

Weeds: Cultivating the Imagination in Medieval Arabic Political Philosophy

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Any reader of Plato's dialogues in their entirety feels the constant tug of two very different solar motions. In the *Laws* the young field-legates (*agronomoi*) of the city move in a twelve-month cycle through each of the divisions of the city's territory (*Laws* 760) in obedience to the law and the gods of the city. Socrates, too, moves through the city, questioning each citizen about the beliefs concerning the virtues implanted by the city's laws and myths. Socrates, like the field-legates, moves in "obedience" to the command of the sun-god Apollo, a command that Socrates claims to have received through the god's oracle at Delphi.¹ To live in the light of the sun of reason is only possible within a city totally ordered in imitation of heavenly order—so speaks the *Laws*.² To follow the sun is to move in opposition to the shadows of artificial light that dominate all actual and even possible cities—so speaks the *Apology* and, more explicitly, the *Republic*.

Our learned prejudices about these two solar motions lead us to divide Plato's thought into periods of composition. Socratic heliotropy belongs to the dialogues of Plato's earlier period, especially the earliest, the *Apology*, scholars believe; the city itself in seasonal motion belongs to the dialogues of Plato's later period, and especially the latest, his *Laws*. The *Republic*, which describes the best city as an artificially lighted cave, whose inhabitants ought nonetheless to be ruled by the philosopher-king who has, at least momentarily, seen the sun, belongs to Plato's middle period.

¹ *Apology* 21ff, cf. *Symposium* 220d.

² On the religio-political significance of the twelve-month cycle see Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian*, tr. David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1996), 67, 96-97.

Whatever the merits of this family of readings as interpretations of Plato,³ they use a scholar's device to avoid coming to terms with a genuine tension. The two modes of solar motion represent two different modes of relating philosophy to politics, even under their modern guises of theory and practice. Either the philosopher is to bring the political into rational order, or he is to bring his own life into rational order against the disorders and deliberate confusions of the political. Either the philosopher is to weed the fields of the city of disorderly weeds, or he himself is a weed or, more politely, a wildflower, pushing up toward the sun through the broken asphalt of politics.

Plato himself seems to resolve this tension by distinguishing between the philosopher's duties in the best city and in other cities. As Socrates says in the *Republic*:

Observe, then, Glaucon, that we won't be doing injustice to the philosophers who grow up among us, but we will say just things to them, when we compel them to care and guard for the others. For we will say that those who are of their sort who grow up in the other cities fittingly do not share in the labors therein. For they grew in them spontaneously though the regime in each did not intend it, and the spontaneously grown has a just claim not to be eager to repay the cost of its nurture to anybody, since it owes [its] nurture to nobody. But you we reared up, just as in hives, as leaders and kings for yourselves and the rest of the city, and you have been educated better and more perfectly than those and are more able to have a share of both [philosophy and rule]. Each of you must then go down in turn to the common dwelling of the others and accustom yourself to the shadows there. For when you are accustomed, you will see in a myriad ways better than those there, and you will know the images, that they are images and of what they are images, on account of your having seen the true things that concern the beautiful, the just and the good.⁴

Yet Plato's Socrates availed himself only partially of the just claim of the philosopher in an actual city that contributed nothing to his nurture. While Socrates took only a minimal part in the official business of the city, he never hesitated to

³ Such a resolution though periodization flies in the face of numerous passages in both the "early" and the "later" dialogues. In the *Gorgias* Socrates claims to be the only true politician in Athens—the city as a whole is disordered, filled up with the toxins of excess, but Socrates the political physician claims to be able to diagnose the disease and propose, if not impose, the remedy (518b ff., 521d). In the *Laws*, on the other hand, the Athenian Stranger recognizes that the best human beings do not necessarily grow up in the best-governed city (951bc), thereby admitting that the standard for political order does not simply transcend and realize the standard for order within the individual but can contradict and subvert it.

⁴ *Republic* 520a-c; all translations from the Greek are my own.

care for and cultivate the other spontaneous growths.⁵ This care for others would appear to partake of all of the burdens of political life, if only in part. Such a cultivation of other weeds is a burden that the spontaneously grown philosopher could, one would think, shirk, as justly as he could shirk the burden of ruling.

I propose to examine the image of the solitary weed reaching toward the sun in three medieval philosophers writing in Arabic—Alfarabi (ca. 870-950), Ibn Bajjah (d. 1138), and Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185). All of them, though in very different ways, continue what they themselves see as the Platonic tradition in political philosophy. Yet as philosophers they must resolve this fundamental tension in Plato for themselves and not merely paper over it with a historically sophisticated but philosophically naive periodization of the apparently opposed solar motions.

In Plato's image the philosopher is the sole pilot of the ship of state.⁶ Yet as we know, the ship of state is sailed on a sea of opinion, and it is steered by myth and rhetoric. Why should the philosopher have to steer that foul wheel? For he seeks truth beyond the ways of the city, so whence comes his knowledge of ships and seamen? And suppose one of the crew obeys his orders but wishes to know why he must obey. What should the pilot say to him? Or perhaps the pilot should run from these troubles, take his instruments and go ashore, and contemplate the beauties of the stars and the winds by himself.

