“The People Become a Monarch”: Aristotle and Alfarabi on the Problems and Possibilities of Democracy

*Abstract*: This paper examines the similarities and differences between Aristotle’s and Alfarabi’s views of democracy, as well as their proposals for mitigating the problems they believe are inherent in democratic regimes. Both thinkers criticize the democratic rule of law, claiming it renders itself ineffective by mandating freedom and equality for all, yet placing political power in the hands of an often-oppressive majority. While Aristotle offers a potential solution to this issue in the form of a revised rule of law, Alfarabi—despite the fact that his overall opinion of democracy is, surprisingly, more positive than Aristotle’s—rejects the thought that policy changes will fix the democratic problem. As it turns out, the thinkers’ disagreements are rooted in their differences regarding what they see as the majority’s fundamental character.

*Introduction*

In his *Political Regime*, Alfarabi says of the democratic city that “On the surface, it is like an embroidered garment replete with colored figures and dyes. Everyone loves it and loves to dwell in it, because every human being who has a passion or desire for anything is able to gain it in this city.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This powerful description would attract anyone to the diverse delights of the democratic city. Notably, however, this city resembles an embroidered garment only “on the surface.” Do problems exist beneath the surface that the careless observer, blinded by the beauties of the garment, would miss?

Both Alfarabi and one of his greatest influencers, Aristotle, believe so. The two thinkers agree that although the democratic city is technically ruled by law, this rule is self-contradictory. In keeping with the character of the city, its law mandates equality among and freedom for the people. Yet this law necessitates that all political decisions be made by majority vote, which allows the members of the majority to seize the reins of power, curtailing the freedom and equality of the minorities they wish to command. The law, therefore, ends up permitting the very thing it was made to prevent, which renders the rule of law in a democracy fundamentally problematic.

Aristotle and Alfarabi concur on this point, but they diverge on possible solutions to the democratic problem. Though Aristotle quietly critiques the rule of law (as a whole, not just as it appears in the democracy), he also stresses its importance. Despite its flaws, he argues, a modified rule of law—one that prevents the majority from gaining too much power, but still manages to satisfy its fundamental desire to share in that power—contains the democracy’s best chance at maintaining a kind of virtuous stability. If the majority is kept from controlling the city completely, its members will be kept from exercising an oppressive and selfish command. Their deep longing to rule, however, must also be gratified to some extent, or else they will come to resent their lack of political power so greatly that they may prove destructive to the city. When Aristotle does criticize the rule of law, then, he must do so subtly, for he sees its promotion as integral to his project.

Alfarabi’s critique of law, on the other hand, is much more obvious, for he disagrees with Aristotle about the true character of the majority. The members of Aristotle’s majority primarily desire a share in political rule. The members of Alfarabi’s, on the other hand, have desires that are much more various—and more firmly connected to money and material goods—than those of Aristotle’s. For Alfarabi, then, a solution like Aristotle’s will not prevent the decline of the democratic city, since giving the majority members some share in the rule will not satisfy them. It seems Alfarabi’s democracy is trapped between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, granting the majority’s every wish will clearly endanger the city, but on the other hand, the majority will remain dangerously resentful as long as those wishes go unfulfilled. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Alfarabi sees greater potential for virtue in the makeup of the democratic city than does Aristotle. He suggests that the freedom enjoyed by its inhabitants is conducive to the emergence and association of virtuous people. The projects of Aristotle and Alfarabi, therefore, differ in crucial ways. The former hopes to preserve what remains of stability and virtue in the democratic city through the (admittedly imperfect) tool that is the rule of law; the latter hopes the character of this city will give rise to a virtuous partnership, one that cannot save the city as a whole, but may have some general and lasting influence.

*Aristotle’s Initial Discussion of Democracy*

Aristotle begins to analyze democracy in Book Three of the *Politics*, in which he studies the different kinds of regimes and their rankings. Before examining the types of regimes, Aristotle states what it means for a regime to be correct, saying that “those regimes which look to the common advantage are correct regimes according to what is unqualifiedly just, while those which look only to the advantage of the rulers are errant, and are all deviations from the correct regimes.”[[2]](#footnote-2) As Aristotle explains, the rulers of the deviant regimes act like masters commanding slaves: they benefit themselves by giving the slaves orders, and if the slaves gain any benefit, it is accidental. The rulers of the correct regimes, on the other hand, act like fathers presiding over households or pilots presiding over ships: they may share in the benefits of their rule, but they think primarily of benefiting the people they oversee (1278b30–1279a9). Because “the city is a community of free persons” (1279a21–2), it follows that the correct regime cannot be run in a way that essentially makes some of its citizens slaves.

