

**Hardship, Recompense, and Divine Law:
Al-Fārābī on the “Virtue of Struggle”**

Abstract:

This essay explores the political implications of the debate between medieval Islamic philosophy and theology regarding the soteriological importance of hardship. Reviewing key works by al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari, I show that these theologians assert that divine rewards in the afterlife must be earned through the fulfillment of burdensome religious obligations. I subsequently turn to al-Fārābī’s *Fuṣūl Muntaza‘a*, focusing on the philosopher’s discussion of virtue, happiness, and self-restraint. I argue that al-Fārābī, though ultimately critical of that version of piety that seeks to make earthly life difficult for the sake of divine reward, simultaneously advocates for the popular adoption of just such a view. Finally, I discuss the precise manner in which the *Fuṣūl* pertain to modern political debates in the Muslim world regarding the relationship between reason and revelation. I argue that al-Fārābī’s profound understanding of religious psychology makes clear the shortcomings of both a pious embrace of hardship as the key to salvation and a purely worldly politics.

Introduction

Beginning especially in the nineteenth century, the Muslim world produced a multitude of liberal-minded scholars who sought to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with the modern world.¹ Although the intellectual movement thus generated is complex and variegated, its representatives have in common a broad desire to meet the dynamic needs of the Muslim community by expanding upon or revising the divine law (‘Abd al-Raziq 2003, 117; ‘Ashmawi 1992, 53; Iqbal 2012, 123–124; Mernissi 1991, 22–23; Sardar 1987, 40; Soroush 2000, 61). According to these theorists, Islam provides permanently valid guidance in the form of theological and ethical teachings while nevertheless leaving specific matters of legislation open to determination by future generations.² Prudence therefore attains a particular importance in liberal Muslim theory as the means by which the applicability of revealed guidance to modern life is determined.

Reform efforts of this kind have received no shortage of scholarly attention, much of which examines their relationship with early Muslim juristic principles such as *maṣṣlaha*, *darūra*, and *munāsaba* (Hallaq 1997, 207–254; Hourani 2013, 130–160; Kerr 1966, 187–208; Opwis 2005, 197–202). As it was reliance upon these principles that entitled the *fuqahā*’ of the classical age to exercise a degree of personal judgment (*ra’y*) in forming legal decisions, such a research orientation has helpfully elucidated the extent to which the pragmatic orientation of modern reformists has its basis in longstanding

¹ For overviews of modernist Islamic theory, see Binder 1988; Hourani 2013; Kerr 1966; Kurzman 1998; Kurzman 2002; Rahman 1982. I use “liberal” in the sense of Fyzee 2007, to mean an understanding of Islam that is “in conformity with conditions of life in the twentieth century” (156).

² For the distinction between matter of worship (*‘ibāda*) and social practice (*mu‘āmalāt*), see Hallaq 1997, 216–218; Hourani 2013, 148; Kerr 1966, 188; Opwis 2005, 196. This matter is discussed further in Section 3, below.

principles of legal flexibility in Islam. Of course, the intellectual legacy of Islam’s middle period is far from uniformly supportive of an authoritative role for reason in religious matters.³ The various epistemic challenges to rationalism offered by certain figures in the jurisprudential and theological traditions of Islam have themselves been the object of much study (Gleave 2000, 188–204; Hallaq 1997, 1–35; Vasalou 2016, 56–105). In sum, the question of how to properly navigate the oft-competing influences of revealed wisdom and prudential considerations, salient since the formative centuries of Islam, remains unsettled.

This essay seeks to address a critical lacuna in the existing literature by demonstrating the relevance to this very question of a heretofore overlooked debate regarding the soteriological role of struggle and hardship. To this end, I first discuss the moral and religious significance of struggle as it comes to light in the works of al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari, two major theologians of the late 11th and early 12th centuries. I show that, through their respective examinations of this theme, al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari deny any necessary link between worldly comfort and ease on one hand and ultimate bliss in the afterlife on the other. Next, I turn to tenth-century philosopher al-Fārābī’s treatment of happiness, virtue, and sacrifice in his *Selected Aphorisms* (*Fuṣūl Muntaza‘a*). I demonstrate that al-Fārābī criticizes the understanding of piety exhibited by al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari while nevertheless insisting that such understanding be promoted among the general public. Finally, I discuss the relevance of the *Fuṣūl*, and of al-Fārābī’s disagreement with al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari, to ongoing debates in the Muslim world regarding the status of worldly goods and the proper role of prudence in religious matters. The primary contention of this essay is two-fold: first, that al-Fārābī offers profound insight into the nature of religious psychology as it pertains to the expectation of divine recompense for worldly hardships, and second, that such insight is indispensable for understanding the shortcomings of both a pious embrace of hardship as the key to salvation and a purely worldly politics.