In *The Political Regime* Alfarabi discusses these questions using the image of weeds, men in virtuous cities who grow of themselves toward the truth—pushing up or through the “images” on which the city is based.⁷ Weeds, at least some weeds, turn out to be potential philosophers; and so Alfarabi's view of the philosopher and his political and educational duties emerges in his account of weeds, their growth and “cultivation.”⁸ Such caring requires the concern with images that is the very core of true statesmanship according to Plato.

⁵ See, e.g., *Charmides* 153d.

⁶ *Republic* 488.

⁷ Alfarabi, *Political Regime*, N104-107; selections tr. Fauzi M. Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972), 53-56. Whereas Plato uses the image of the sun to describe the relation of the idea of the good to the other intelligibles, Alfarabi uses this image and Plato's language to describe the relation of the Active Intellect to the other intelligibles (*Republic* 508a ff., *Political Regime* N35-36). All translations from *The Political Regime* are drawn from Fauzi Najjar's published and Miriam Galston's unpublished partial translations (University of Maryland, Department of Government and Politics, photocopy); but I have also consulted Shukhri Abed's complete Hebrew translation (Tel Aviv, 1992). References to the *Political Regime* are to Najjar's Arabic edition, *Al-Siyāsāt al-madaniyyah* (Beirut: Matba'ah al-kāthūlīkiyyah, 1964), as used by Galston and Abed (preceded by N), and to *Medieval Political Philosophy*, when the passage is translated by Najjar.

⁸ On the historical background of the term “weeds” (in Arabic, *al-nawābit*), see Ilai Alon, “Fārābī's Funny Flora: Al-nawābit as ‘Opposition,’” *Arabica*, 37 (1990), 56-90. Alon notes that while the term emerges in ninth-century disputes over the Caliphate, Alfarabi gives it the novel general meaning of “oppositionists,” those who oppose the rulers and their doctrines, without regard for the specific doctrine opposed.

Ibn Bajjah discusses weeds in *The Governance of the Solitary*, where he says that “one of the characteristics of the perfect city is that it is free of weeds.”⁹ Where Alfarabi sees weeds growing up amid the well-manicured lawn of the virtuous city, Ibn Bajjah sees them amidst the crabgrass. Ibn Bajjah’s contradiction of Alfarabi is a consequence, as we shall see, of his general denigration of political life.

Ibn Tufayl, in *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, presents us with the story of two weeds and one other: Hayy, Asal, and Salaman, although he never calls them such. In this remarkable tale Ibn Tufayl hints that actual philosophers who disregard political life not only fail to perpetuate philosophy in the city but themselves fail to attain the highest possible understanding of the apparently transpolitical order of the whole. Thus, while Ibn Tufayl appears to extol the solitary weed Hayy, at the same time he presents Hayy as a failure. Hayy fails to ameliorate the condition of ordinary believers or to encourage the few who are capable of speculation because he cannot understand human beings and the kingdom of images in which they live. Worse, Ibn Tufayl hints that Hayy himself cannot reach the loftiest levels in intellectual speculation, and Hayy’s failure is connected to his defective grasp of the use of images.

For Alfarabi, political science is the master science, and we must begin here if we wish to understand his teaching regarding “those who are well-grounded in science,” the philosophers, and those who would be, the weeds. “Man belongs to the species that cannot accomplish their necessary affairs nor achieve their best state, except through the association of many groups of them in a single dwelling-place.”¹⁰ It is political science, Alfarabi states in the *Enumeration of the Sciences*, that explains that true happiness “comes about only through a rulership by which [the ruler] establishes these actions, ways of life, states of character, positive dispositions, and morals in the cities and nations.”¹¹ He who would establish this rulership must inquire “into that in which all nations share—that is, the human nature common to them—and then into all the things which pertain specifically to every group within every nation.”¹²

Political science in Alfarabi’s account is thus rooted in theoretical science, that is to say, the perfect legislator must also be a philosopher.¹³ “If he intends to

⁹ *Governance of the Solitary*, tr. Lawrence Berman, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 127. References to *The Governance of the Solitary* given by page number.

¹⁰ *Political Regime* N69; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 32.

¹¹ *Enumeration of the Sciences*, tr. Fauzi M. Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 24.

¹² *Attainment of Happiness*, in *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, tr. Muhsin Mahdi (rev. ed., Ithaca, N.Y., 1969), sec. 45.

¹³ This statement of the relation between political science and philosophy is based on Alfarabi’s accounts of political science in the *Political Regime*, the *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, and the *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*, ed. and tr. Richard Walzer as *Alfarabi’s Perfect State* (Oxford, 1985). As Miriam Galston has shown in *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi* (Princeton, 1990), the relation of political science

possess a craft that is authoritative rather than subservient, the legislator must be a philosopher.”¹⁴ The legislator inquires into “accidents,” whether they be those of a single city or nation, as above, or those of man; the philosopher, however, inquires into the intelligibles both voluntary and otherwise, and thus his science is logically and temporally prior to that of the most perfect legislator.¹⁵

Not only must the perfect legislator be a philosopher, but the true philosopher must also be legislator:

To be a truly perfect philosopher one has to possess both the theoretical sciences and the faculty for exploiting them for the benefit of all others according to their capacity. Were one to consider the case of the true philosopher, he would find no difference between him and the supreme ruler.¹⁶

Not all, however, have the capacity for philosophy. “When one acquires knowledge of the beings or receives instruction in them, if he perceives their ideas themselves with his intellect, and his assent to them is by means of certain demonstration, then the science that comprises these cognitions is philosophy.”¹⁷ Most, however, cannot comprehend the intelligibles with the intellect but only with the imagination, that is to say, through images.¹⁸

It is the task of the philosopher-legislator to create these images and see that they are instilled in the imagination of the citizens. These images, Alfarabi says, first in the name of the ancients and then in his own name, “are religion when they are in the soul of the multitude.”¹⁹ This founder of a religion—who “invents the images and the persuasive arguments,” but which “as far as he is concerned ... are certain”—is the true philosopher.²⁰ At least, this is the true philosopher as he is seen in the virtuous city.