Aristotle adds a provoking nuance to his discussion of these two kinds of rule. Though he does not yet use the word “democracy,” he begins to describe the potential decline of a regime that seems at least somewhat democratic. Aristotle states that “with respect to political offices too, when the regime is established in accordance with equality and similarity among the citizens, they claim to merit ruling in turn” (1279a9–11). Yet their idea of what it means to “rule in turn” has become corrupt: “Previously, as accords with nature, they claimed to merit doing public service by turns and having someone look to their good, just as when ruling previously they looked to his advantage. Now, however, because of the benefits to be derived from common things and from office, they wish to rule continuously” (1279a11–15). The citizens in this regime used to define “ruling in turn” as “doing public service by turns,” wanting to rule like the pilot when it came time and being content to follow a different leader when their turns were over. Having enjoyed the advantages of holding power, however, they have begun to rule with a view to their own benefit, the way the master rules the slave. What exactly does Aristotle mean when he talks about these corrupting advantages of power? Why did this regime have to decline?

Aristotle reveals more of his thoughts on this matter after explicitly stating that, since the democratic regime constitutes “rule with a view to the advantage of those who are poor” rather than to the common advantage, it is a deviant regime (1279b9–10). He does not immediately say democracy is rule with a view to the advantage of the majority, for the key feature of the ruling body in this regime is its poverty. A regime would still be a democracy, Aristotle argues, if the ruling body consisted of only a few poor people. It is always the case, however, that the few are rich and the many are poor. Democracy, then, is not necessarily the rule of the majority, but in practice, it would be impossible to find an instance of this regime being ruled by the few (1279b19–1280a6).

The members of the majority, Aristotle claims, are correct in a certain way when they discuss justice, but they are not fully correct. Because they are all equal in freedom, they decide that justice is equality and demand control of the city on this basis. Though they are right that they are all equally free, that equality is not enough to make their rule just, for they end up subordinating the common good to their own advantage (1280a7–26). The reason is that after they take power, they inevitably begin to view the wealthy as a threat to that power. Their primary focus, therefore, becomes the suppression of the wealthy and the seizure of their goods. Furthermore, if the wealthy happen to take power, their primary focus becomes the suppression of the threatening majority (1281a12–29). It follows that both a regime ruled by the poor majority and a regime ruled by the wealthy few must become deviant, even if they do not start out that way. Only rule by those with “political virtue” (1281a7)—those who concern themselves with the good of the whole citizen body—can be truly just.

The rule of the virtuous, however, also lies open to danger, for the majority, still believing that justice is equality, would soon grow resentful of its leaders and attempt to destroy them. In practice, therefore, it is impossible to hand the reins of the city to the virtuous. Instead, the majority must be given some say in governance—Aristotle mentions the tasks of auditing and selecting officials—but should not be allowed to hold the “greatest offices” (1281b22–42). Aristotle also proposes a principle that applies to all instances of deciding who should rule and how they should do so: “One might perhaps assert … that it is bad for the authoritative element generally to be man instead of law, at any rate if he has the passions that result [from being human] in his soul” (1281a34–7). Yet Aristotle questions this principle immediately, as his tentative way of introducing it shows: “But if the law may be oligarchic or democratic, what difference will it make with regard to the questions that have been raised?” (1281a37–9) A little later, he states again that “it is laws—correctly enacted—that should be authoritative,” while the governing body “should be authoritative with respect to those things about which the laws are completely unable to speak precisely on account of the difficulty of making clear general declarations about everything” (1282b2–6). As Aristotle repeats, however, laws “should be enacted with a view to the regime” (1282b10–11), which means a deviant regime must have deviant laws, at least to some extent. How much it would actually help a democracy to live by the (necessarily democratic) rule of law, therefore, is an open question.

*Aristotle’s Types of Democracy*

According to Aristotle, different kinds of democracy can arise depending on the makeup of particular cities. A city, he says, consists of the poor multitude, the wealthy “notables,” and the rulers. The multitude comprises farmers, craftsmen (those who make the goods the city needs), merchants, sailors, menial workers, and non-citizens (1290b22–1291b29). Aristotle then names five types of democracy, but does not yet connect them to the different elements of the multitude.