³ The phrase “middle period” in the context of Islam follows Hodgson’s periodization (1974, 96).

A few clarifying remarks are necessary at the outset. First, although al-Fārābī predates al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari by over a century, I nevertheless treat the argument contained in the *Fuṣūl* as a criticism of the approach to piety adopted by these later theologians. There is nothing inherently anachronistic about this method of proceeding, provided we are willing to recognize that the notion of struggle as a means toward salvation did not originate with al-Ghazali or al-Zamakhshari.⁴ I choose to rely upon these particular theologians for an elaboration of this view because of the clarity and forcefulness of their respective discussions of it.

Second, it is not my intention to construct a full dialogue between al-Fārābī’s medieval political philosophy and various aspects of modern political theory in the Muslim world. Such an endeavor far exceeds the scope of this essay. However, I do attempt, in Section 3, to lay the groundwork for future research along these lines by demonstrating the relevance of the *Fuṣūl* to both liberal reformists and conservative legalists writing in the last century. Further exploration of this topic presupposes a proper understanding of al-Fārābī’s moral philosophy in its distinction from the perspective adopted by al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari,⁵ precisely the theme explored by first two sections of this essay.

Finally, although the figures treated in this essay are exclusively Muslim, and although this essay is most immediately concerned with questions that arise from a consideration of Islamic theology and political theory, my findings are by no means of interest solely to Muslim scholars. Al-Fārābī’s treatment of struggle offers profound insight into human psychology as such, and its implications reach far beyond the politics of the Muslim world. This essay therefore seeks to further our understanding of a singularly important medieval philosopher while simultaneously demonstrating his continued

⁴ Consider, in this context, Qur’an 29:2, 29:69, and Sahih Bukhari 5645.

⁵ This is not to suggest that these two theologians agree on all major points. However, as explored in Section 1, below, their respective treatments of hardship are, in the fundamental respect, concordant.

relevance to our ongoing efforts to understand man in his full complexity as both a political and spiritual animal.

I. The Soteriological Role of Hardship

The practical character of many passages of the Qur’an, along with the political aspects of Muhammad’s prophetic career,⁶ present obvious difficulties for any simply otherworldly interpretation of Islam. God, as described in the foundational texts of Islam, is far from indifferent to the welfare of Muslims in this world. However, the fundamental purpose of sharia is to lead believers to eternal bliss in the *afterlife*. Thus, the Qur’an offers repeated reminders of the ephemeral quality of worldly life and the ultimate insignificance of the goods contained therein.⁷ Inspired by these exhortations to heed the life to come, Muslim theologians of the classical era emphasized that the rewards of paradise must be earned through the fulfillment of oft-demanding religious obligations (Hallaq 1997, 69–70).

In this section, I discuss the religious significance of hardship as it comes to light in the works of two great theologians of Islam’s middle period, al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari. These figures represent Ash‘arite and Mu‘tazilite approaches to theology, respectively.⁸ Their joint consideration is intended to illustrate that the soteriological role of hardship was not the idiosyncratic interest of any single school of Islamic thought, but rather a topic of common concern. Both theologians assert that rewards in the hereafter must be earned by believers through their humble acceptance of religiously imposed hardships in this world, a sensible trade-off given the secondary status of worldly goods.

⁶ ‘Abd al-Raziq (2003, 81) denies that Muhammad was a political leader at all; cf. Binder 1988, 131–132.

⁷ Consider, e.g., 6:32 and 57:20. Along similar lines, Muhammad is recorded as having said that “this world is a prison for the believer” (Sahih Muslim 2956).