Different men will receive different images, depending on their capacity. “As every citizen of the city does what is entrusted to him—either by knowing it

to philosophy (and thus of political practice to philosophic inquiry) appears in a very different light in Alfarabi’s *Selected Aphorisms*; see *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, ed. and tr. D. M. Dunlop (Cambridge, 1962), aphorism 4; *Politics and Excellence*, 123-24, 188.

¹⁴ *Attainment*, sec. 56.

¹⁵ *Attainment*, sec. 34; cf. *Book of Religion*, tr. Charles Butterworth (Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland, photocopy), sec. 5; *Book of Letters*, tr. Muhsin Mahdi (Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, photocopy), secs. 144, 147.

¹⁶ *Attainment*, sec. 54.

¹⁷ *Attainment*, sec. 55.

¹⁸ *Political Regime* N85; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 40; cf. *Virtuous City* chap. 14 sec. 4.

¹⁹ *Attainment*, sec. 59, cf. *Book of Religion* sec. 2, *Book of Letters* secs. 108-10.

²⁰ *Attainment*, sec. 59.

on his own or by being guided and induced to it by the ruler—he acquires, by these actions, the good states of the soul.”²¹ Thus in place of Plato’s single noble lie Alfarabi has a whole hierarchy of images.²² The city will realize its aim when each class of citizens minds not just its own business, as in Plato, but when each citizen minds only his own images.²³ These images “are religion when they are in the souls of the multitude.”²⁴ Alfarabi says this of religion generally, not merely of religions other than Islam. Indeed, “there may be a number of virtuous nations and virtuous cities whose religions are different,” as the images must be suited for the accidents belonging only to that city or that nation.²⁵

Yet not all will be fooled. Occasionally we will find “an understanding endowed by nature with measure and charm, one whose nature grows by itself in such a way as to make it more easily led to the idea of each thing it is.”²⁶ Such a nature will not be satisfied with the images that the rulers have so far presented to it. Rather it will seek the “places of contention” in these images, and when it finds such places, it will pronounce these images as mere lies. In short, this nature is the nature of a weed. Yet because the most important images are presented as part of the religion of the city, the weed seems to the multitude to strive against God Himself.²⁷

Not all weeds grow up striving for the truth. Some reject the aims of the virtuous city and, out of intent or misconception, aim for one of the ends of the ignorant cities: honor, rulership, wealth, and so forth. Some falsify all images and argue sophistically against “anything that may establish happiness and truth firmly in the soul.”²⁸ Some find the points of contention in the images of the truth, but lack the imagination to comprehend the images which are closer to the truth.²⁹

²¹ *Political Regime* N81; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 37.

²² *Virtuous City* ch. 17, sec. 2.

²³ See Alfarabi, *The Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato and Aristotle*, tr. Charles Butterworth (University of Maryland, Department of Government and Politics, photocopy), sec. 61, where one who believes that “the first creator” is corporeal will only become perplexed if “compelled to conceive” that the Creator is incorporeal or acts without motion. In consequence, Alfarabi hints, the multitude is taught that a corporeal Creator created a corporeal universe out of preexisting matter (sec. 62). The truer doctrine of God’s incorporeality is reserved for those who will recognize its greater accuracy. Maimonides famously contradicts this particular segregation of images, in principle in the *Guide*, and in practice in the *Code (Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 35; “Laws of the Foundations of the Torah,” ch. i-ii). Cf. also Averroes, *Decisive Treatise in Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, ed. and tr. George Hourani (London, 1967), 13ff; Shem Tob ad *Guide* I:35; Shlomo Pines, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago, 1963), cxix.

²⁴ *Attainment*, sec. 59.

²⁵ *Political Regime* N85-86; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 41; and see Joshua Parens, “Multiculturalism and the Problem of Particularism,” *American Political Science Review*, 88 (1994), 163-81.

²⁶ Plato, *Republic* 486d.

²⁷ Cf. *Book of Letters*, sec. 149.

²⁸ *Political Regime* N105; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 54.

²⁹ *Political Regime* N105; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 55.

The weed that finds the true places of contention in the images must gradually be raised to better images, and if his nature permits, to the truth:

[He] should have the level of his imagination raised to things that cannot be falsified by the arguments he has put forward. If he is satisfied with the level to which he has been raised, he should be left alone. But if he is again not satisfied, and discovers here certain places susceptible to contention, then he should be raised to a higher level. This process should continue until he becomes satisfied with one of those levels of imagination, he should be raised to the level of the truth and be made to comprehend those things as they are, at which point his mind will come to rest.³⁰

It is this weed, who, alone among the various types of weeds is truly “endowed by nature with measure and charm.” In a parallel passage in the *Virtuous City* Alfarabi goes on to say of the “rejector of images”:

When he rejects all the symbols as false and he has the strength and gift to understand the truth, he will be placed into the class of those who take the philosophers as their authorities. If he is not yet satisfied with that and desires to acquire philosophical wisdom and has himself the strength and gift for it, he will be made to know it.³¹

Perhaps the reader of the *Virtuous City* is already at a higher level than the reader of the *Political Regime*. In order to keep him climbing toward philosophy the reader of the *Political Regime* must be deceived. He must be inculcated with an image of philosophy as a teachable body of doctrine, an image in which true philosophical wisdom can come when he follows the philosopher as his authority. When he has found the place of contention in *this* image, only then can he be raised, or given the nature of this particular lie, only then will he raise himself, to the higher level of genuine philosophic wisdom.