The first type is “that which is particularly said to be based on equality.” According to the law in this democracy, the poor and the wealthy must be seen as equals. This equality seems to be demonstrated by the kind of “ruling in turn” that Aristotle mentioned earlier: “For if freedom indeed exists particularly in a democracy, as some conceive to be the case, as well as equality, this would particularly happen where all share in the regime as far as possible in similar fashion” (1291b32–7). By stating that “some conceive [it] to be the case” that freedom thrives most in a democracy, Aristotle suggests that he does not agree. This suggestion matches his earlier implication that in the democracies he sees, the people who want to rule in turn want not the rule of the pilot over his sailors, but that of the master over his slaves. Aristotle also hints that this kind of rule lessens not only the freedom of those in the democracy, but also the equality they supposedly prize so highly. Though the law states that “there is equality when the poor are no more preeminent than the well off, and neither have authority, but both are similar,” it turns out that “since the people are a majority, and what is resolved by the majority is authoritative, this will necessarily be a democracy” (1291b32–8). Equality rests on neither body having authority, so the law forbids both from gaining too much of it. Yet because this law also places the decisive power in the hands of the majority, and the multitude makes up the majority in the city, the multitude does gain authority, and inequality inevitably arises. It makes sense, then, that Aristotle says this democracy is “particularly said to be based on equality” rather than that it is based on equality.

Aristotle then names three more kinds of democracy: the kind where anyone with the right amount of property can hold office, and this amount is small; the kind where “all citizens of unquestioned descent take part, but law rules”; and the kind where “all have a part in the offices provided only they are citizens, but law rules” (1291b39–1292a4). Interestingly, Aristotle does not say law rules in the second kind of democracy. Does he mean his readers to take it for granted that law rules in this democracy, or is he hinting that law does not actually rule there?

This puzzle is left temporarily unsolved, for Aristotle goes on to name the fifth kind of democracy: the kind that is “the same in other respects, but the multitude has authority and not the law. This comes about when decrees rather than law are authoritative, and this happens on account of the popular leaders.” Aristotle says the “best of citizens” can rise to power in a democracy where the law rules, but a popular leader sees his opportunity to seize control in a democracy where the people are authoritative (1292a5–11). He writes:

For the people become a monarch, from many combining into one—for the many have authority not as individuals but all together. What Homer means when he says “many-headed rule is not good” is not clear—whether it is this sort of rule, or the sort when there are a number of rulers acting as individuals. At any rate, such a people, being a sort of monarch, seek to rule monarchically on account of their not being ruled by law, and become like a master… (1292a11–17)

Though Aristotle gives this type of democracy its own category, it seems exactly the same as the first type. Again, the multitude has authority, and the people rule “like a master” rules his slave. The difference lies in Aristotle’s explicit statement that in the fifth kind of democracy, the law does not rule. In the first kind of democracy, a law does seem to rule. Yet because this law is, as Aristotle said at the beginning of his discussion, “enacted with a view to the regime” (1282b10–11), it ends up allowing what it is meant to prohibit, and the multitude gains authority. With this comparison, then, Aristotle drives home his point that the “rule of law” that supposedly exists in a democracy is fundamentally self-contradictory, amounting to no law at all. At this juncture, Aristotle comes across as a firm supporter of a truly sound rule of law.

Aristotle’s brief reference to Homer’s *Iliad*, however, adds another nuance to this passage. Odysseus speaks the line about many-headed rule when he is convincing the Greeks not to abandon the fight against Troy. After claiming that “Lordship for many is no good thing,” Odysseus goes on to say, “Let there be one ruler,/one king, to whom the son of devious-devising Kronos/gives the scepter and right of judgment, to watch over his people.”[[3]](#footnote-3) By referring to this passage when he does, Aristotle makes Homer out to be suggesting that the people should be ruled by law—and indeed, Homer does hint at some sort of universal, divine law when he mentions Zeus. By emphasizing the king’s “right of judgment,” however, Homer highlights a problem that Aristotle has already pointed out: the fact that the law must always apply imperfectly to particular cases, which means a wise ruler is needed to pass correct judgment in those cases. By citing this passage, Aristotle could be hinting that he recognizes weaknesses in the rule of law as a whole—that a rule of law that is truly sound at all times might not exist.

*Aristotle’s Support for—and Criticism of—the Rule of Law*

Yet Aristotle continues to argue for the rule of law at the end of this discussion of democracy. He writes:

One may hold it a reasonable criticism to argue that a democracy of this sort is not a regime. For where the laws do not rule there is no regime. The law should rule in all matters, while the offices and the regime should judge in particular cases. So if democracy is one of the sorts of regime, it is evident that such a system, in which everything is administered through decrees, is not even democracy in the authoritative sense, since no decree can be general. This may stand, then, as our discussion of the kinds of democracy. (Aristotle 1292a31–9)

A “democracy” in which the laws have no authority is no longer even a deviant regime; it is a non-regime, for no general rules exist to determine what political decisions should be made. Instead, an authoritative majority passes judgment on each particular case as it arises. This is a problem, for, as Aristotle has shown, the judgment of the majority is always clouded by its skewed understanding of justice. The rule of law is necessary, therefore, to keep democracies from deteriorating even more than they already have.