⁸ For an overview of the major areas of debate among various schools of thought (particularly the Ash‘arite and Mu‘tazilite) during the formative centuries of Islamic theology, see Fakhry 2004, 43–66; Hodgson 1974, 437–443; Martin and Woodward 1997, 25–33; Watt 1985, 46–68; 1998, 180–250.

Al-Ghazali

Al-Mustasfā min ‘Ilm al-Uṣūl is a momentous work of *fiqh*, written by al-Ghazali shortly before his death in 1111. The text contains a lengthy discussion of abrogation (*naskh*), which al-Ghazali defines as “an address (*khiṭāb*) ... that indicates the elimination of an established rule of a prior address” (1904, 108:14).⁹ In Islamic jurisprudence, abrogation refers to divine commands that are overruled by subsequent divine commands, and it is in this context that al-Ghazali broaches the subject of public benefit and its relationship to burdensome religious obligations.

In the relevant portion of the work, al-Ghazali flatly denies that sharia is “built upon” the principle of public benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) (119:14). Nevertheless, he proceeds, for the sake of argument, on the assumption that considerations of public benefit *are* determinative in matters of divine law. Even on this basis, al-Ghazali rejects the claim that a divine injunction may only be replaced by one that is less burdensome. As he explains,

“Even if we accept [the determinative status of public good], why is it not possible that public benefit [involve] the upgrading (*tadrīj*) and elevation (*tarqī*) of what is less burdensome (*akhaff*) to what is more burdensome (*aṭqal*), as was the case with the public benefit at the beginning of religious obligation (*taklīf*)¹⁰ and the abolition of the original rule (*al-ḥukm al-aṣlī*)?” (120:4–5).

As al-Ghazali here indicates, Muhammad’s prophetic mission certainly imposed burdens on the nascent Muslim community, whose members had previously existed in a state of ignorant laxity. Yet no Muslim would deny on this basis that the community was benefited by revelation. It may be precisely through the performance of burdensome tasks that public welfare is achieved. Denial of this fact is tantamount to asserting that pre-Islamic ignorance (*jahilīyya*) is preferable to Islam.

⁹ Hammad (1987) offers a partial translation of *Al-Mustasfā min ‘Ilm al-Uṣūl*. I have modified this translation where appropriate.

¹⁰ On the significance of this term, and its connection with divine law, see Vasalou 2008, 79–80.

Al-Ghazali subsequently raises, and responds to, a series of hypothetical objections. In response to the claim that divine mercy is at odds with burdensome obligations, al-Ghazali states, “It would [on this basis] not be fitting for [God] to initiate religious obligation, nor to afflict sickness, poverty, and various torments upon man (*khalq*)” (120:5–6). This *reductio ad absurdum* is revealing inasmuch as it directly associates divine obligation with suffering, thus making clear the extent to which religious burdens are opposed to worldly comfort. This point is further emphasized when al-Ghazali considers two Qur’anic verses according to which God desires ease for his followers rather than hardship.¹¹ According to al-Ghazali, these verses were revealed for “particular cases” (*ṣuwar khāṣa*) and in no way not preclude “burdensome and severe” (*taṭqīl wa tashdīd*) religious obligations (120:8–9). Were God solely or primarily interested in the worldly comfort of his followers, “he would grant them permission (*ibāḥa*) to act [freely], for in this there is ease (*yusr*)” (120:7). Al-Ghazali thus insists that a good life differs fundamentally from an easy life.

Al-Ghazali’s most important statement in this section arises with respect to another verse of the Qur’an: “And whatever verse we abrogate or cause to be forgotten, we bring one better than it or its like” (2:106). The objector, in an attempt to explain what God means by “better” (*khayr*), asserts that “what is better for us is what is less burdensome (*akhaḥḥ*)” (120:9–10). In response, al-Ghazali states, “on the contrary, better is what is more abundant as recompense (*ajzal ṭawāban*) and more beneficial to us in the hereafter (*māl*), *even though it is more burdensome in the present condition (ḥāl)*” (120:10, emphasis added). This statement represents an explicit rejection of the assumption that worldly ease or comfort goes hand-in-hand with happiness in the afterlife. God does indeed wish to benefit mankind, but only someone who fails to grasp the utterly ephemeral character of this life would expect that benefit to take the shape of worldly comfort. True benefit is found in the hereafter, and it is for this reason that human beings are better off under the burden of religious obligation than in a state of comfortable freedom.