Now Alfarabi does not maintain that any currently existing city, or indeed any city which ever actually existed, is the perfect or virtuous city. Yet he only discusses weeds in the virtuous city and makes no mention of them growing up in others.³² Nonetheless, we can see in our ignorant cities those men whom Alfarabi calls weeds, both those who grow towards the truth and those who do not. “It is

³⁰ *Political Regime* N105; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 54.

³¹ *Virtuous City*, ch. 17, sec. 4.

³² In *The Opinion of the Citizens of the Virtuous City* Alfarabi does not use the term weeds (*al-nawābit*). Instead, as we have already cited, he speaks of those who reject the images of the city as false. Like the weeds of the *Political Regime*, these “rejecters” are a group among the citizens of the virtuous or excellent city.

not impossible for a human being who is part of the virtuous city to be living in an ignorant city...."³³ Nothing Alfarabi says of the weeds themselves could not be carried over to those virtuous men in ignorant cities.³⁴

In the virtuous city it is the duty of the ruler "to look for the Weeds, keep them occupied, and treat each class of them in the particular manner that will cure them."³⁵ In actual cities, where the ruler is not a philosopher, it must be the task of the philosopher to look for weeds as they grow up and pull, crop, or cultivate them as befits their nature. Indeed, Alfarabi says that whereas the true philosopher is he who can invent images of the theoretical things and inculcate them, "the false philosopher is he who acquires the theoretical sciences without achieving the utmost perfection so as to be able to introduce others to what he knows insofar as their capacity permits."³⁶

Now we can see some parts of the philosopher's duty in the imperfect city. First, the philosopher must explain to the weed, who falsifies the images, what truth, or what image nearer to the truth, must lie behind these divine or prophetic images which the weed has correctly denied. The philosopher then comes to interpret the law philosophically.³⁷ More generally, the philosopher must understand and create images, for it is through images that the weed can be gradually raised up into the sun. The philosopher cannot contemplate only the intelligibles, but he must contemplate and manufacture images of the intelligibles. If he would avoid the fate of Socrates, he must promulgate these images not only to weeds but also to the multitude.³⁸

We might think that given such precedents the philosopher would flee the city as soon as he was able. He would flee for a distant island or into the vast silence of the desert. Instead, Alfarabi approves of Socrates' choice:

For when he knew that he could not survive except by conforming to false opinions and leading a base way of life, he preferred death to life. This made it evident that if a man shares in [the opinions and the ways of life of] the citizens of those nations and cities ... his life will not be that of a human being; and if he should wish to depart from their ways

³³ *Book of Religion*, sec. 14a.

³⁴ Cf. *Political Regime* N80, N101; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 37, 51.

³⁵ *Political Regime* N106; *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 55.

³⁶ *Attainment*, secs. 59, 61; cf. *Political Regime* N77.

³⁷ Compare *Book of Letters* sec. 149, where Alfarabi states that if neither the adherents of philosophy nor those of a religion recognize that religion depends on philosophy, "the adherents of philosophy will also oppose this religion so long as they do not know that this religion consists of paradigms of what is in philosophy." Alfarabi goes on to state that the adherents of philosophy must defend themselves before the adherents of religion "by seeking to make them discern that the contents of their religion are paradigms of the contents of philosophy." The philosopher must therefore interpret the law philosophically both to the weed and to the "cultivated" multitude.

³⁸ Cf. *Philosophy of Plato*, sec. 36.

and become isolated from them and seek to achieve perfection, he will lead a poor existence.³⁹

The philosopher can only remain within the city and continue to proclaim the truth if he would continue to pursue his own perfection by seeking to perfect others. If the philosopher cannot be a prince, he must at least remain a citizen.

Ibn Bajjah states that “in some of the ways of life the solitary must keep away from men completely so far as he can....”⁴⁰ This of course directly contradicts the teaching of Alfarabi that we have just explained. He also maintains that there are no weeds in the virtuous or perfect city,⁴¹ where Alfarabi uses the term “weed” only in describing a certain class of men within the virtuous city. These two contradictions of Alfarabi are closely linked, for Ibn Bajjah’s teaching regarding weeds is part and parcel of his anti-political philosophy.⁴²

Ibn Bajjah describes the weeds in the imperfect cities thus:

As for those who stumble upon a true opinion that does not exist in the city, they are called weeds.... Strictly speaking the term applies to these men alone. But it may be applied, more generally, to anyone who holds an opinion other than the opinion of the citizens of the city, regardless of whether his opinion is true or false. The name has been transferred to these men from the weeds that spring up of themselves among plants. But let us restrict the use of this term to the ones who hold true opinions.⁴³

Ibn Bajjah thus restricts most of his attention to these weeds in the strict sense, who form but one of the classes of Farabian weeds. Already we can see that Ibn Bajjah has little time for those who pursue vain ends or who falsify the truth. Unlike Alfarabi, Ibn Bajjah will neither study images, nor will he legislate for those not possessed of a philosophic nature.

