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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābḫāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v
Delineating Dialectic: 
*The Perfect Philosopher in al-Fārābī’s Commentary on Topics VIII* 

Alexander Lamprakis, Daniel Davies*

**Abstract**

This article presents and discusses two previously unpublished fragments from al-Fārābī’s (d. 950/1) literal commentary on *Topics* VIII. This text survives only in a Hebrew translation of the provençal intellectual Ṭodros ben Mešullam ben David Ṭodrosi (born 1313) and is part of an anthology of philosophical texts that he produced around the year 1333 in Trinquetaille, Arles. In these two fragments, al-Fārābī assesses Aristotle’s claim in *Top.* VIII 1, 155b7-10 that the philosopher and the dialectician differ insofar as the philosopher does not need the ability to address others in his speech, while the dialectician necessarily does. Through a close reading of these fragments, the article aims to show that al-Fārābī’s commentary is more than mere textual exegesis: Al-Fārābī juxtaposes Aristotle’s claim with the concept of ‘philosopher’ that he himself develops, both in his political writings and in his abridgements of Aristotle’s *Organon*.

In discussing whether or not a philosopher needs to have command over teaching others, as well as refuting and testing their opinions, al-Fārābī gives a straightforward account of the natures and definitions of both the philosopher and the dialectician, which leads him to distinguish two ways in which a philosopher can be called ‘perfect’. It will be argued that al-Fārābī’s commentary on *Topics* VIII is therefore an important source text for discussing the way in which he navigates between the different definitions of ‘philosopher’ inherited from the ancient and late ancient philosophical tradition.

1. Introduction

In his political writings, al-Fārābī (d. 950/1) famously claims that a perfect philosopher must be qualified to become the leader of a political community. The locus classicus for this claim is found in *The Attainment of Happiness*, where he writes that

To be a truly perfect philosopher (al-faylasūf al-kāmil ‘alā l-iṭlāq) 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 (al-faylasūf ‘alā l-iṭlāq), one would find no difference between him and the supreme leader (al-raʾīs al-awwal).

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Al-Fārābī’s concept of the perfect philosopher as depicted in the above-quoted passage has been the subject of controversy, most notably regarding its possible sources. In his study of Platonic political philosophy in late Antiquity, O’Meara has argued that, in ascribing certain political functions to philosophers, al-Fārābī may be aligned with an idea of ‘assimilation to God’ prevalent in later Neoplatonism, which includes both one’s own perfection, theoretical and practical, and also acting providentially upon others. In other words, for many of the Neoplatonists, philosophers aim not only at perfecting their theoretical and practical intellects in order to assimilate themselves to God’s self-intellection and pure goodness but also at bestowing the good they have attained on others, thereby assimilating to God’s providence and emanation of goodness. As O’Meara summarizes:

Becoming divine-like means, for the later Neoplatonist, imitating the divine, not only by leading a life of theoretical wisdom, but also by exercising a providential (i.e. political) role, since the divine not only enjoys perfect intellection, but also confers benefit (providence) on what is lower.

O’Meara’s analysis shows that it is important not to limit the study of the sources of al-Fārābī’s political thought to Aristotle and Plato alone. He may have found inspiration for his ideas also in the less distant current of philosophers belonging to different streams of


Neoplatonism. However, late ancient thinkers who preceded al-Fārābī did not spell out in great detail how philosophers may realize the sort of providential activity they exercise on their communities. From a series of his writings, it is clear that, for al-Fārābī, this happens by conveying knowledge using the syllogistic methods of dialectic, rhetoric, and poetry. Logic therefore becomes important also for political purposes, since the perfect ruler must adopt the various registers of discourse in order to exercise (political) providence.

It has often been pointed out that al-Fārābī’s concept of ‘philosopher’ may fit well in a Platonic (and, as mentioned, Neoplatonic) framework but appears to contrast with Aristotle’s perception of the philosopher as a virtuous, but solitary researcher, who leads a theoretical rather than a political life. Nevertheless, al-Fārābī himself does not directly oppose the views of the two ancient philosophers to one another in any of his extant treatises: In The Philosophy of Plato, al-Fārābī states that, for Aristotle’s teacher, “the person who is philosopher and the person who is prince are the same”. In contrast, he does not mention any definition or description of philosophy or the philosopher in his The Philosophy of Aristotle. In his Book of Debate, on the other hand, al-Fārābī reports that, according to Aristotle, the philosopher “is the one in whom the end of the two parts of philosophy is present”. These two parts are theoretical and practical philosophy – but there is no mention of any political activity. Only in The Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Sages, whose authenticity has been frequently contested, does al-Fārābī claim that Plato and Aristotle hold the same views on the nature of philosophy.

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5 O’Meara explicitly draws a connection with al-Fārābī, in the continuation of the above-quoted passage. As he states: “The same interpretation of divine assimilation as both theoretical and providential is found in early Islamic philosophy and can be found in al-Farabi’s perfect ruler, who possesses not only perfect theoretical wisdom, but also the capacity to use this wisdom for the benefit of others”. Cf. D. O’Meara, Platonopolis (above, n. 3), p. 192.

6 On this, see, for instance, al-Fārābī’s Kitāb al-Ḥurūf, in which he explains that while the elect few are taught by demonstration (burhān), teaching addressed to the masses (al-ǧumhūr) “proceeds by dialectical, rhetorical, or poetical methods”. Cf. al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-Ḥurūf, ed. by M. Mahdī, Dār al-Mašriq, Beirut 1990, p. 152.3-4.