¹¹ Qur’an 2:185, 4:28.

Al-Zamakhshari

Though a prolific author, al-Zamakhshari produced only one dedicated theological work, *Al-Minhāj fi Usūl al-Dīn*. Over the course of the book’s nine chapters, each of which takes the form of a conversation between the author and an imagined interlocutor, al-Zamakhshari outlines the basic tenets of the Mu‘tazilite creed. Two of these chapters are particularly relevant to the purposes of this essay: the third, on “Religious Obligation” (*taklīf*), and the fifth, on “Pains” (*ālām*).

Al-Zamakhshari characterizes religious obligation as “what is burdensome to do or omit,” but which we are nevertheless ordered to do or omit (1997, 64:2).¹² Performance of these duties, which includes acts of the body as well as “acts of the heart,” is therefore necessarily difficult (64:5). Nevertheless, the imposition of religious duties is good because it is precisely through their performance that we render ourselves worthy of reward:

If you were to say: ‘What is the proof that religious obligation is good (*ḥasan*)?’ I would say: ‘Because it exposes (the obliged) to recompense (*tawāb*) which consists of great, pure, and permanent benefits (*manāfiʿ*) which are deserved (*mustahiqqa*) by way of praise and glorification, compared to which the hardships (*mashāq*) of religious obligation become small. *And there is no access (sabīl) to these [benefits] except [through] religious obligation* (64:13–15, emphasis added).

Al-Zamakhshari thus makes it clear that it is *only* by struggling to undertake the burdensome obligations imposed on us by God that we may earn “great, pure, and permanent benefits.” Praise and glorification, when deserved, accompany acts that are difficult; what comes naturally is unworthy of esteem.¹³

¹² Schmidtke’s edition (1997) of *Al-Minhāj fi Usūl al-Dīn* includes an English translation of the work, which I have modified where appropriate.

¹³ Al-Zamakhshari recognizes that praise and veneration may be misplaced, stating that they “are not good when undeserved” (62:18). On this basis, he reiterates, “Religious obligation is the *only* means of access to [the benefits sought]” (62:17).

This last point receives further elaboration when al-Zamakhshari discusses the various conditions that must be met if the imposition of religious obligation is to be good. It is necessary, according to al-Zamakhshari, that the one who is obliged experience conflicting motives with respect to the act in question. On one hand, he must have a motive to obey, which stems from “his knowledge of [the act’s] incumbency (*wujūb*) and of his worthiness of recompense (*istiḥqāquhu al-ṭawāb*)” (65:3–4). On the other hand, he must be deterred from the act due to “its being burdensome (*shāqa*) for him” (65:4). If one is not deterred from an action by the burden it presents, its performance is not meritorious. Duties are inherently unappealing, and for this reason, the moral man is necessarily conflicted. In the case that he is successful in carrying out his duties, it is not because doing so is pleasant but because it is obligatory and because he expects to receive compensatory rewards.

The subject of compensation ties together the discussion of religious obligation with that of pain and theodicy. When pain is inflicted on those who do not deserve punishment, it is nevertheless good “because of the abundant recompense” (*al-‘iwaḍ¹⁴ al-mawfā*) granted by God (68:4). Perhaps recognizing that this position is not fully satisfactory, al-Zamakhshari has the objector raise the following concern: “How is it permissible to cause pain for the benefit (*naḥ*) of someone who does not approve of it ... even if you compensate him fully?” (69:12–13). In response, al-Zamakhshari states, “God the Exalted is closer to his servant than the servant is to himself and [better able] to direct him to that which benefits him and makes him happy (*yuslahuhu wa yas‘aduhu*). For that reason, he imposed [religious obligations] on him (*kallifah*) even though he did not approve of it and it is not preferred (*mukhtāran*) by him” (69:13–15). Al-Zamakhshari thus justifies religious obligation in response to a question about the infliction of pain, making clear in the process that religious duties are indeed painful and would not be chosen for their own sake. But in imposing these duties, God leads us towards our happiness. Just as a patient forced to swallow unpleasant medicine by a doctor will, upon recovering, be

¹⁴ On the significance of this term in Mu‘tazilite theology, see Ormsby 1981, 296–302.

grateful for the treatment, so too will believers come to understand that religious obligations, though burdensome and difficult, are worth the reward to which they ultimately lead (69:15–17).