Ibn Bajjah maintains that all of the opinions of the virtuous and perfect city “are true, and there is no false opinion in it.”⁴⁴ Ibn Bajjah has discarded Alfarabi’s careful hierarchy of classes and the corresponding images and opinions. Ibn Bajjah agrees with Alfarabi that “in the virtuous and perfect city, every man is offered the highest excellence he is fit to pursue.”⁴⁵ Unlike Alfarabi, he does not

³⁹ *Philosophy of Plato*, sec. 30.

⁴⁰ *Governance of the Solitary*, 132.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴² Weeds or spontaneous growths are mentioned in Ibn Bajjah’s botanical treatise; see “Avempace Botánico,” ed. and Spanish tr. Miguel Asín Palacios, *Al Andalus*, 5 (1940), 255-99. The brief discussion (p. 288) does not appear relevant to his political philosophy.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

see that most men, even among the citizens of the virtuous city, are so far from excellence that the images they can accept inevitably contain falsehoods or “points of contention.”

Since Ibn Bajjah holds that “every opinion arising in the perfect city that is different from the opinions of its citizens is false,” he maintains that the perfect city is free of weeds in the strict sense, those who hold true opinions not held by the citizens. The perfect city is also free of weeds in the more general sense, because if a citizen contradicts the opinions widely held “the city is already diseased and has ceased to be perfect.”⁴⁶ Ibn Bajjah’s perfect city is even more unlikely than that of Alfarabi or Plato, for the presence of any vice or even disagreement in the city makes it imperfect and unvirtuous.

If this city is the goal of politics, it is no wonder that Ibn Bajjah is disaffected with actual regimes. Ibn Bajjah seemingly has so little tolerance for falsehood that in his view the slightest contamination of the city’s opinions cause the city to cease to be ideal, whereas for Alfarabi, following Plato, even the ideal regime is a hierarchy of human types bound together by a hierarchy of opinions whose closeness to the truth reflects the citizens’ intellectual inequality. Ibn Bajjah demands not that the best city expel the false but that it must be unblemished by falsehood to remain ideal. One cannot doubt that Ibn Bajjah was intellectually disgusted with the ever-present falsehoods in the images of actual politics. “The false does not have a defined nature and cannot be known at all,” Ibn Bajjah says.⁴⁷ Not only can it not be known, he maintains, but also the false cannot virtuously even be imagined.

Whereas Alfarabi devotes large portions of his *Political Regime* to a discussion of the accidents belonging to the peoples of different places and times, and their relation to the governance of the city, Ibn Bajjah would not discuss this at all:

As far as the governance of cities is concerned, Plato has explained it in the *Republic*.... To trouble oneself with the task of dealing with something that has been adequately dealt with before is superfluous, a result of ignorance, or a sign of evil intent.⁴⁸

Thus Ibn Bajjah dismisses all the differences between the men of his time and the men of Plato’s, between Greeks and Arabs, Pagans and Muslims. Alfarabi admits of a multiplicity of virtuous cities and nations and of religions that can lead men to happiness. Ibn Bajjah, it appears, admits only one set of opinions in the virtuous city; he does not wish the philosopher to study images or the laws that promulgate them, nor does he wish him to study ignorant cities and ignorant

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

men. These are all “such matters as exist at particular times,” and Ibn Bajjah commands his student to “turn aside” from them and contemplate only the eternal, the necessary, and the essential. Ibn Bajjah knows that “it was explained in political science that all isolation is evil,”⁴⁹ but he thinks that in the imperfect cities this evil as such becomes a good.

Ibn Bajjah does not merely despise the political, but he despises the “corporeal” as well:

Just as the basest among the men concerned with their corporeal form would be the one who disregards his spiritual form for the sake of the corporeal and does not pay any attention to the former, so the one who possesses nobility in the highest degree would be the one who disregards his corporeal form and does not pay attention to it.⁵⁰

Alfarabi numbers this very opinion among “the pernicious views of the ancients.”⁵¹ Not only does Ibn Bajjah despise images, but he despises the world of sense out of which we can form them.

In the introduction to *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* Ibn Tufayl says that Ibn Bajjah did not describe the state of the happy man because “he realized that if he described that state, he would find himself obliged to say things that decry his own conduct, and belie what he had continually maintained concerning the efforts one should exert to accumulate and hoard riches and the use of all kinds of artifices to obtain them.”⁵² Ibn Tufayl also says that Ibn Bajjah was so preoccupied with material success that he died “before his intellectual storehouses could be cleared and all his hidden wisdom made known.”⁵³ Ibn Tufayl attacks thus the very man who taught that the true philosopher “destroys the corporeal in favor of the spiritual”! Ibn Bajjah, says Ibn Tufayl, did not live up to his own philosophy, and because he did not, he was incomplete as a philosopher.

In telling the “Tale of Hayy ibn Yaqzan and of Asal⁵⁴ and Salaman” Ibn Tufayl explains the true duties of the philosopher. The tale itself is contained in a letter addressed to a friend who wishes to know “the secrets of the illuminative

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵¹ *Virtuous City*, ch. 19, secs. 2-4, 7.