This passage seems straightforward enough, so why does Aristotle equivocate at the beginning and at the end? He says “one may hold” this criticism to be a reasonable one, casting a shadow of doubt on the statement. Furthermore, he seems to indicate in the last line that he has finished discussing the kinds of democracy. One chapter later, however, he reopens the subject, suggesting that he has not yet drawn his definitive conclusion. Here, he links the different elements of the multitude to the different kinds of democracy. Aristotle says that when the farmers have control, most of them are content to be ruled by laws and to “assemble only for necessary assemblies,” for they do not have the leisure to spend time on politics. It is left to “others”—those who, like the farmers, have the amount of property necessary to participate in politics, but who, unlike the farmers, do not have to work constantly just to maintain that property—to hold the offices. This description fits with Aristotle’s second kind of democracy. Before, he did not state that the law rules in this democracy, though he did say the law rules in the third and fourth kinds. Now, he claims the second kind is, in fact, ruled by law (1292b26–35).

Aristotle then explains that in the democracies where everyone of “unquestioned descent” and every free person can participate in politics, the people are also content to be ruled by law, for many still lack the money to be at leisure. It is only in the last kind, in which money is abundant, that everyone gains the leisure to participate in politics as much as he likes. The poor even have more leisure than the rich in this situation, for they receive enough pay to have free time, but do not have to spend any of that time caring for their large properties. As the members of the majority insert themselves more and more into politics, they start resenting those in power and wanting to rule themselves; consequently, “the multitude of the poor” gains authority, and the laws stop ruling (1292b35–1293a11).

This discussion seems simple until a puzzle arises. Aristotle described five kinds of democracy earlier; why does he describe only four now? Here, he omits the first kind of democracy—the kind whose laws seemed to guarantee freedom and equality, but actually ended up allowing the multitude to rule as the master rules his slaves. This puzzle carries over into Book Six, in which Aristotle discusses how to establish and preserve the types of regimes. He writes, “Of the four sorts of democracy, the best is the one that is first in the arrangement spoken of in the discourses preceding these; it is also the oldest of them all. But I call it first in the sense that one might distinguish among peoples” (1318b7–10). He goes on to explain why the farming element makes up the best democracy, drawing pointed attention to his neglect of the original “first” democracy.

Aristotle repeats that the farmers, not having much leisure, do not participate in politics often. Now, however, he is more explicit regarding the office-holders than he was in his previous description of this democracy. Sometimes, he says, “it is sufficient for the many if they have no share in election to the offices but certain persons are elected to do this from all by turns … provided they have authority over deliberation” (1318b23–6). In this situation, the members of the majority do not have complete authority even over elections; instead, they choose people to represent them “by turns.” This method sounds like the original kind of “ruling in turn”—the better kind that the rulers want to enact before they become corrupted—that Aristotle discussed in Book Three. Furthermore, it turns out that the office-holders are not always chosen “on the basis of assessments”—instead, it is possible for the people “to elect none on the basis of assessments, but rather capable persons” (1318b30–2). Aristotle says that if they follow this method, “the offices will always be in the hands of the best persons” (1318b33–4). This passage sheds more light on Aristotle’s earlier statement that the “best of citizens” can rise to power in a democracy where the law, rather than the multitude, rules (1292a9–10). If the members of the majority lack the leisure to dwell on politics and are prevented from gaining too much power, those best suited to ruling—those who will rule not for their own advantage, but with a view to the common good—have a better chance of taking control. In this situation, the people are less likely to resent their leaders, for they have neither the time (since they must spend most of their time working) nor the inclination (since they are still allowed some share in politics). As the types of democracy decline, however, more and more people begin to move into the city and to make enough money to gain greater leisure. With more time on their hands and greater numbers behind them, the people grow discontent, follow popular leaders’ demands for more power, and eventually gain total authority.

By calling this kind of democracy the best one and omitting the first kind, Aristotle suggests that the best kind of democracy is not, as some people might think, the most democratic one. Although law supposedly rules in the first kind of democracy, it ends up allowing what it is supposed to forbid: one group gaining the authority of a master over a slave. The best democracy, on the other hand, includes laws that counteract the majority’s desire to grasp at that authority. Though these laws still preserve the character of the regime in that they give everyone some share in politics, they do so in a way that creates more space for the “best of citizens” to hold power.