7 On some aspects of the relation between al-Fārābī’s concept of philosophy and that of Plato and Aristotle, see the literature quoted in n. 2. In the late ancient philosophical literature, the definitions and descriptions of philosophy are usually discussed in the context of the prologue to Porphyry’s Isagoge. On Aristotle’s definition see, for instance, Ammon., In Porph. Isag., p. 8.8 Busse. On the Syriac and Arabic reception of this interpretation see C. Hein, Definition und Einleitung der Philosophie. Von der spätantiken Einleitungs-literatur zur arabischen Enzyklopädie, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M. 1985, pp. 86-130.


9 In fact, the word ‘philosopher’ is not mentioned once and ‘philosophy’ is only mentioned in the two final sections, introducing the different branches of philosophy. Cf. al-Fārābī, Falsafat Aristūtalīs, Arabic Text, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by M. Mahdī, Dār Majallat Šiʿr, Beirut 1961, pp. 131.22-133.3, and, for an English translation, Mahdī, Alfarabi’s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (above, n. 1), p. 130.


12 The authenticity of this treatise has been questioned, for instance, by J. Lameer, al-Fārābī & Aristotelian Syllogistics. Greek Theory & Islamic Practice, Brill, Leiden 1994, pp. 30–39 and by M. Rashed, “On the Authorship of the Treatise on the Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Sages Attributed to al-Fārābī”, Arabic Sciences and Philosophy 19 (2009), pp. 43-82; al-Fārābī’s authorship has been defended by C. Genequand, “Théologie et philosophie:
this treatise both Plato and Aristotle hold that “the definition and essence of philosophy is that it is knowledge of existents insofar as they are existents”. There appears to be, however, no extant passage in al-Fārābī’s œuvre that addresses and discusses the differences between Aristotle’s and Plato’s definitions of philosophy.

This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by introducing new evidence from his writings that has not yet been taken into account. This evidence consists of two fragments from his literal commentary on the eighth book of Aristotle’s *Topics*, which is only preserved in a Hebrew translation by the provençal intellectual Ṭodros ben Mešullam ben David Ṭodrosi (born 1313) as part of an anthology of philosophical texts written around the year 1333 in Trinquetaille, Arles. In these two fragments, al-Fārābī comments on the opening lines of *Topics VIII 1*, in which Aristotle claims that the philosopher differs from the dialectician insofar as the philosopher is not concerned with addressing others in his discourse, while the dialectician is. Despite being an exegetical commentary on the final book of the *Topics*, al-Fārābī’s discussion of Aristotle’s claim is more than a mere exposition of its meaning. As this paper will argue, it is also an attempt to reconcile Aristotle’s account with al-Fārābī’s own understanding of the philosopher’s nature both in his political and logical writings. By introducing the question of whether the philosopher must have command over teaching, refuting and testing others, al-Fārābī’s commentary picks up a theme he himself introduces in both his *Book of Debate* and *Book of Demonstration*. This also bears consequences for a better understanding of the political function al-Fārābī envisions for the perfect philosopher, for which, as the final analysis will show, one has to differentiate between different meanings of ‘perfection’.

2. Al-Fārābī’s commentary on Top. VIII 1, 155 b 7–9

The passage on which al-Fārābī comments in the two fragments introduced below is located at the beginning of the final book of Aristotle’s *Topics*, which deals with practical precepts for the questioner and the respondent in dialectical debates. Elaborating on the commonality and difference between philosophers and dialecticians, Aristotle states that

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13 Cfr. C. Martini Bonadeo, al-Fārābī. L’armonia delle opinioni dei due sapienti, il divino Platone e Aristotele. Introduzione, testo arabo, traduzione e commento, Pref. di G. Endress, Pisa U.P., Pisa 2008 (Greco, Arabo, Latino. Testi 3), p. 37. This definition is striking, since it was known through the late ancient commentary tradition that the definition is one of Aristotle’s, while ‘assimilation to God’ (ὁμοίωσις τῷ θεῷ) was known to be one of Plato’s. According to Lameer, al-Fārābī & Aristotelian Syllogistics (above, n. 12), p. 32, “this definition is nothing but an echo of Aristotle’s description of first or primary philosophy (...)”. However, given that this definition is known from the late ancient introductory literature, it is not necessary to claim that the author “mistook Aristotle’s description of metaphysics for a definition of philosophy in general” (ibid., p. 33), as pointed out by Martini Bonadeo in her commentary on that passage. In light of the analysis presented in this paper, it is important to note that al-Fārābī here explicitly refers to the ‘essence’ (māhiyya) of philosophy. On al-Fārābī’s other definitions of philosophy see also Martini Bonadeo’s commentary on that passage.

up to the point of finding the topos, the philosopher’s inquiry and the dialectician’s proceed alike, but actually arranging these things and devising questions is unique to the dialectician. For all of that is directed at someone else.\(^15\)

Aristotle’s claim in this passage is that the philosopher and the dialectician both share methods of conducting research and arriving at arguments, which they do through the \textit{topoi} outlined in books II-VII of the \textit{Topics}. The philosopher and the dialectician differ, however, from the point of view of how they arrange and present their knowledge. According to Aristotle, only the dialectician needs to organize his discourse with another party in mind (\πρὸς ἕτερον), while the philosopher is merely concerned with the syllogism’s soundness and validity.\(^16\)