⁵² Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, tr. George N. Atiyeh, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 10. Translations of *Hayy* are taken from Atiyeh’s partial translation in *Medieval Political Philosophy* or Lenn Goodman’s translation (New York, 1972) for portions untranslated by Atiyeh. References to *Hayy* are given using the standard page numbers of Léon Gauthier’s Arabic text (Beirut, 1936).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴ Or Absāl, in some manuscripts, and in the recital of Avicenna from which Ibn Tufayl claims to take his characters’ names (*Hayy* 20); cf. Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1960).

[or oriental] philosophy referred to by the Leading Master Abū ‘Ali ibn Sīnā [Avicenna].”⁵⁵ We see that Ibn Tufayl himself is not neglecting the duty of education. He gives his theory of weeds (although he never uses the word) concerning weeds which grow up in cities and weeds which grow up isolated from all mankind. Although on the surface *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* seems to praise the life of the solitary as Ibn Bajjah conceives it, we shall see that at a deeper level Ibn Tufayl demands that the philosopher remain within political life to educate through images.⁵⁶

Hayy, who grows up apart from all other human beings on an equatorial, deserted island, is himself the complete weed. According to one version of his origin, says Ibn Tufayl, he was formed in a pocket of fermenting clay heated by the sun.⁵⁷ Hayy literally emerges weed-like out of the earth, he is earth-born, “under the earth within, being fashioned and reared.... When the job had been completely finished, then the earth, which is [his] mother, sent [him] up.”⁵⁸ It is as though Ibn Tufayl did not wish to contradict Plato’s self-described lie, a lie which, contrary to the teaching of Ibn Bajjah, is to be believed by the inhabitants of the virtuous city of the *Republic*.⁵⁹

Hayy grows up alone on the island except for the gazelle who raises him as an infant. Despite his isolation and as a result of “a desire aroused in him,” he comes to think about the world around him, investigating first animals and plants, then bodies, souls, the Creator, and finally the heavens.⁶⁰ Hayy understands himself as obliged to undertake three imitations: he must imitate a dumb animal, a celestial body, and the Being who exists necessarily.⁶¹ He does not see any place for himself in his uniqueness in the divinely governed natural order, and so he is unaware of any peculiarly human duties.⁶² In that sense Hayy completely lacks self-knowledge.

Hayy strives to devote all of his being to contemplation of the divine, and so “destroys the corporeal” as much as he can and still live. He believes that the needs of the body are “as such a hindrance, and a help only accidentally.”⁶³ Ibn Bajjah would thus say that Hayy was a well-governed solitary.

⁵⁵ *Hayy*, 3-4.

⁵⁶ Hillel Fradkin, “The Political Thought of Ibn Tufayl,” in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin H. Mahdi*, ed. Charles E. Butterworth (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

⁵⁷ *Hayy*, 26-30.

⁵⁸ Plato, *Republic* 414de.

⁵⁹ Though Ibn Tufayl does in the end contradict the story of Hayy’s spontaneous generation (*Hayy*, 34); see Fradkin, “Political Thought of Ibn Tufayl.”

⁶⁰ *Hayy*, 50.

⁶¹ *Hayy*, 106-7.

⁶² Since Hayy cannot fit himself in to the order of the beings, he knows of nothing that is fit for him to eat (110-12).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 109.

Gradually Hayy raises his understanding and achieves the ecstasy of ultimate happiness in a vision of God and His governance. When describing Hayy's ecstatic vision, Ibn Tufayl uses the image of the sun reflected in a series of mirrors each of which in turn reflects the image found in the other.⁶⁴ The mirrors stand for the series of spheres, from the highest super-stellar sphere and the united mirrors of the saved to the tarnished, rusted mirrors of the sinners and the dimmed and disarranged mirrors of those who had known God but had forgotten Him. The reflected image in the mirrors is each sphere's (or each man's) immortal part, which comes, like the repeatedly reflected light, ultimately from a divine source.

Ibn Tufayl allows that the addressee might object:

By your analogy of the reflecting mirrors, the image has permanence only so long as there is a mirror. If the mirror is ruined, then the image is obliterated. The lowest mirrors are the bodies of men and other lower creatures, which certainly decay. Thus, the divine image within them cannot be permanent.⁶⁵

Ibn Tufayl replies to the supposed objection: "Your misapprehension is due solely to your confusing my symbol with what it represents." This is only an image, Ibn Tufayl says. Unlike Ibn Bajjah and, as we shall see, unlike Hayy, Ibn Tufayl is willing to create and study images, though they contain "points of contention." Ibn Tufayl does not expect that the opinions these images create in the minds of the listener be completely free of error, no matter how noble the image may be. Ibn Tufayl, then, agrees with Alfarabi that images are necessary no matter how virtuous the recipient.

Hayy's ecstatic vision is not the conclusion of the story, as one might expect were Ibn Tufayl praising the way of life of the solitary philosopher. Hayy does not remain a solitary, alone in contemplation of the truth. In his fiftieth year he is joined by another weed on his equatorial island, a delver into "esoteric meaning," Asal.