Aristotle’s argument for the rule of law, however, is not free of complication. As we recall, he was initially silent about law when he introduced the democracy that he later calls the best kind; it is only in his second treatment of it that he says it is ruled by law. Furthermore, the law that rules this democracy is supposedly the law that the office-holders are chosen on the basis of certain assessments—but at the end of his discussion, Aristotle says the people can “elect none on the basis of assessments, but rather capable persons” (1318b30–2), as if that law does not actually matter at all. Aristotle also equivocated when he said a democracy that was not ruled by law was not really a regime, and he cited Homer in a way that neglected the tension between the rule of law and the judgment of the wise king.

Combining all these pieces of the puzzle leads to the possibility that Aristotle does not believe the truly best city includes the rule of law. According to Aristotle’s previous formulation, it would not be correct to call this city a regime, since it is not run by laws. Yet this type of non-regime is a good one, since it is ruled by those who, in focusing primarily on their citizens’ good, can judge what that good is in each situation. As Aristotle has demonstrated, however, what he sees as the fundamental desire of the majority—the desire to rule—will never permit the best leaders to hold power for long. And if the members of the majority are allowed to take complete control—to create a non-regime guided only by their erroneous judgments—stability and virtue will depart entirely from the city. Aristotle, therefore, refrains from criticizing the regime that is ruled by law in all but the quietest of ways, since he knows all real-world cities need this rule. He fears for the democracy, since its citizens believe they are following the rule of law, but have unknowingly traded it for the rule of the majority. Consequently, he provides examples of democracies in which the people are given enough power to satisfy them and lack the leisure to start lobbying for more. In the least imperfect situation, both the law and the natural time limits imposed on the majority will give the best leaders more freedom to exercise their correct judgments in some political situations. Though this city obviously will not be the same as the city ruled entirely by these leaders, it will come as close as possible to a city in which their wisdom makes the rule of law unnecessary.

*Alfarabi: Comparisons and Contrasts*

Like Aristotle, Alfarabi includes what he calls the “democratic city” in his extensive discussion of non-virtuous cities. He also discusses a virtuous city, which is led by “the first ruler.” This ruler “has the ability for excellent apprehension of each one of the particular things that ought to be done and the faculty for excellently guiding everyone other than himself to all that he has instructed them in,” and he knows how to “determine, define, and direct the activities toward happiness” (Alfarabi 79). The people this ruler leads, therefore, are the “virtuous, good, and happy people.” Alfarabi quickly implies, however, that it is highly improbable that the virtuous city would arise—and that even if it did arise, it would be by chance and could be destroyed easily. It is much more likely that virtuous individuals would appear in the non-virtuous cities, never managing to form a separate political community themselves (81). In this way, Alfarabi’s argument is similar to Aristotle’s: it is possible to envision an ideal city, but such a city cannot last in the real world.

Alfarabi also suggests that the virtuous city is not ruled by law, though he seems more eager than Aristotle to emphasize this suggestion. It is almost as if he goes out of his way to stress that he is not mentioning law: he says twice that the first ruler leads according to his knowledge of each individual case, not according to any general rules, and he says the virtuous people are “governed by the rulership of this ruler” rather than by laws (81). Here, Alfarabi’s mind still seems to be running along the same track as Aristotle’s. If the virtuous ruler and the virtuous city existed, law would not be necessary, for the ruler would simply be able to judge what was best in every particular—yet this ruler and this city do not and will not exist.

The contrast between Aristotle’s and Alfarabi’s treatments of democracies, however, becomes clearer as Alfarabi’s discussion continues. From the beginning of Aristotle’s treatment to the end of it, the rule of law is a central topic, for it is crucial to his project. In contrast, the word “law” appears only once in Alfarabi’s description of the democratic city—one more time than it appears in his description of the virtuous city. Alfarabi writes, “The democratic city is the city in which every one of its inhabitants is unrestrained and left to himself to do what he likes. Its inhabitants are equal to one another, and their traditional law is that no human being is superior to another in anything at all. Its inhabitants are free to do what they like” (113). These first few lines of Alfarabi’s description bring Aristotle’s first kind of democracy to mind, though the comparison is not perfect. On the one hand, Alfarabi does not highlight what Aristotle suggests is the essence of the democratic character: the majority’s desire to rule, which manifests itself in the struggle between it and the wealthy few. On the other hand, Alfarabi sees the same contradiction in the democratic law as Aristotle does.