Synopsis

Medieval theologians al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari deny any simple correspondence between worldly comfort and divine reward. According to al-Ghazali, God benefits the Muslim community by imposing burdens whose patient acceptance leads to great rewards in the hereafter. Similarly, al-Zamakhshari asserts that it is only by struggling to fulfill our religious obligations despite the natural inclination to do otherwise that we render ourselves worthy of divine reward. The approach to piety represented by these two figures presents a challenge to any project of religious reform that seeks to alter the divine law on the basis of the religious community’s worldly comfort. For if it is indeed by struggling with difficult burdens that we prove ourselves worthy of reward in the afterlife, any attempt to lessen those burdens for the sake of worldly ease must be regarded as fundamentally misguided. The status of worldly goods in the face of divinely imposed religious obligations will be discussed further in Part 3. For now, we turn to al-Fārābī in order to gain a deeper understanding of those aspects of religious psychology most intimately connected with the expectation of divine recompense.

II. Al-Fārābī on the Virtue of Struggle

As indicated by its full title,¹⁵ al-Fārābī’s *Selected Aphorisms* is intended to be a partial encapsulation of the wisdom of the ancients.¹⁶ Its specific focus is how “cities should be governed and

¹⁵ “Selected aphorisms that comprise the roots of many of the sayings of the ancients ...” (23:3–5).

¹⁶ Although there are several book-length studies of various aspects of al-Fārābī’s political philosophy, the *Aphorisms* have not received a great deal of attention. Discussions of this text may be found in Galston (1990), Orwin (2017), and in the introductory material to both of the cited translations.

However, these sources do not discuss the themes of struggle, hardship, or compensation, which are the focus of this essay. Gutas (2002) and Leaman (1980) both argue that the importance for medieval

made prosperous, the way of life of their people improved, and they be guided toward happiness (*sa‘āda*)” (1971, 23:3–5).¹⁷ Al-Fārābī divides the text into 96 parts (*fuṣūl*). The sheer diversity of themes addressed over the course of these aphorisms, along with al-Fārābī’s characteristic density of style, precludes any synoptic treatment of the work in this essay. I instead focus on the connection between al-Fārābī’s discussion of self-restraint in Aphorisms 14 and 15 and his treatment of happiness in Aphorism 76.

Self-Restraint, Virtue, and Happiness

In Aphorism 14, al-Fārābī distinguishes between the self-restrained (*dābiṭ li-naḥsihi*) human being and the virtuous (*fāḍil*) human being. The former is characterized by internal struggle. He “does good deeds (*khairāt*) while having a passion and a longing for evil (*sharr*). He contends with his passion and is at variance with what his condition and yearning encourage him to do. He does good deeds and suffers while doing them” (34:7–9). More specifically, the self-restrained man has excessive longings with respect to “food, drink, and sex,” and as a result conforms to the law (*sunna*) with great difficulty (35:1). In contrast, the virtuous man “follows what his condition and yearning encourage him to do. He

Muslim philosophers, including al-Fārābī, of the relationship between religion and philosophy is routinely exaggerated by scholars. This essay makes no claims regarding the relative importance of this particular topic in the oeuvre of al-Fārābī or any other philosopher. It is worth pointing out, however, that Leaman’s argument rests on the questionable assumption that, according to al-Fārābī, “religion has no relevance to philosophy” (535). Gutas, for his part, asserts that even the political aspects of al-Fārābī’s thought are “centered on emanationist metaphysics and the theory of the intellect” (23); but cf. Parens 1995, esp. 17–27 and 77–89.

¹⁷ Dunlop (1961) and Butterworth (2001) offer English translations of the *Aphorisms*. I have modified these translations where appropriate.

performs good deeds while having a passion and a longing for them, and he does not suffer in [doing] them; rather, he takes pleasure in them” (34:9–10).