On an island not far from Hayy's the inhabitants had accepted one of the "true religions":

Now there had grown in that island two young men of virtue and good will, called respectively Asal and Salaman, who embraced that religion and accepted it eagerly. They took it upon themselves to observe all its laws and to follow regularly its practices; this formed the basis of their friendship.... Of the two, Asal delved deeper into the esoteric meaning;

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 127-31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

he was more apt to find spiritual notions, and was a more ambitious interpreter. As for Salaman, he was more apt to keep to the apparent meaning to avoid interpretation, and to abstain from examination and reflection.⁶⁶

Asal is a weed. He seeks the truth and is not satisfied with the images found in the apparent meaning of the Law. Asal's fondness for "deeper meanings" leads him toward solitude, while Salaman is led toward companionship and the political life. Thus Asal sails for a desert island "to retire from the company of men" and there to meditate upon the highest, divine things.⁶⁷

Yet on this island Asal is not alone. One day he and Hayy spot each other. Asal flees; Hayy, who has never seen another man, pursues in curiosity. Hayy catches Asal, and seeing that he is weeping, comforts him. The two come to trust and "mutually wonder at each other."⁶⁸ Neither Hayy nor Asal had previously wondered at anything human, Asal by choice and Hayy by compulsion of his isolation from the others of his species.⁶⁹

Asal gradually teaches Hayy to speak, not in order to learn from him but in order to convert him. Hayy tells Asal of his life and "how he ascended in knowledge until he attained a degree of conjunction [with the divine]." Hayy describes the "essence of the Truth, the Exalted and Majestic." Finally Hayy speaks of what he saw "when he attained conjunction, the joys of those who are conjoined, and the pains of those who are veiled from Him."⁷⁰ Asal thus comes to understand all the difficulties in his own religious law and sees that all of its features are the images of the things that Hayy had beheld. Asal has come to a Farabian understanding of religion as the image of philosophy.

In allowing Hayy to communicate his understanding of the divine, Ibn Tufayl has contradicted himself. Ibn Tufayl said in his own name to his addressee that "that which is beheld by those who experience the vision, the taste, and the presence [of God] in their moment of sanctity" is one of those things whose real nature cannot be contained by the spoken or written word.⁷¹ Yet Hayy is able to explain all of this to Asal and to raise him to become one of the "men of understanding."⁷²

According to Ibn Tufayl's statement to his addressee, genuine philosophic communion is impossible except through the use of images that necessarily dis-

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 136-37.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 137-38.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 140, 142.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 143-44. The translation of these passages has been slightly modified from that of Atiyeh with the help of Michael Marmura; on the importance of distinguishing this "conjunction" or *ittisal* from the "union" with the divine see *Hayy* 4, 123-24.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 144.

tort the highest experiences. For Ibn Tufayl, following Alfarabi, the use of images is the essence of the political. Thus the sociality inherent in human nature, a sociality that Hayy does not lack,⁷³ can only be satisfied by an “imaginary,” and therefore political, community. On the surface Ibn Tufayl presents Hayy as having attained understanding beyond that offered by the images contained in religion. Yet because the highest things cannot be communicated without images, Hayy’s own understanding of the divine order cannot be perfect if he can explain all of what he understands to Asal without using images. Hayy seems in fact to have failed to attain that level of understanding which requires communication through images. Ibn Tufayl hints that Hayy does not himself understand that which he cannot imagine.

Asal then explains his religion to Hayy. Hayy does not find anything in Asal’s religion “that disagreed with what he had intuitively seen in his sublime station.” Hayy therefore accepts all the external duties of Hayy’s religion, but there are still two points “that kept him wondering and whose veracity he could not understand.” First, Hayy believes that the messenger of Asal’s religion did not sufficiently regulate man’s appetite: while allowing “acquisition of wealth and excessive consumption of food so that people gave themselves up to vain occupations and turned away from the truth,” this prophet proclaimed strange and superfluous laws regulating property, laws that are unnecessary for those who guide their own lives by an understanding of the truth.⁷⁴

Second, Hayy does not understand why images are necessary and their promulgation virtuous. Hayy wonders

Why this messenger, in the greatest part of his description of the divine world, used parables? Why [had] he avoided the clear disclosure [of the truth] and thus led men to fall into the great error of attributing corporeality to Him and believe certain things about the truth from which he is completely exempt?⁷⁵

In his understanding of human things, Hayy is like Ibn Bajjah, who will not admit the regulation of the corporeal as a proper end of political life nor allow the legislator of the perfect city to employ false images. Both cannot understand the nature of politics as the governance of human beings differing in body, soul, and intellect. As Ibn Tufayl says, “What misled Hayy was his belief that all men were endowed with excellent natures, clear-sighted sagacity, and resolute souls.”⁷⁶ Hayy cannot understand the imperfect, flawed souls of men; he cannot understand that lies are necessary even in the virtuous city ruled by the sacred law of a true religion.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 146, 147.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

Hayy resolves to go to Asal's island to save those "cattle gone astray." Asal warns him of "their deficient nature and how they turn away from God." Hayy cannot understand this, and thus he is not dissuaded. By "God's command" a ship chances to pass near the island and picks up Hayy and Asal. "God sent a fair wind," and they arrive at Asal's island.⁷⁷ Because of their isolation, the two require divine help in order to reach out to other men.

"Now the ruler and chief of that island was Salaman, Asal's friend who believed in adhering to the whole body of the community and prohibiting seclusion."⁷⁸ Asal has abandoned society, leaving the rulership to men like Salaman, who are by nature unfriendly to philosophy. Asal's friends flock around Hayy, and Hayy begins to teach and "disclose the secrets of wisdom." Hayy attempts to speak without using images, and so fails:

But no sooner had [Hayy] gone a little beyond the apparent, and started to describe what they had previously learned to be otherwise, than they began to feel ill at ease in his presence, to feel in their souls an abhorrence for what he told them; and they resented it in their hearts....⁷⁹

Asal's friends cannot understand Hayy; their natures are too afflicted by the lies of the city to approach closer to the truth. Perhaps if Asal, rather than Salaman, had remained and become ruler, these men would not be so unfriendly to philosophy.

