

The Farabi conceptualisation of 'social health' and global moderation

**Author:**

Ahad
Faramarzgharamaleki^{1,2}

Affiliations:

¹Department of Islamic Philosophy and Theology, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, University of Tehran, Iran

²Department of Science of Religion and Missiology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Research Project Details:

Project Leader: M. Sukdaven 

Project Number: 04616546

Description:

Prof. Faramarzgharamaleki is participating in the research project, 'Religion in Dialogue', directed by Dr Maniraj Sukdaven, Department of Science of Religion and Missiology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

Corresponding author:

Ahad Faramarzgharamaleki,
ghmaleki@ut.ac.ir

Dates:

Received: 07 June 2018

Accepted: 27 July 2018

Published: 06 Dec. 2018

How to cite this article:

Faramarzgharamaleki, A., 2018, 'The Farabi conceptualisation of "social health" and global moderation', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(3), a5139. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5139>

Copyright:

© 2018. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Globalisation today has collapsed cultural and social boundaries and has turned humanity into a global family. Its result is humanity's common fates and its new threats, as extremism. Here, extremism is analysed within the framework of health approach, in the broader sense of the term. This analysis is based on the political philosophy of Abū Naṣr Farabi (873–950 AD), the founder of Islamic philosophy. He applies the concept of health to the civil (polis) with two definitions: (1) moderate and (2) virtuous structures. There is a casual connection between these two definitions: deration as the source of health and extremism as the source of disease. Maintaining the moderation of society requires an ethical assessment of the laws and policies. Lack of ethical ground in many theories and policies of development are the main cause of extremism. In its various forms, exclusivism is another important cause of extremist mentality. Media can prevent and heal extremism in different ways, especially by re-imagining common destructive images.

Humanity's common fate

With the rise of globalisation, the national and cultural boundaries are disappearing and, for the first time in history, humanity seems to be like a big, planetary family. There are various definitions of globalisation, based on different images of it, as a process (Albrow & King 1990:8; Featherstone 1995:6–7; Waters 1995:3), a project (McMichael 2000:345), a trend (Keohane 2002:15) or as a phenomenon (Krueger 2000; OECD 1993:7). Albrow and King (1990) define globalisation it as '... all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society'. Ohmae (1992) defines it as the borderless world. According to Larsson's conceptualisation (2001:9), globalisation 'is process of world shrinkage, of distances getting shorter, things moving closer'. By globalisation, I do not mean internationalisation. Currently, the resurgence of nationalism is somewhat like the nations' movement against the disappearance of the national and ideological boundaries.

The most important result of globalisation, as the onset of the borderless world, whether it is being communicated as a process or a project, is humanity's common fate. Human beings have already experienced other kinds of shared fate on more limited scales such as groups, families and organisations. But now the common fate of all human beings on the earth, despite their religious, cultural and national differences, leads to the emergence of global threats and opportunities. In the past decades, humanity had faced various economic, political and environmental challenges. In recent years, extremism has become one of the main concerns. Although extremism has featured for a long time in human life on earth, its destruction is apparent throughout history, the common fate of humanity and the age of globalisation makes its destructive effect even more powerful.

Extremism as a social fact is a multi-origin problem and a multifactorial phenomenon, and for that reason it can be viewed from various perspectives. In this article extremism is analysed and approached from the concept of health in the broader sense of the term. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as follows: 'A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 1948).

The concept of health has many facets with reference to the various fields of research like individual, social or cultural aspects. However, one can also speak about the health and diseases of a civilisation as we will discuss these from Al-Farabi's point of view. From this perspective, extremism is analysed as a kind of deviation from the health of a civilisation, or at least, as an indicator of the lack thereof. This analysis is based on the political philosophy of Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Al Fārābī (872–950), the founder of Islamic philosophy

(Hammond 1947). He regards extremism as a deviation from the society's health and defines the health of a polis using the concept of moderation.