What follows contains the first of two comments on this passage by al-Fārābī. Given that the fragments from his commentary have not yet been published, a complete rendition of the two fragments will be provided.\(^17\) Judging from the first fragment’s position and arrangement in Ṭodrosi’s \textit{Philosophical Anthology}, it probably belonged to the passage “up to finding the topos, the philosopher’s inquiry and the dialectician’s proceed alike” from the above-quoted section of the \textit{Topics}.\(^18\) Al-Fārābī’s commentary runs as follows:

[T1] Ṭodros Ṭodrosi says [that] Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī says: [i] It is likely that he meant by ‘philosopher’ someone who, using demonstrative methods, speculates about existents inasmuch as they are existents, because in this he is equal to the dialectician. He [i.e., the dialectician] shares [with the philosopher], since his speculation is a common speculation about existents inasmuch as they are existents, for he speculates about the existent not only inasmuch as it is quantitative, as in the mathematical arts, nor [does he speculate] about the natural existent from the artificial. Rather, he speculates about all of them, and when speculating about them he uses generally accepted premises. Someone who speculates about the things the dialectician speculates about, and uses demonstrations when speculating about them, is a philosopher simpliciter (\be-muḥlaṭ). However, someone who speculates about the mathematical arts alone or natural science alone is not a philosopher simpliciter nor is he equal to the dialectician. [ii] They [i.e., the philosopher and the dialectician] share in knowledge of those \textit{topoi} of this treatise that are [both] generally accepted and true.


\(^{16}\) See also the subsequent passage in Arist., \textit{Top.} VIII 1, 155 b 10-14: τῷ δὲ φιλοσόφῳ καὶ ζητοῦντι καθ’ ἑαυτὸν οὐδὲν μέλει, ἐὰν ἀληθῆ μὲν ἡ καὶ γνώριμα δὲ ὁ συλλογισμός, μὴ ἡθ δ’ ἢ κοτὰ ἢ ἀποκρινόμενος διὰ τὸ σύνεγγυς εἶναι τοῦ ἐξ ἀρχῆς καὶ προσφέρειν τὸ συμβησόμενον.

\(^{17}\) The edition and English translation of these two fragments will be published in Davies – Lamprakis, “Al-Fārābī’s \textit{Commentary on the Eighth book of Aristotle’s \textit{Topics}’}” (above, n. 14) as Fragment XII [24] and Fragment XIII [25].

\(^{18}\) Cf. Arist., \textit{Top.} VIII 1, 155 b 7-8: \μέχρι μὲν ὁν τοῦ ἐὑρεῖν τὸν τόπον ὡμός τοῦ φιλοσόφου καὶ τοῦ διαλεκτικοῦ ή σκέψεις. The context informs us that the following fragment probably belongs to al-Fārābī’s commentary on this lemma. However, what is quoted as a lemma in Ṭodrosi’s \textit{Philosophical Anthology} is taken from Qalonymos b. Qalonymos’s Hebrew translation of Averroes’s \textit{Middle Commentary on the Topics}, edited by Ch.E. Butterworth – A’. A. Haridi, The American Research Center in Egypt, Cairo 1979, p. 199.6-7: \waj-l-jadalī yashtarikān fi l-fahs. For Qalonymos’s Hebrew translations of this passage, see MS Paris, BnF, \hebr. 932, f. 85r3 and MS Munich, BSB, \textit{Cod. Hebr.} 26, f. 384r9. On Ṭodrosi’s method of explaining Averroes’s middle commentaries in his work, see Harvey – Horezky, “\textit{Averroes ex Averroe}” (above, n. 14), pp. 8-20 and their chapter in the present volume.
For the philosopher uses them from the point of view that they are true and the dialectician from the point of view that they are generally accepted. These are also words of Abū Naṣr.²⁰

According to al-Fārābī’s analysis, the dialectician and the philosopher are equal to each other in that their investigation deals with the same kind of subject matter, which al-Fārābī introduces as ‘existents inasmuch as they are existents’.²¹ They differ only in the kind of premises they employ: While the philosopher is restricted to those that are demonstrative, the dialectician uses those which are generally accepted.²² These two points appear less motivated by the text quoted above from *Topics* VIII 1 than by a passage from *Metaphysics* IV 2, in which Aristotle claims that “sophisticy and dialectic turn on the same genus (το ἀνυτὸ γένος) of things as philosophy”, which is “being qua being” (τῷ ὄν ᾗ ὄν).²³ Linking these two passages seems to be unprecedented in the late ancient commentary tradition; nor is the link found in the commentaries on *Topics* VIII composed by Avicenna or Averroes. As will be seen below, al-Fārābī returns to these definitions when distinguishing the philosopher from the dialectician in the subsequent fragment, which continues his commentary on the above-quoted passage.