Hayy keeps entreating Asal's friends, to no effect. But this only serves to increase their "disdain and aversion." Because of their "deficient natures," Asal's former friends neither pursue the truth nor can they receive it properly. They wish to receive the truth on authority, not to inquire into it for themselves. Unlike Asal these friends are not weeds, for they do not strive themselves to penetrate the lies of the city. Thus Hayy gives up on Asal's friends and, all the more so, on the other inhabitants of the island. Hayy realizes that only through the religious Law can they be guided to the right path, for they are not such as are fit for the Truth.⁸⁰ Hayy has nothing to contribute to the images set out by the prophet, which these men already possess.

Hayy begs their forgiveness for what he has said—unlike Socrates he denies philosophy. He tells them that they have guided him to the right path, that of the apparent meaning, and he exhorts them to follow the law in its external practices and not delve into inner meanings. "He and his friend Asal knew now that this is the only way in which this group, which has the desire but not the capacity for salvation, can achieve it." Hayy and Asal return to the island, where they medi-

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 148-49.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 149-50.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 150-54.

tate until they die. “Hayy sought his previous sublime station the same way he had sought it before, till he recovered it.”⁸¹ Yet since Hayy is defective in his imagination and his understanding of imagination, his “sublime station” does not permit him to grasp those truths that can only be communicated in images.

Hayy and Asal fail in the city. They cannot teach the multitude images closer to the truth, nor can they even teach Asal’s allegedly elect friends. In the end they must leave them to the counsels of the Law—that is to say, Hayy and Asal must admit that their philosophy has nothing for this multitude, or even for the few who remain among the many within the community.

Ibn Tufayl’s own philosophy enables him to create images, to alter and to expound the very image of Hayy and Asal. Indeed, it is the very need to communicate that brings Ibn Tufayl to a higher state of understanding. He writes to the addressee: “Your question has awakened in me a noble intention that led me, praise be to God, to partake in the vision of a state I had not experienced before.”⁸² Since this state is one that Ibn Tufayl can communicate only in the image of Hayy and Asal, it must be a higher state of understanding than any Hayy is able to attain.

Because Hayy is the solitary, he has nothing for the crowd. He contemplates only the supra-political truth, so he cannot create noble lies. Because Asal seeks personal salvation, he has abandoned all of his friends and he cannot teach anything to them either. In the end, says Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajjah’s governance of the solitary adds nothing to the religious law. Indeed, when a weed like Asal follows it, he makes it impossible for others in his city to learn more of the truth or at least to be friendly to those who seek it.

Ibn Tufayl agrees with Ibn Bajjah (and Alfarabi) that society can hinder the philosopher’s own pursuit of truth. After Hayy and Asal meet, Hayy is no longer about to attain his former “sublime station”; nor does he regain it until he has returned to his desert island.⁸³ Yet the philosopher, having left behind the petty duties of the law for the ascetic life of contemplation of the law’s inner truth, still must return to the political and religious imaginary. To remain in solitude is to abandon all weeds to the Salamans, thus to give up any hope of helping others toward enlightenment. Most important, Ibn Tufayl illustrates by invoking himself as an example, it is only in the thoroughly political act of educating in images that the philosopher can achieve the highest understanding of the divine order of the whole and of the place of human beings within that order. A philosopher who, like Hayy, rejects the imagination and its products, can never understand his place within the natural or divine hierarchies of beings.

Alfarabi maintains that the philosopher must both study the political and act politically, at least in the sense that he must understand that the political fact of

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 153-54.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 143.

human diversity requires images, and he must himself supply this need. Education, even the philosophic education of a weed, is the inculcation of images. Each class of men requires its own images, and it is the philosopher's task to see, as far as the ignorant city allows, that the weeds are provided with higher images as befits their individual nature. If the weeds are left to sprout as they will, they can harm themselves, the city, and philosophy. If the philosopher must mediate between the city and philosophy even in the best city, all the more so must he mediate between the city or religion and philosophy in other, less virtuous, cities.⁸⁴ Alfarabi himself undertook such mediation many times, as evidenced by his numerous works that discuss the relation between philosophy and politics or religion. Though he founded no cities nor religions, in virtue of the concern for the education of weeds and their protection Alfarabi was a philosopher-ruler.

Ibn Bajjah counsels withdrawal from the city and its lies. He tells the weed to isolate himself from the city, to seek only the company of those who pursue the sciences.⁸⁵ As Ibn Tufayl shows, this way of life is inadequate. The philosopher who leaves the city leaves it to the anti-philosophers; he shows no concern for his fellow weeds, nor any for the lot of the masses. Renouncing the exercise of his own imagination, he renounces the highest intellectual understanding of his own place with the city and the universe, an understanding that requires a concern for image-making. Philosophy itself, Ibn Tufayl claims, forces the philosopher back into the cave; thus Ibn Bajjah would ever be, as Farabi would call him, a false philosopher.⁸⁶

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⁸⁴ *Book of Letters*, secs. 149-53.

⁸⁵ *Governance of the Solitary*, 132.

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