As Alfarabi discusses, the law of the democratic city does not rule because it ends up failing at the job it is supposed to do: promoting equality. Various popular leaders arise in the democratic city, but the public “has authority over those who are said to be their rulers. The one who rules them does so only by the will of the ruled, and their rulers are subject to the passions of the ruled” (113). These so-called rulers are “those who bring the inhabitants of the city to freedom and to all of their passions and desires and those who preserve their freedom and the diverging, differing desires of some from others and from their external enemies while restricting their desires only to what is necessary” (114). This kind of rule sounds just like Aristotle’s rule of the master over the slave. The popular leaders—the slaves—must cater to the public’s every whim while considering their own desires as little as possible. The people, who are really the ones in charge, are considering not the common advantage, but their own “passions.” The majority, therefore, rises to ultimate authority and superiority.

In some ways, however, Alfarabi makes his democratic city appear more attractive than Aristotle’s. Aristotle, of course, claims democracy is the “most moderate” of the deviant regimes (Aristotle 1289b5). This statement, however, turns out not to be a great praise of democracy. It is only the most moderate because it does not take much to turn a polity, the least virtuous of the virtuous regimes, into a democracy, so the slope toward deviance is not particularly steep. Furthermore, Aristotle thinks the best chance a democracy has at producing virtue is to become less democratic—to keep most of the people too busy for politics and to enact laws that restrict how they elect their officials. Alfarabi, on the other hand, presents a much different picture of the democratic city and its possibilities for virtue.

*The Virtues of the Democratic City*

Though Alfarabi does imply that the democrats do not live up to their promise of instituting freedom and equality—the multitude still forces its supposed leaders to do its bidding—he stresses that freedom does exist among the multitude itself and that such freedom has its positives. It causes the emergence of “many moral habits, many endeavors, many desires, and taking pleasure in countless things. [The democratic city’s] inhabitants consist of countless similar and dissimilar sects” (Alfarabi 113). It turns out, therefore, that “all the endeavors and purposes of the ignorant [cities] are present in this city in the most perfect manner, and more” (114). Because every sort of desire is given leeway to arise in the democratic city, the desires that characterize Alfarabi’s other “ignorant” cities—the desires for necessities, wealth, sensual pleasures, honor, and domination—all appear in the democratic one as well. Furthermore, they are allowed to reach their “most perfect” state in the democratic city, since no restrictions are placed on their development.

Alfarabi’s most eloquent description of what results from so much freedom is worth quoting at length:

Of [all] their cities, this is the admirable and happy city. On the surface, it is like an embroidered garment replete with colored figures and dyes. Everyone loves it and loves to dwell in it, because every human being who has a passion or desire for anything is able to gain it in this city. The nations repair to it and dwell in it, so it becomes great beyond measure. People of every tribe are procreated in it by every sort of pairing off and sexual intercourse. The children generated in it are of very different innate characters and of very different education and upbringing. (115)

Like Aristotle, Alfarabi claims that in a certain way, the democratic city ranks first among the non-virtuous cities. His reasoning, however, differs from that of Aristotle and makes the democratic city look much more appealing. It is “the admirable and happy city” not because its deviation from one of the virtuous cities is most slight, but because so many possibilities exist in it. Unlike Aristotle, Alfarabi does not divide the democratic city into different types; he simply states that “this city comes to be many cities, not distinguished from one another but interwoven with one another, the parts of one interspersed among the parts of another. … All of the passions and ways of life come together in it” (115). For Alfarabi, the different types not only of a democracy, but also of every other kind of regime are contained within this single city. Though he says it is like an embroidered garment “on the surface,” hinting that it hides more problems than one might expect, he makes that surface appear quite attractive.

Why do the myriad possibilities within the democratic city give it a certain superiority to the other ignorant cities? Because “it is not impossible as time draws on that virtuous people emerge in it. There may chance to exist in it wise men, rhetoricians, and poets concerned with every type of object. It is possible to glean from it parts of the virtuous city, and this is the best that emerges in this city” (115). If everyone is allowed to do whatever he likes in the democratic city, it follows that some people will want to pursue philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry. It is more likely that these kinds of people will emerge in the democratic city than in the other ignorant cities, since “people of every tribe are procreated in it” and the natures and educations of these people vary widely. It may be, therefore, that the closest thing to the virtuous city can be reached in the democratic city.

On the other hand, Alfarabi says it is “not impossible” that virtuous people may appear in the democratic city over time, which is far from a firm statement that they will appear. Furthermore, the wise men, rhetoricians, and poets “may chance to exist in it.” Due to its diverse character, the democratic city is more likely to produce virtuous people than the other ignorant cities. This same character, however, ensures that this production can only occur by chance. The democratic city does not provide an education in virtue—far from it. It simply allows people to be educated in all sorts of ways, which means someone may happen to receive an education in virtue at some point. The likelihood of virtuous people appearing in the democratic city, therefore, is still slim, especially because “of the ignorant cities this city has both the most good and the most evil” (115). This is the other side of the coin: if people are allowed to do whatever they like in the democratic city, vice as well as virtue is freer to emerge there than in the other ignorant cities. The democratic city, therefore, ranks last among the ignorant cities for the same reason it could be said to rank first.

