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A Comparative Study of Human Communication in Habermas's Civil Society and Al-Farabi's Madinah Fazilah (the Ideal City)

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ABSTRACT

Human communication is a fundamental element shaping the nature and structure of societies. Civil society and Madinah Fazilah represent two distinct types of societies, each characterized by different forms of communication. Jürgen Habermas and Abu Nasr Muhammad Al-Farabi are prominent thinkers who have examined human communication, its ideal form, and its role in shaping these two societal models. This study employs a comparative-analytical approach grounded in fundamental methodology to examine and compare the levels of human communication in the thought of these two philosophers. The analysis reveals that both thinkers, adopting a critical perspective on their respective societies and the quality of communication within them, propose an ideal society concerned with rationality, mutual understanding, and collective agreement. Habermas's concept of communicative rationality, along with his emphasis on rational-critical discourse and consensus-building, is central to establishing truth and legal legitimacy, yet it remains fundamentally rooted in conventional reason without transcending its epistemic limits. In contrast, Al-Farabi's notion of demonstrative communication and mutual understanding extends beyond the human horizon, achieving its full significance through its connection to the First Leader (Rais al-Awwal) of Madinah Fazilah and its metaphysical relationship with the Active Intellect (al-'Aql al-Fa''āl). This research provides a foundational framework for re-examining and analyzing diverse communicative systems within the two distinct paradigms of Madinah Fazilah and civil society.

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1. Introduction

While the quality of communications and communication systems is shaped by social forces and cultural backgrounds, it also exerts a substantial influence on the formation of the cultural and social structures of societies. Among prominent figures who have theorized on this subject are Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, representing Muslim Iranian thought, and Jürgen Habermas, representing modern Western philosophy. Each, grounded in their respective cultural contexts and ontological–epistemological frameworks, has developed distinct conceptions of the ideal society and, accordingly, defined the nature and levels of human communication within their own theoretical constructs.

Given that every society must independently define an optimal organizational framework for its social communications in line with its cultural, political, economic, and historical circumstances, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of how human communication is conceptualized in relation to the epistemological foundations of these two thinkers. The aim is to elucidate how the desirable form of communication among members of society is delineated in the ideal societies envisioned by al-Fārābī and Habermas. The study seeks to answer the following central question: How is human communication formulated in al-Fārābī's Madīna Fāḍila and Habermas's civil society, and what understanding of the levels and types of communication emerges from these two models?.

2. Methodology

This research adopts an analytical–comparative method in the form of a historical–comparative study, examining the distinct historical and environmental contexts of al-Fārābī and Habermas and assessing the influence of these contexts on their intellectual development. Data collection relies on documentary research. The comparative framework employed focuses on how theoretical constructs are shaped in accordance with their contextual backgrounds. Every theory, in its historical formation and development, is rooted in specific epistemological foundations as well as non-epistemological contexts. This study primarily investigates the epistemological foundations of the two thinkers' views through an analysis of their ontological, epistemological, anthropological, and methodological assumptions, and explores their implications for human communication—its levels, dimensions, and qualitative features.

3. Findings

The epistemological foundations of the two thinkers—shaped respectively by al-Fārābī's monotheistic worldview and Habermas's humanistic orientation within the Frankfurt School tradition—lead to the formulation of two distinct ideal societies (Madīna Fāḍila and civil society) and, consequently, to different models and qualities of communication.

While both share certain concerns—such as the nature of the ideal society, the role of rationality, rational dialogue, mutual understanding, and collective consensus—there are significant differences in their foundational premises, the articulation of their ideas, and their socio-cultural implications.

For Habermas, the central communicative concern is modern society's deviation from rationality and Enlightenment ideals, and the need for communicative rationality to liberate society from the limitations of instrumental rationality. His model emphasizes consensus, rational discourse, and critical reflection, where shared reason is essential for attaining truth and legitimizing laws.

In contrast, al-Fārābī focuses on the process through which a rational society is achieved—specifically, the elevation of thought and language from probabilistic forms (e.g., rhetoric and poetry) to demonstrative and certain forms of reasoning. In his view, demonstrative communication reaches its highest realization in the Madīna Fāḍila, particularly in connection with its ruler (Imam). While Habermas, due to his anthropocentric orientation, does not incorporate communication with God or the sacred into his theory, al-Fārābī's

framework extends beyond human horizons to encompass a vertical dimension—communication with the divine and the sacred..

4. Conclusion

This comparative analysis highlights several components relevant to contemporary governance. These include:

- Upholding rationalism and privileging demonstrative reasoning alongside rhetorical persuasion in policymaking.
- Promoting cooperation and public participation through dialogue and consensus, while connecting such processes to revealed principles.
- Freeing cultural policymaking from illusion and superficial imagery, instead grounding it in reason, demonstration, and demonstrative persuasion.
- Transitioning from a consumerist society to one capable of critically analyzing cultural phenomena.

In Habermas's civil society, communication remains within the human horizon and is limited to consensus-building among individuals, without reference to transcendent dimensions. In al-Fārābī's Madīna Fāḍila, by contrast, communication—grounded in monotheism, reason, and demonstration—is intrinsically linked to revelation and the sacred intellect, and culminates in connection with the Active Intellect.

Such a connection enables an individual to achieve the highest level of perfection and comprehension, making them fit to lead society toward ultimate felicity. This leadership is not defined by command and control, but by the capacity to instruct, guide, and cultivate human perfection. Within this hierarchical communicative structure, relationships among individuals and groups are pedagogical and guiding, ultimately serving the goal of human development.

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