In *Top.* VIII 1, 155 b 7-9, the primary point of comparison between the dialectician and the philosopher is the commonality of deriving arguments from *topoi*. However, al-Fārābī mentions this point only in the last part of his comment, starting at section [ii]. His analysis of how Aristotle’s *topoi* are used throughout the different syllogistic arts aligns with what is stated in his *Book of Analysis*, where it is said that the *topoi* determine “many particular premises, of which some are used in dialectic (*fi l-γαδαλ*), some in rhetoric, some in the sciences (*fi l-ʿilūm*), and

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²⁰ Cf. MS London, BL, *Add.* 27559, ff. 87r2-87r11: [i]: ἡσυχάσθαι τῷ ὄντι ᾗ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν. ²¹ Cf. Add. 27559, ff. 87r2-87r11: [i]: ἡσυχάσθαι τῷ ὄντι ᾗ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν. ²² Cf. Add. 27559, ff. 87r2-87r11: [ii] ἡσυχάσθαι τῷ ὄντι ᾗ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν. ²³ Cf. Add. 27559, ff. 87r2-87r11: [ii] ἡσυχάσθαι τῷ ὄντι ᾗ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν. ²⁴ One must bear in mind that this is one of the six definitions of philosophy mentioned in the late ancient introductory literature to philosophy, see above, n. 7. Al-Fārābī’s general interest in the question of how to understand the concept of ‘philosophy’ is also apparent from the fact that he wrote a treatise entitled *Risāla fi ism al-falsafa wa-sabab Zubīrihā*, whose fragments are especially known through the works of Ibn Abī Usaybi’a and Shem Tob Ibn Falaqua. Cf. B. Chiesa – C. Rigo, “La tradizione manoscritta del *Risāla fi ism al-falsafa di al-Fārābī*, Sefarad 53 (1993), pp. 3-15, here 6-15. On this passage, see also S. Harvey, “The Quiddity of Philosophy according to Averroes and Falaqua, a Muslim Philosopher and his Jewish Interpreter”, in L.A. Aertsen – A. Speer (eds.), *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter*, De Gruyter, Berlin 1998, pp. 904-913, esp. pp. 908-9. ²⁵ Since the art of rhetoric also draws on generally accepted premises, al-Fārābī’s claim should be accentuated by adding ‘truly generally accepted’, in contrast to ‘truly and seemingly generally-accepted’ which is the class of premises rhetorical drawings on.

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²² Cf. Add. 27559, ff. 87r2-87r11: [ii]: ἡσυχάσθαι τῷ ὄντι ᾗ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν. ²³ Cf. Add. 27559, ff. 87r2-87r11: [ii]: ἡσυχάσθαι τῷ ὄντι ᾗ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν κοινὸν δὲ πᾶσι τὸ ὄν ἐστιν.
some in other intellectual arts (al-ṣanāʾiʿ al-fikriyya)". Additionally, his Book of Debate states that the topoi “that encompass what is certain and what is generally accepted … apply both for dialectic and philosophy”. According to both treatises, there is a set of topoi suitable for dialectic that also rise to the level of demonstrative science, and which the philosopher both employ in their respective investigations.

In summary, al-Fārābī approaches the commonality of the philosopher and the dialectician from two perspectives. One is that they both investigate ‘existents inasmuch as they are existents’, rather than a particular class of being alone, such as mathematical or natural being. The second is that, in developing arguments, the philosopher draws on the class of topoi that are both true and generally accepted. These topoi are also included in the relevant class of topoi on which the dialectician draws, which are those that are (truly) generally accepted.

3. Al-Fārābī’s commentary on Top. VIII 1, 155 b 9-10

After elaborating on what the philosopher and the dialectician have in common, al-Fārābī moves on to their differences, which are the subject of the next fragment that is preserved in Ṭodros Ṭodrosi’s Philosophical Anthology. According to the passage quoted above from the Topics, Aristotle states that only the dialectician addresses an interlocutor but the philosopher does not. In consequence, arranging one’s speech (in view of an interlocutor or an audience) and the order and wording of the premises one uses in the process of questioning are matters relevant only to the dialectician. The following fragment from al-Fārābī’s commentary is likely to have belonged to the lemma “but actually arranging these things and devising questions is unique to the dialectician” and runs as follows:

[T2] Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī said in his commentary: [i] Through this he [i.e., Aristotle] makes known that what is in this book is particular to this art, in contrast with what has preceded, and that the two arts share in what has preceded. [ii] We ought to investigate his statement because it appears to say that the arrangement and the questioning are not used by the philosopher, but it is evident that the philosopher discourses in order to teach, to refute false statements, and for testing, and that arrangement is needed for teaching or testing. [iii] The answer is that ‘arrangement’ and ‘questioning’ are necessary parts of the art of dialectic such that without them the art of dialectic would not be attained. The essence of the art of dialectic requires its practitioners to have the power over ‘arrangement’ and ‘questioning’. [iv] Philosophy is not so, because the philosopher is a philosopher through the