Furthermore, Alfarabi agrees with Aristotle that the majority will end up destroying any virtuous ruler:

The one who is virtuous in truth—namely, the one who, when he rules [the people], determines their actions and directs them toward happiness—is not made a ruler by them. If he chances to rule them, he is soon deposed or killed, or his rulership is disturbed and challenged. The same holds for the rest of the ignorant cities: Each of them wants only to be ruled by someone who sets its choices and desires before it, makes the path to them easy, gains them for them, and preserves them for them. They reject the rulership of the virtuous and censure it. However, it is more possible and easier for the virtuous cities and the rulership of the virtuous to emerge from the necessary and democratic cities than from the other [ignorant] cities. (117)

Though the types of rulers who would lead the various ignorant cities all have an equal chance of rising to prominence in the democratic city—as Alfarabi says, the appearance of all the ignorant desires in the democratic city allows for these possibilities (116)—the virtuous ruler does not share that chance, since he cares more about inculcating virtue in the people than satisfying their desires. The democratic city may be more likely to produce virtuous people than the other ignorant cities, but these people have no hope of holding power. If the virtuous do happen to gain some sort of command, the majority soon unseats them.

Despite these caveats, however, Alfarabi ends his discussion of the democratic city on a positive note. He writes that “it is more possible and easier for the virtuous cities and the rulership of the virtuous to emerge from the necessary and democratic cities than from the other [ignorant] cities,” seeming to contradict directly what he said immediately before. If virtuous rulers have no chance of retaining power in the democratic city, how is it easier for their “rulership … to emerge” from the democratic city than from the other ignorant cities?

*Alfarabi’s Critique of Law*

Alfarabi appears to contradict himself here, but it is possible to see how his statements could actually fit together. What if, when he says that the virtuous cities and rulerships are more likely to “emerge” from the democratic city, he means something besides the rulers gaining command and leading the city toward virtue? Since Alfarabi has stated explicitly that this event cannot occur, perhaps the “emergence” of the virtuous rulers has nothing to do with their taking over the democratic city, but concerns something else.

Alfarabi’s initial discussion of the “first ruler” sheds light on what that something else might be. As previously mentioned, he explains that the city led by this ruler cannot realistically exist. Instead, the virtuous people are separated, doomed to live out their lives as “strangers in those [ignorant] dwelling-places” (81). Alfarabi, however, qualifies these statements in an interesting way. He writes, “If there happens to be an association of these kings at a single moment in a single city, a single nation, or many nations, then their whole association is like a single king due to the agreement in their endeavors, purposes, opinions, and ways of life. If they succeed one another in time, their souls will be as a single soul” (82). Here, Alfarabi presents a much more hopeful picture of the feasibility of the virtuous city. He still does not claim that an entire city could become completely virtuous, but he proposes that an association could arise among the virtuous people in the ignorant cities—a kind of intellectual partnership, born of the knowledge that other like-minded people exist.

If this partnership arises and continues throughout generations, each virtuous ruler will know the best course of action in each particular circumstance:

Just as it is permissible for one of them to change a law he legislated at one moment if he is of the opinion that it is more fitting to change it at another moment, so may the one now present who succeeds the one who has passed away change what the one who has passed away has already legislated. For the one who has passed away would change [it] himself, were he to observe the [new] condition. When there does not happen to be a human being of this condition, the laws that the former [kings] prescribed or ordained are to be adopted, then written down and preserved, and the city is to be governed by means of them. So the ruler who governs the city by means of written laws adopted from past leaders is the king of traditional law. (82)

Here, Alfarabi distinguishes between the virtuous ruler, whom he initially discussed without any mention of law, and the “king of traditional law.” The virtuous ruler does not govern according to general, fixed laws, for he knows every individual is different and situations are always changing. Instead, he is able to understand what commands are needed in each of those situations. The “king of traditional law,” however, lacks this ability, which is why he needs general, fixed laws to help him govern. As Alfarabi has already explained, of course, this king is the one who always rules in the real world, for the virtuous ruler cannot hold political power.

Like Aristotle, then, Alfarabi presents a critique of law—but his critique is much more blatant than Aristotle’s. Alfarabi almost states explicitly that the rule of law has major limitations, since human beings change from one era to the next and cannot live well under a single, ongoing system. Furthermore, the rule of law does not figure into his hopes for the virtue that may arise in the democratic city. Both Aristotle and Alfarabi see the fundamental contradiction in the democratic rule of law, but Aristotle proposes a partial solution in the form of a revised rule of law, while Alfarabi envisions a partial solution that lies outside the political realm. What makes Alfarabi diverge from Aristotle on this point?