Farabi's social health theory

Based on the Koran and Hādith teachings, as well as Galen's (Greek physician, 129–210 AD) medical heritage, some Muslim scholars in the first Islamic centuries considered ethics as the spiritual medicine. The most influential figure in the promotion of 'ethics as a medicine' is Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā *al-Rāzī* (854–925). Following his teacher, Ibn Sahl al-Balkhi (850–934), and his famous book *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa-al-Anfus*, Razi first wrote *Tebbe Mansuri* on the medicine of the body, followed by *Tebbe Rouhani* on the medicine of the soul.¹ Razi's individualistic approach to health and the medicine of the soul is a kind of philosophical psychology. He was a physician who dealt with spiritual healing and was concerned about the health of the human soul.

Farabi, besides thinking of the body and soul's health, thinks about another concept of health, which can be applied to civil society. In fact, unlike his predecessors, he gives two different definitions of the concept of health: health as moderation and health as soul's virtuous structure.

Health as moderation

Most of the Islamic physicians and ethical scholars have defined 'bodily health' as the moderation of humours and of the soul's health' as the moderation of its faculties. Farabi's notion of soul's health is different from, but related to, the current concept of spiritual health; in fact, the latter is one aspect of the former. In his first definition, Farabi agrees with this view and tries to describe the health of the society based on it:

As the body has health and disease, the Polis also has health and disease ... as the body's health is the moderation of its humors and its sickness is some deviation from its moderation, the integrity, stability, and health of a Polis is based on the ethical moderation of its citizens. (1971:24)

It seems that such a description reduces society's health to the sum of all its citizens' health. Razi is among those who believe this idea and consider the soul's health as a part of ethics. From this point of view, people need two different kinds of medicine: one for the body and another for the soul. According to Al-Farabi's point of view, the internal moderation of a person is a necessary condition for social health, but it is not sufficient. The sufficient condition for state health relates to labour division, social relationships, interpersonal communication and political structure in the society.

However, Al-Farabi does not describe ethics as a science in his book, *Fusūl al-Muntazah* [selected aphorisms], but instead discusses health as part of the field of social (civil) science.

1. First published by Paul Kraus as *Risalat Abu Rayhan fi fihrist kutub al-Razi* (Paris; 1936), and more recently by Mehdi Mohaghegh, under the title of *Fihrist kitab-hai-yi Razi va-Biruni*.

He uses 'social science' instead of ethics, and his definition of social science in the *Ihsā' al-'ulūm* is very similar to other ethical views, with the point that:

The path to creation of virtues in human beings [*the final purpose of Ethics according to his predecessors*] is to promote the virtuous traditions and acts in the Polis and among the nations. Every person in the Polis must follow and apply these virtues. However, based on the civil science, this is not possible without a virtuous State. (1939:Chapter 5)

In Farabi's view, the soul's health requires the health of society and it is the civil science that studies its health. Therefore, he does not speak of ethics when studying the health of the human soul. This interpretation of the concept of health leads us to use other concepts such as community, leadership and policymaking. In fact, based on the common definition of health in ancient medicine, Farabi regards the body's health as the moderation of humours, the soul's health as the moderation of its faculties and society's health as the presence of moderation in society. In all three definitions, what is at odds with moderation is excess and deficiency, the main causes of extremism.

Health as soul's virtuous structure

The second definition of health in Farabi's works explains the first definition that is based on the concept of moderation. Bodily health is when body, tissues and its organs function in such a way that soul can fulfill the expected deed regardless of its goodness or evil. For instance, the health of the eye is when it sees completely, whether the act of seeing is for a good or evil purpose. Here, the soul's health means that its faculties and parts are in such a way that the soul always does good and beautiful deeds. In the same way, the sickness of the soul is when the faculties of the soul and its parts are structured in such a way that the soul does evil and bad.

Of course, this definition brings about the famous challenge of the criterion for separating the good and evil. But the question here is the connection between these two definitions of health in Farabi's view. There are many possible connections between these two, but it seems that the most plausible interpretation with reference to Farabi's texts is the causal connection. We understand this from his definition of bodily health, when based on a causal connection, the ability of the soul to complete its functions depends on the moderation of humours. Thus, the two definitions of health come together in a causal manner.