24 Cf. al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-Ǧadal (above, n. 10), p. 128.13-14. Note that, while the Kitāb al-Ǧadal uses the expression yaqīn, the commentary uses ṣodeq. We take the meaning to be equivalent, however.
25 On this, see also the analysis in Hasnawi, “Topic and Analysis” (above, n. 23), esp. pp. 47-51.
26 Cf. Arist., Top. VIII 1, 155 b 9-10: τὸ δ’ ἤδη ταῦτα τάττειν καὶ ἐρωτηματίζειν ἰδιόν τοῦ διαλεκτικοῦ. What is quoted as lemma in Ṭodrosi’s Philosophical Anthology is taken from Qalonymos b. Qalonymos’s Hebrew translation of Averroes’s Middle Commentary on the Topics (above, n. 18), p. 199.7-8: (...) fa-ammā l-tartīb wa-l-suʾāl fa-bumā yaḥuṣṣāni l-ǧadalī. For the Hebrew, see Paris, BnF, hebr. 932, f. 85r4 and Munich, BSB, Cod. Hebr. 26, f. 384r10. On the problem of lemmatization in Ṭodrosi’s Philosophical Anthology, see above, n. 18.
27 By “the two arts” al-Fārābī means philosophy and dialectic. By “what has preceded” he refers to the middle section of the Topics, i.e., books II-VII. The Hebrew does not have a definite article before “two arts”, but the sense of the sentence seems to require it.
knowledge that reaches him, even if he does not have the ability to teach someone or to refute false statements or to test someone in the art in question, because the ability to refute false opinions is not among the necessary parts of philosophy. [v] For when a person attains the true opinions in an art and knows them, he is a philosopher, even if he does not have the ability to refute false opinions. Likewise, he is a philosopher regardless of whether someone else who has investigated that art is perfect or deficient in it. He is also a philosopher even if he does not notice the deficiency of the other person, or his perfection. [Finally,] he is also a philosopher even if he does not make the person deficient in that art aware of his deficiency. Because these are not among the things through which philosophy is established nor [are they the things] through which the philosopher is a philosopher. [vi] Instead, the capability to do these things is a praiseworthy matter for the philosopher, like the beauty of an animal, for his philosophy would not be invalidated if he cannot [do them], just as the vitality of a living thing is not invalidated if it is not appealing; it [i.e., the animal] would still be a perfect animal inasmuch as it is an animal, that is, inasmuch as it is an animate sensitive substance.  

In section [i] of his comment, al-Fārābī mentions, once again, that both the philosopher and the dialectician share the study of (the relevant class of) *topoi*, whereas, what is contained in the final book of the *Topics* is particular to the dialectician. Al-Fārābī subsequently constructs a separate problem that motivates his commentary from section [ii] onwards. The way in which he phrases this problem intimates that it does not arise from Aristotle's text, but from a possible misunderstanding: According to al-Fārābī, Aristotle appears to be saying that the philosopher does not use 'arrangement' and 'questioning' at all. He counters this alleged conclusion by referring to the fact that the philosopher obviously engages in three activities: teaching students, refuting false statements, and testing opinions and alleged knowledge. Since such activities do require command over ‘arrangement’ and ‘questioning’, the above-stated interpretation of Aristotle’s text needs to be corrected.

As is the case in [T1], the framework of al-Fārābī’s discussion here is far wider than absolutely necessary for explaining Aristotle’s text, which is not concerned with premise admission as such, but only with its strategic aspect. What Aristotle has in mind is that the dialectician must be concerned to avoid a situation in which the respondent will not admit the premises “because they are too close to the initial thesis and one may foresee what will follow”.

In other words, the dialectician needs to know how to arrange his discourse so that the respondent admits the premises from which the refutation of the thesis he is defending is supposed to come about. While Aristotle speaks about this narrow context of dialectical

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28 Cf. MS London, BL, *Add. 27559*, fol. 87r12-87v12: "ודיעת זה בשמה שלמה המאמר [i] יחידי הוא מה המשוב שמה שלמה המאמר פלוסוף שמקיים את הדריש של התודעה לתורת התכונה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה חכמה של מקצוע התפקידר התוכנה 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stratagems, the problem addressed by al-Fārābī is more fundamental: Is it sufficient for the philosopher to be a solitary scientist or must he also interact with others by teaching them, refuting their false opinions, or testing their alleged knowledge? This immediately calls to mind the political function that al-Fārābī ascribed to the ‘truly perfect philosopher’ in The Attainment of Happiness. But why does al-Fārābī pose this question here? And why does he specifically refer to the acts of teaching, refuting, and testing?

A plausible answer to this can be given by taking into account evidence from al-Fārābī’s abridgements of Aristotle’s Organon. Both in his Book of Debate and Book of Demonstration he does, in fact, claim that command over these acts is necessary for reaching perfection within the demonstrative arts. In the former, he states that while “every teacher of a demonstrative art (kull muʿallim ṣināʿa yaqīniyya)” must master the principles and all the demonstrations that could potentially arise from that respective art, that alone is insufficient because he must also be capable of opposing paralogisms. Al-Fārābī’s account is remarkable because it appears to oppose the widespread view of late antique philosophers that opposing paralogisms is the function of dialectic alone.

The way in which he attempts to distinguish a demonstrative form of refutation and testing from their dialectical counterparts is apparent when al-Fārābī discusses which possible interlocutors a practitioner of demonstrative sciences may encounter. They are either students, those who deceive or are deceived by someone from among the art’s practitioners, or those who deceive or are deceived by someone who is not a practitioner of that art. According to al-Fārābī, one does not need to be a dialectician in order to address the first two kinds of interlocutors, since the arguments one has to formulate do not leave the realm of the art or science of one’s own expertise and one can therefore draw on demonstrative premises that are specific to that art or science. Only in the case of encountering those of the final category does one need to argue outside the realm of one’s own area of expertise. In this case, one must draw on generally accepted premises and, therefore, become a dialectician. When discussing how the philosopher ought to address different interlocutors in his Book of Debate, then, al-Fārābī refers to all three of the discourse-types that he mentions in the quoted fragment from his commentary on Topics VIII. According to this treatise, the ideal type of philosopher al-Fārābī has in mind must be equally capable of teaching, refuting, and testing.