*Conclusions*

A possible answer lies in Alfarabi’s different view of the democratic character. While Aristotle firmly believes the majority’s greatest desire is the desire to rule, Alfarabi does not see the passions of the people in such a clear-cut way. As he has said, it is possible for all kinds of desires to arise in the democratic city, which means anyone who seems willing to satisfy the desires of the moment could gain power. Alfarabi says that “these rulerships are bought for money—especially the rulerships that come about in the democratic city. For no one there is more deserving of rulership than another. So when rulership in it is surrendered to someone, it is either because the inhabitants granted it to him or that they took money or some other recompense from him” (116). Here, Alfarabi makes a further suggestion: that although the various desires of the democratic citizens can put amenable rulers in place, these desires are not necessarily enough to rocket the rulers to success. In order to solidify their positions, rulers may also have to buy the people off.

After making this point, Alfarabi repeats a statement he made previously about the rulers who are honored in the democratic city. Yet he does not simply repeat it—he changes the statement a little to create a different emphasis. In the first version, Alfarabi wrote that the honored rulers “bring the inhabitants of the city to freedom and to all of their passions and desires and … preserve their freedom and the diverging, differing desires of some from others and from their external enemies while restricting their desires only to what is necessary” (114). In the second version, he writes that “the virtuous ruler is the one who is excellent at deliberation and fine at using stratagems to gain [the people] their different and variegated desires and passions, preserving that from their enemies, and not depriving [them] of any of their money but restricting himself only to what is necessary for his power” (117). In the first version, the focus was on both the people’s freedom and their desires; in the second version, freedom is replaced by money.

Alfarabi, like Aristotle, has already hinted that the freedom of the democratic city may not be as complete as it looks, for the rulers are essentially slaves to the people. Alfarabi, however, presents a different picture of what freedom means to the people than Aristotle does. In Aristotle’s picture of democracy, the people want nothing more than to gain political power. They believe that because they are all equally free, they should all rule, which means ruling represents freedom for them. Money is the means of gaining the leisure and power that will allow them to rule, which is why their desires manifest themselves in a class struggle. In Alfarabi’s democratic city, however, ruling does not represent freedom—money does. Money is the end rather than the means. Alfarabi’s majority members, therefore, want rulers who will not only satisfy whatever fleeting passions they happen to be feeling, but also grant the common desire that lies beneath those passions: the desire to accumulate money and to preserve it from all external threats.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Alfarabi’s project, then, differs significantly from Aristotle’s, although their ideas are similar in key ways as well. Both thinkers point to a contradiction in the supposed law of the democratic city: though it promises total freedom and equality, it cannot deliver on that promise. Furthermore, both Aristotle and Alfarabi see deep problems with the rule of law as a whole, since it deals with generalities rather than with particular cases. Ideally, a virtuous ruler who could simply judge what is best in each case would take command. Neither Aristotle nor Alfarabi, however, believes this ideal will ever be realized, since this virtuous ruler would inevitably be deposed by the resentful majority.

Here is where the views of the philosophers diverge. Aristotle thinks the majority members will depose the virtuous ruler because they want power for themselves. He argues, therefore, that a revised rule of law is necessary in a democracy and can even elevate it, especially if most of its people lack the time to engage in political machinations. If laws are enacted that prevent the people from seizing all the important offices, but preserve the democratic character by allowing them to participate in politics, some semblance of the ideal situation could be achieved. The virtuous could have some influence over politics without much of a threat from the majority, which would increase virtue in the city as a whole.

Alfarabi, on the other hand, thinks the majority members will depose the virtuous ruler because he refuses to gratify their various desires, especially their desire for money. The rule of law that Aristotle imagines cannot apply to this situation; since the majority’s deepest desire is not political, a political solution will not satisfy it. Alfarabi, therefore, envisions a different situation: a situation in which most of the citizens are given what they see as their freedom, leaving the virtuous to associate with a relatively small amount of risk. Though the city as a whole may lack the virtue that Aristotle hopes to inculcate, Alfarabi hopes the virtuous will form their own sort of city within the democratic one. Alfarabi, therefore, feels freer to criticize the rule of law than Aristotle does, since it does not figure in his project. Though Aristotle agrees with these criticisms, he must keep quieter, since the rule of law remains central to his plan for the democracy.

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2. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1279a18–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 2.204–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A more explicit discussion of this idea can be found in *Averroes on Plato’s Republic*, trans. Ralph Lerner (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974), 125–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)