Moderation as the source of health and extremism as the source of disease

These two definitions of health can be viewed as being causal and teleological, respectively. In this context, the *telos* or purpose of health ultimately has a functional meaning. In other words, everything has a special function and is healthy if it does complete it. For instance, the health of one's eyes is in its full and complete sight, but any amount of decrease in

the ability to see means some degree of disease. Likewise, the main function of the soul is doing good and beautiful deeds. Therefore, by doing good and beautiful actions and ethical living can be viewed as an indicator of the soul's health. This way of living needs the presence of a special structure in the soul and its parts. Al-Farabi (1971:5) uses the term 'virtue' for these structures that make good and beautiful acts possible and 'vice' for the structures that are the origins of evil and bad actions. These virtues and vices are related to both educational and epigenetic factors.

It seems that Farabi is a functionalist who defines human behaviour based on the good-evil dichotomy. But, in fact, he is looking for something deeper than the human behaviour, which shows its origins. The search for the origins of behaviour has significant roots in Koranic verses. For instance, the Koranic use of the term 'Shakelah'² is closely related to the philosophical term 'disposition' in the Aristotelian tradition and in Farabi's view. According to him, the health of the soul depends on those dispositions are the origins of good and beautiful acts. He calls these dispositions 'virtue'.

His pattern of understanding the society's health also relies on the virtuous polis or utopia. This term has been translated into 'Ideal State' by the European translators of the Platonic writings (see Klosko 1984:93–171). But this understanding is far from Farabi's aim. He tries to define a healthy society on the basis of virtues and separates it from a wicked and sinful society. According to him, there are three different ways to do ways to do well in society: In other words, a citizen does well because of (1) an external requirement, such as a law (2) an inner obligation or (3) based on a virtue. Farabi regards the soul's health as an inner virtue that is the origin of good and beautiful. This inner virtue is a special structure in the soul and its parts. But how is this structure obtained?

The answer to this question is based on the analogy between the body's health and soul's health, both of which depend on the concept of moderation. Moderation creates the virtuous structure in the soul, a deviation from it in the form of excess or deficiency, deprives the soul of virtues.

These two causal chains are illustrated in Figure 1.

Al-Farabi uses the same model also for the social life in the polis (1971:1–3). A moderate soul causes a special order and structure which results in good and beautiful acts. Now if such an analysis of the soul's health is applicable to the society or polis, we can also use it to study the health of a civilisation. Interestingly, this viewpoint is applicable even when the non-human world is explained. Some scholars use the concept of equilibrium or harmony to analyse the physical reality (Pauli 1925).

For these reasons that based the health of society, including the health of citizens, upon the moderation, extremism threatens the health of societies and civilisations.

2.Say, 'Each works according to his shakelah, but your Lord is most knowing of who is best guided in way', (Q17:84).

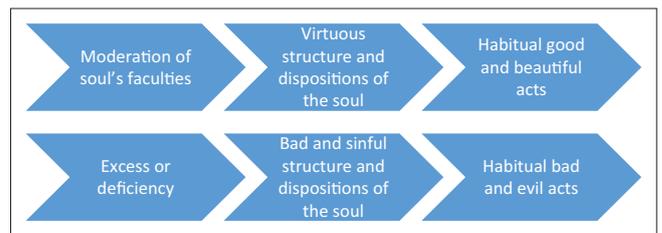


FIGURE 1: Moderation and deviation of the virtuous structure of the soul.

What about fundamentalism: does it threaten the health of societies for those reasons? There are various kinds of fundamentalism: exclusivist fundamentalism and pluralist fundamentalism. The latter has different forms. Exclusivist fundamentalism can be developed as an extremism. Now the question is the following: how can we protect the society from this harmful sickness? Because excess and moderation are associated with various factors, answering this question needs multiple elements. In Farabi's view, the moderation of a soul requires lifelong education; however, the influence of epigenetic factors is undeniable.

Although society's health is related to precise social education, in Farabi's analysis it cannot be obtained only by mere public instruction and thus needs a deeper strategic view in the process of policymaking. Therefore, maintaining the moderation of society requires an ethical assessment of the laws and policies. For this reason, an ethical framework must be considered in the process of policymaking in different areas such as health, education, economics and development. For example, developing competitive environments for businesses can be done by an ethical, competitive or a violent, anticompetitive approach.

The prerequisite for this view is to prioritise the moral development of the political-economic development, or at least, in some form create a partnership between moral development and political-economic development. If we cannot base the political-economic development on the moral development, we should correlate them.