This discussion shows that al-Fārābī aims at dividing the task of refuting and testing (and elsewhere also that of teaching) between the philosopher and the dialectician. This idea appears again, and this time more systematically, in his treatise that specifically deals with the

30 Cf. al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-Ǧadal (above, n. 10), p. 88.1.
32 Al-Fārābī himself states in Kitāb al-Ǧadal (above, n. 10), p. 67.6-12 that among the uses of dialectic is that “not one of the people of the scientific arts is able to reject – by the faculty that derives from his art – sophistical arguments that he criticizes and opposes in his art (…). Only the dialectician – and he alone – is able to meet sophistical arguments. Therefore, the art of dialectic is also the protector and defender of philosophy against the sophists”; translation from DiPasquale, Alfarabi’s Book of Dialectic (above, n. 11), p. 39-40.
34 On this, see also Arist., Soph. El. 9, 170 a 20-39, where Aristotle distinguishes between refutations specific to single sciences and those that apply to all sciences. See also Kitāb al-Ǧadal (above, n. 10), pp. 91.4-5, where al-Fārābī points out that, when the philosopher engages in refuting opinions, neither he, nor the interlocutor becomes a dialectician or investigator, but their discourse is that of teachers and students.
philosopher as practitioner of demonstrative sciences. In the fifth and final part of his *Book of Demonstration*, al-Fārābī aims at elaborating on the different types of demonstrative discourses (*al-muḫāṭabāt al-burhāniyya*). He introduces this section as follows:

Let us now speak about the kinds of demonstrative discourses, which are four in number: Among them is the discourse of ‘teaching and learning’ (*al-taʿlīm wa-l-taʿallum*), the discourse of ‘scientific refutation’ (*al-ʿinād al-burhānī*), the discussion of those collaborating in ‘proof discovery’ (*al-istinbāṭ*), and [lastly] scientific testing regarding the matter [of the particular science], that is ‘using deception in demonstrative science’ (*al-muḡālaṭa al-burhāniyya*).\(^{35}\)

This part has no direct parallel in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, and appears to be al-Fārābī’s own attempt to establish the rules of different scientific discourses. In doing so, he fills a gap in the Aristotelian corpus, for Aristotle articulates such rules explicitly only for dialectical, rhetorical, and sophistical discourses, but not for the scientific. This reframing of the *Posterior Analytics* as an art that employs various ranges of discourse, parallel to dialectic and rhetoric, is also significant for al-Fārābī’s political philosophy. As seen in the introduction, the ‘truly perfect philosopher’ has to be able to teach all members of his community. To turn the initial thesis around: In order to act providentially on his community, the philosopher needs methods to address not only those who are not capable of demonstrative thinking (which he does by becoming a dialectician, rhetorician, and someone who uses poetical devices), but also for addressing those who are.

What is important to note for the current investigation is that, according to al-Fārābī, someone only reaches “the perfection in the art (*al-kamāl fī l-ṣināʿa*)”\(^{36}\) when, aside from knowing all principles and mastering all demonstrations, one also “possesses the capacity to make someone else aware (*taḥṣīr ǧayrihi*) of what one knows”\(^{37}\) regarding the matters pertaining to the art, the ability “to deceive someone (*muḡālaṭat ǧayrihi*) in points through which it is possible that one may err in that science”\(^{38}\) and, finally, the capability of “nullifying the relevant erroneous refutations (*faṣḥ al-muḡālaṭāt*) that arrive from someone else”.\(^{39}\) Including this topic in the *Book of Demonstration* therefore corroborates what al-Fārābī already stated in his *Book of Debate*: The perfect philosopher must be able to teach, refute, and test others qua philosopher, and not only qua dialectician.

In summary, al-Fārābī appears to take Aristotle’s claim in *Top. VIII 1, 155 b 9-10* as an occasion (perhaps even a pretext) for discussing whether the definition of ‘philosopher’ includes the ability to address others. As both his *Book of Debate* and *Book of Demonstration* show, he believes that the philosopher must be able to address others as a practitioner of his universal science, and from premises and principles peculiar to his art, and not from what is widely held and generally accepted. Al-Fārābī may have found passages in the Aristotelian corpus, or earlier interpretations of it, suggesting such a distinction. A more detailed investigation of his logical writings and their sources is still lacking, but one can speculate that it is his own innovation.

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36 Cf. al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Burhān* (above, n. 35), p. 94.18.
38 Cf. al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Burhān* (above, n. 35), p. 94.20.
4. Al-Fārābī’s two notions of ‘perfection’

Al-Fārābī’s concept of ‘philosopher’ as encountered in his *Book of Debate* and *Book of Demonstration* is evidently in contrast to what Aristotle claims in Top. VIII 1, 155 b 9-10. Aristotle puts philosophers on a level with those who investigate for themselves alone and claims that they do not need to concern themselves with addressing other parties.

What follows in section [iii]–[v] of the above-quoted second fragment from al-Fārābī’s commentary comes therefore as a surprise: Al-Fārābī fully adheres to Aristotle’s claim that the notion of ‘philosopher’ does not entail any of the things he introduced in his abridgements. In section [v] he even intensifies his argument in stages, pointing out that another person’s deficiency in a demonstrative art does not detract from the philosopher’s philosophy, nor does the philosopher’s lack of awareness of that deficiency, nor his inaction in rectifying it.

