fullest awareness of God. Those who deny that meaning is essentially a matter of achieving a goal include Galen Strawson (2018), who in contrast can be read as holding that it can be a function of haphazard behavior one happens to find of interest at a particular moment in time.

3. Discovery-oriented: The desire for happiness is the highest good in human nature, and it is discovered once it accords with rationality. Therefore, there is a real meaning of human life, which is equal to achieving *Sa'adat*. Nihilism, the view that life has no meaning or that all claims about meaning are false (held by, e.g., Smith 2003), is itself false. Not only is error theory false in respect of meaning for *Farabi* but is skepticism (agnosticism) too; he believes that we can know that God exists and how to relate to God to obtain meaning in life.

4. Objectivist: Regarding the meaning of life, some consider the meaning dependent on human perception or judgment, while others consider it independent of the human mind. *Farabi* is a supporter of the latter group, in contrast to subjectivists such as Harry Frankfurt (1988) or, very recently, Michael Hauskeller (2025). *Farabi* believes that, just as a sick person may not be able to enjoy decent food and recognize its taste and smell correctly, the human cognitive system does not work properly in the condition of lack of health and may not recognize *Sa'adat* despite desire for it being part of human nature. In other words, in discussing the meaning of life, it is not the first-person (subjective) view that makes life meaningful. Instead, life's meaningfulness is evaluated from the external observer's or third-person point of view and is something about which a given individual might be mistaken. Meaning is a matter of what people ought to appreciate,

judge to be important, and pursue, i.e., it is objective, in contrast to the subjective view that meaning is whatever people happen to appreciate, judge to be important, and pursue.

5. Unity-oriented: The logical requirement of the previous point is that the meaning of life is the same for all human beings. It is not the case that humans can choose a goal or envision a meaning from among several options, all of which are justified and acceptable. This is because God's scheme implies a single final goal for every human being, namely, the full apprehension of God. However, as we have seen, not everyone achieves the highest purpose and to the same degree. *Farabi's* view contrasts not merely with subjectivism, but also with pluralist accounts such as that of John Kekes (2000).

6. Pragmatic: If *Sa'adat* is achieved only through virtuous actions, then life becomes meaningful depending on action and behavior based on virtues and good deeds; therefore, life

does not find meaning with mere theoretical knowledge and knowledge of good and evil (*contra* Mintoff, 2008). In addition, life does not become meaningful by chance and without action. Farabi moreover provides guidance about how individuals and governments ought to be oriented to foster meaning in life, which parallels recent supernaturalist and advice-oriented work by Clifford Williams (2020).

7. Holistic: *Farabi's* emphasis on *Sa'adat* Qosva shows his holistic view of the meaning of life. Even though every human action is essential on the way to happiness, based on the unity of the purpose of human life, life has a general meaning, and the meaning of human life, in *Farabi's* view, is evaluated as a whole. Human actions are not ends in themselves, but they are chosen to achieve something else; that is the ultimate goal. So, the value of each action is considered in proportion to how it helps to achieve that overall

goal (a contemporary version of this view is in Tabensky 2003).

6. Conclusion

As can be seen, *Farabi's* view of the meaning of life is a supernaturalist view that is dependent upon the existence of God and the human soul. As an eschatological philosopher, *Farabi* sets an overarching goal to be achieved during a human's life, which is to know God. In accordance with his/her *fitrah* and existential reality, *Farabi* emphasizes the belief that a person discovers this God-determined goal and carries it to the highest level with the help of his/her sensual faculties and above all the intellectual faculties of *Nafs*.

¹ Existence is necessary.

² In the sense that each order is the cause of the inferior and the effect of its superior order.

The highest goal is to achieve the highest good, that is, to achieve *Sa'adat*. *Sa'adat*, which constitutes the meaning of human life, is a single meaning in which there is no multiplicity; the meaning of life is thereby the same for all human beings, and it is the achievement of ultimate *Sa'adat* ("*Sa'adat Qusvai*") that becomes possible by choosing and performing virtuous actions after recognizing their virtuousness, which makes one aware of the holy. According to *Farabi*, this meaning is fully realized only in the complete liberation of the soul (*Nafs*) from the body, i.e., physical death that leads to the greatest spiritual life in union with the divine.

³ Intuitive perception is against acquired perception.

⁴ Examining these challenges is beyond the scope of this research.

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