Lack of ethical ground in many theories and policies of development is the main cause of extremism, such as the economic policies that caused wealth inequality between countries (Lewis 2004). On the other hand, the ethical assessment of global policies plays an important role in making a moderate society.

In its various forms, exclusivism is another important cause of extremist mentality. In contrast, pluralism, especially in epistemological and methodological dimensions, can prevent exclusivism and extremism. In fact, exclusivism is based on the rejection of 'others' or 'otherness'. There is no doubt that such a view is the main source of violence and extremism. In contrast, the normative pluralism can establish a moderate dialogue between different groups with various religious beliefs and from different cultural backgrounds.

Finally, media can prevent and heal the extremism in different ways. One of the most important and hidden roles of the

media in healing this social disease is its image-making function. The mental image or picture (which is not a mere concept or a belief), in the mind of a person or a society, can shape feelings, emotions, beliefs, judgements and behaviours of that person or society. Therefore, with its powerful image-making tools, media can create these images or change them in order to cause some special kinds of behaviours in a group of people (Faramarzaghamaleki & Nasekhian 2016:195–205). There are some famous people who have been affected by media's 'image-making'. In fact, because many directors are interested in making a documentary portrait about celebrities such as artists, politicians, scholars, and so on, the idea or image of the famous people may change significantly after producing and screening the portrait movies. This change can be either positive or negative depending on the form and meaning of the movies.

Conclusion

Extremism is a multi-factorial social phenomenon and therefore a multiple-origin problem. Regarding Farabi's definition of 'state health' as moderation and virtuous structure, the critical aspect of extremism is devastation of the polis health. State health is based, according to Farabi's philosophy, on six elements: internal moderation of each citizen as their soul health, just labour division, social relationships, interpersonal communication, leadership and political structure in the society. These elements imply that moderation is the source of health and extremism is the main source of the disease of the state.

Since the great religions have a strategic role to play in the civilisation, religious extremism can threaten the health of a civilisation. Because religious extremism has an exclusive standpoint regarding everything in civilisation which is considered as 'other thought', or 'another way' et cetera,

religious exclusivism in religious extremism, 'being other' means being an enemy of God. And being an enemy of God means that that being must be killed or destroyed. So religious extremism is the destruction of the civilisation's health.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he or she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him or her in writing this article.

References

- Albrow, M. & King, E., 1990, *Globalization, knowledge and society*, Sage, London.
- Al-Farabi, A.N., 1939, *Ihsa al-'ulum* [A List of the Sciences], ed. U. Amin, Librairie anglo-égyptienne, Cairo.
- Al-Farabi, A., 1971, *Fusil muntaza'a* [Some Proverbs], ed. F. Najjar, Dar al-Machriq, Beirut.
- Featherstone, M., 1995, *Undoing culture, globalization, postmodernism and identity*, Sage, London.
- Hammond, R., 1947, *Al-Farabi, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism*, One World Publications, Oxford.
- Keohane, R.O., 2002, *Power and governance in a partially globalized world*, Routledge, London.
- Klosko, G., 1984, *Provisionally in Plato's ideal state, History of political thought*, pp. 93–171, University of Virginia, Virginia.
- Krueger, A., 2000, 'Trading Phobias: Governments, NGOs and the multilateral system', The Seventeenth Annual John Bonython Lecture, Melbourne, 10th October.
- Larsson, T., 2001, *The race to the top: The real story of globalization*, Cato Institute.
- Lewis, W.W., 2004, *The power of productivity*, The University of Chicago Press.
- McMichael, P., 2000, *Development and social change, a global perspective*, 2nd edn., Pine Forge Press, London.
- OECD, 1993, *Intra-firm trade*, OECD, Paris.
- Ohmae, K., 1992, *The borderless world: Power and strategy in the global marketplace*, HarperCollins, London.
- Pauli, W., 1925, 'On the connection between the completion of electron groups in an atom with the complex structure of spectra', *Z. Physik* 31, 765. (Pauli exclusion principle).
- Waters, M., 1995, *Globalization*, Routledge, London.
- WHO Constitution, 1948, viewed n.d., from <http://www.who.int/about/mission/en/>