This discrepancy between al-Fārābī’s explanation of Top. VIII 1, 155 b 9-10 and his other writings was also noticed in the early reception of this commentary, as attested by the following marginal note attached to the translation, written by Ṭodrosi:

In the book of the commentary of Abū Naṣr, from which I translated this, this was written on the page facing this statement: ‘This is not a philosopher according to Abū Naṣr himself in other places, and his words contradict one another.’

Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine when and by whom this note was placed in the Arabic manuscript Ṭodrosi used for his translation. Given the fact that Ṭodrosi translated it into Hebrew around the year 1333 CE, the note must have been written earlier than that and attests to the puzzlement the reader must have felt when comparing al-Fārābī’s commentary on Topics VIII 1 with other sections of his writings. As the comparison between his commentary and his abridgements suggests, al-Fārābī must have himself been aware of a certain tension between his own conception of a philosopher and that outlined in the works of Aristotle. This tension is apparent in *The Attainment of Happiness*, too, where al-Fārābī addresses the difference between the two meanings of the word ‘philosopher’. As he writes

‘Imam’, ‘philosopher’, and ‘lawgiver’ denote the same thing, aside from the fact that the name ‘philosopher’ signifies, first of all, theoretical virtue (al-faḍīla al-nazariyya). But if it be determined that the theoretical virtue reaches its ultimate perfection in every respect (‘alā kamālihā l-aḫīr min kulli l-wuǧūb), it necessarily follows that he [i.e., the philosopher] [also] has the other faculties.
While in The Attainment of Happiness, al-Fārābī does not explain the relation between the philosopher as the possessor of theoretical sciences and initiator of political providence in more detail, in his commentary on Topics VIII 1 he chooses to tackle this problem head on.

At this point it is worthwhile taking a step back and revisiting [T1]. As has been shown, al-Fārābī gives proper definitions to both the philosopher and the dialectician by introducing their genus and differentiae. To recapitulate, both fall under the genus of ‘investigating being as such’. The philosopher does so while using ‘demonstrative premises’, which is how he is differentiated from the dialectician, whose differentiae are both ‘the usage of generally accepted premises’ and ‘power over arrangement and questioning’. The power over arrangement and questioning is thus part of the definition of the dialectician, but not of the philosopher. Now, in [T2], al-Fārābī draws on these definitions by claiming that

(...) the philosopher is a philosopher through the knowledge that reaches him, even if he does not have the ability to teach someone or to refute false statements or to test someone in the art in question, because the ability to refute false opinions is not among the necessary parts of philosophy.43

By ‘necessary parts’ al-Fārābī alludes to the differentiae given earlier, according to which ‘the power over arrangement and questioning’ is not part of the philosopher’s definition, but of the dialectician’s. In the final part of his exposition, al-Fārābī therefore argues that the ability to teach, refute, and test the opinions of others is simply “praiseworthy” (mešubbah)44 for the philosopher. He compares this to an animal which may rightly be called a perfect animal (hay šalem), once it answers to its essential definition, which is “animate sensitive substance”.45 As al-Fārābī states, this perfection is not inhibited by the animal’s lack of “beauty”.46

Transferred to the definition of the philosopher, one has to distinguish two kinds of ‘perfection’ in al-Fārābī’s treatises: When, in The Attainment of Happiness, it is said that the “truly perfect philosopher (al-faylasūf al-kāmil ‘alā l-iṭlāq)” must posses “the faculty for exploiting [the theoretical sciences] for the benefit of all others according to their capacity”47, or, when it is said in his Book of Demonstration that “the perfection in a [demonstrative] art (al-kamāl fi l-ṣināʿa)”48 must include the command over teaching, refuting, and testing, then this sense of ‘perfection’ comprises both aspects that al-Fārābī, in his commentary on

43 Cf. MS London, BL, Add. 27559, ff. 87r21–87v3, quoted above as part of [T2].
44 Ṭodrosi often uses the Hebrew mešubbah to translate the Arabic mamdūḥ or mahmūd.
45 Defining ‘animal’ as ‘animate sensitive substance’ is often used as a school example in the late ancient logical literature. See, for instance, Porph., Isag., p. 10.6 Busse: ἐστι γὰρ τὸ ζῷον οὐσία ἐμψυχος ξινοθυτική.
46 On the relation between ‘beauty’ and ‘perfection’ see also al-Fārābī, Kitāb Mabādiʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila, A revised text with introduction, translation, and commentary by R. Walzer, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1985, pp. 82-4, where al-Fārābī states that “beauty and brilliance and splendour mean in the case of every existent that it is in its most excellent state of existence and that it has attained its ultimate perfection”. However, as al-Fārābī adds, we humans “have beauty and splendour and brilliance as a result of accidental qualities (of our souls), and of what our bodies have in them and because of exterior things, but they are not in our substance (lā fī ḥawharinā)” (trans. Walzer). For the distinction of the different meanings of ‘perfection’ and ‘beauty’ as non-substantial perfection, see also al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya, Arabic Text, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by F.M. Nağğār, Dār al-Mašriq, Beirut 1993, p. 49.7-11.
47 Cf. al-Fārābī, Kitāb Tabīj al-saʿida (above, n. 1), p. 89.10-12. The translation is taken from Mahdī, Alfarabi’s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (above, n. 1), p. 43 (slightly modified).
48 Cf. al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-Barhān (above, n. 35), p. 94.17.
Topics VIII 1, calls ‘necessary’ and ‘praiseworthy’ for a philosopher.\(^9\) In light of this analysis, what al-Fārābī means when equating ‘the supreme ruler’ (\(al-raʾīs al-awwal\)) with the ‘truly perfect philosopher’ (\(al-faylasūf al-kāmil ‘alā l-iṭlāq\)) in The Attainment of Happiness is that they must fulfill both these criteria.

Therefore, what is merely praiseworthy for the philosopher becomes mandatory for the philosopher-king. To be a ‘truly perfect’ philosopher means, at first, this: to be a philosopher who deals with universal beings, uses demonstrative premises, and has the power to address others of his rank by teaching them, refuting their false opinions, and testing the knowledge they claim to possess. This is part of how the philosopher exercises his providential activity, and, as the structure of al-Fārābī’s Book of Demonstration suggests, it is what all philosophers should aim at. In addressing others the philosopher does not have to become a dialectician, as Aristotle’s Topics has suggested. Only in teaching those who are not of the philosopher’s rank, in refuting their false opinions and testing their alleged knowledge, must the philosopher-king be a dialectician (as well as a rhetorician and master of poetic devices), and exercise his providential activity by using premises that are widely held and generally accepted. A truly perfect philosopher who has the power to address all members of a political community is therefore also a dialectician. However, what makes him a dialectician is not his command over ‘arrangement’ and ‘questioning’ but, rather, over generally accepted premises and forms of argumentation that use them.

5. Conclusion

Al-Fārābī is the first available philosopher in the Islamic world to continue the practice of writing literal commentaries on Aristotle’s works.\(^50\) However, his commentary dedicated to Aristotle’s De Interpretatione is the only one that has come down to us in its entirety. Only parts of his commentaries on the Categories, Prior Analytics, Rhetoric, and that on Topics VIII survive; others are lost completely. The impact of these commentaries must not be underestimated, given that they served as a model for reading and commenting on Aristotle’s treatises, first and foremost for Averroes. Aside from al-Fārābī’s commentary on the De Interpretatione, which has already been the subject of a profound investigation, the extant fragments of al-Fārābī’s other commentaries have been studied only scarcely, if at all.\(^51\)

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\(^9\) Al-Fārābī may have been influenced by the way Aristotle defines the term ‘praiseworthy’ in Eth. Nic. I 12, 1101 b 13-15. As Aristotle explains, “we praise the just and the brave and the absolutely good and the virtue due to the actions and deeds (\(τὸν γὰρ δίκαιον καὶ τὸν ἀνδρεῖον καὶ ὅλως τὸν ἀγαθὸν τε καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν ἐπαινοῦμεν διὰ τὰς πράξεις καὶ τὰ ἔργα\)). The extant Arabic translation renders this thought as “we praise the just and [...] generally the good and virtue, on account of the actions and what results from them (\(bi-sabab al-afʿāl wa-mā yahdatu ʿanhā\))”. For the text and an English translation, see A.A. Akasoy – A. Fidora, The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics, With an Introduction and Annotated Translation by Douglas M. Dunlop, Brill, Leiden 2005, p. 144-5. Following Aristotle’s line of thought, one may conclude that, if a philosopher engages in teaching, refuting, and testing opinions, it may be considered as praiseworthy due to its consequences and not in relation to him as a philosopher.

\(^50\) Here one must also take into account al-Fārābī’s intellectual context, the Baghdad School, whose members translated many of the late ancient commentaries and themselves also commented on many treatises, such as Aristotle’s Physics and the Organon. Many of these comments only came down to us as glosses on extant manuscripts of Aristotle’s texts in their Arabic rendition. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which commentaries that are not extant but are mentioned in the bio-bibliographical literature were indeed literal commentaries.

\(^51\) Al-Fārābī’s commentary on De Interpretatione has been profoundly studied in F. Zimmermann, Al-Fārābī’s Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione, Translated with an Introduc-
One of the goals of this article was to contribute to the understanding of how al-Fārābī proceeded in these works, and of how they relate to other treatises of his œuvre. The two passages selected from his commentary on *Topics* VIII prove to be particularly illuminating for this purpose, given that they force al-Fārābī to mediate between Aristotle’s text and what he envisions in his more independent treatises, such as his abridgements of Aristotle’s *Organon* and his political writings. The analysis of the two passages chosen has shown that, on the one hand, al-Fārābī is faithful to his role as a commentator and offers a plausible reading of Aristotle’s text, even though his reading is shaped by the systematizing tendencies of the late ancient Alexandrian tradition. On the other hand, it is evident that he is commenting on Aristotle with an eye on his own philosophy, aiming at presenting his thoughts as though they accord with those of the Stagirite. Al-Fārābī’s subtle reconciliation still provoked surprise and the allegation of self-contradiction by one of his pre-modern readers. It is difficult to discern whether this confusion was caused by the comparison with al-Fārābī’s political works or with his logical writings, but, when translating his commentary into Hebrew, Todrosi considered it worth mentioning, even though he did not comment further. What can be inferred with certainty, is that al-Fārābī’s literal commentaries were not only studied as a means for understanding Aristotle (or, in Todrosi’s case, Averroes) but also in order to shed light on his own philosophy.

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