The distinction between these human types must be kept in mind when considering Aphorism 76, which appears in the midst of a discussion of the precise character of happiness. Al-Fārābī begins by citing the opinion of an unnamed group, who say that “happiness is neither a recompense (*ṭawāb*) for the actions by which happiness is attained nor a compensation (‘*iwaḍ*’) for renouncing the actions by which it is not attained” (82:10–12).¹⁸ Similarly, this group denies that “misery (*shaqā’*) is a punishment (‘*uqūbāt*’) for renouncing virtuous actions or a requital (*jazā’*) for defective (*naqā’is*) actions” (82:19). Instead, they assert that “happiness is a goal such that it is attained by virtuous actions, just as knowledge is an attainment (*ḥusūl*) of learning and study, and the arts are attained through learning them and persistence in their activities” (82:17–19). Al-Fārābī thus distinguishes between those who view happiness as a natural consequence of virtuous acts on one hand and those who consider happiness a recompense for having performed virtuous acts or avoided vicious acts on the other.

Regarding the latter group, al-Fārābī writes, “anyone who believes [that happiness is a recompense] and holds the opinion, in addition, that what he is compensated with, for what he renounces, is part of the [same] class (*jins*) as what he renounces—his virtues are close to being defects” (83:1–2). In other words, it is only a defective form of virtue that leads one to forgo certain goods merely for the sake of attaining comparable goods in the future. As al-Fārābī goes on to explain, “the moderate man (‘*afīf*’) who renounces all or some sensual pleasures (*al-laddāt al-maḥsūsa*) only to be compensated in place of what he renounces with another pleasure of the same class as what he renounces, but greater than it, is led by his greed and covetousness for increasing pleasure to renounce what he renounces” (83:3–5). The man thus characterized could be described as a prudent hedonist. He

¹⁸ As becomes especially clear in al-Farabi’s treatment of courage, “the actions by which happiness is gained” are, for a certain human type, actions that are tremendously difficult.

seeks pleasure above all, but is willing to forgo immediate gratification for the sake of greater pleasure in the long-run. Of course, this type of moderation does not alter the fact that its possessor remains fundamentally motivated by pleasure.

In support of his assertion that the prudent hedonist exhibits virtues that are close to being vices, al-Fārābī considers the cases of justice (*‘adāla*) and courage (*shajā‘a*) in particular, having already spoken of moderation. Beginning with the former, he says,

the justice that is practiced by giving up wealth (*māl*) and not seizing it is ... only greed and covetousness for what [the one who gives it up] is to attain and be compensated for by his giving it up. He gives it up only out of covetousness for gain (*ribḥ*) and to be recompensed for what he gives up with something far greater (*shay’ zā’id ziyāda*) than what he gives up (83:8–10).

There is a certain type of justice, then, that is practiced for the sake of gaining precisely those goods that one forgoes in the name of justice. The one who practices this kind of justice is not fundamentally distinct in motive from the unjust thief. Both individuals seek profit; justice is simply an alternative means to it. What is not at all clear from this account is why anyone would seek profit through justice, especially if justice demands giving up the very goods one seeks. Somehow, the very act of forgoing profit is expected by some individuals to result in their eventual attainment of it. Of course, al-Fārābī could simply mean that accruing a reputation for fair-dealing allows the just man to maximize his profits in the long-run. But that he has in mind a more sophisticated meaning is made clear by his subsequent treatment of courage.

According to al-Fārābī, the courageous man¹⁹ “holds the opinion that he relinquishes the pleasures that he wants for *this ephemeral life* (*al-ḥayāt al-‘ājila*) in order to be compensated for that by pleasures of the [same] class as what he relinquished, but much greater” (83:15–16, emphasis added).

¹⁹ Al-Fārābī speaks of “the courageous man *among these*” (83:15, emphasis added). The antecedent is unclear, but seems to refer to those who have virtues close to defects. Al-Fārābī thus does not deny the existence of a truer courage than that described.

This statement makes clear, for the first time in Aphorism 76, that al-Fārābī is speaking of people who forgo certain goods during their mortal lives in the expectation that they will receive goods of a better and more lasting kind in the hereafter. The courageous man “advances against the evil (*sharr*) that he hates in fear of a greater evil. For he holds the opinion that advancing against death is an evil, but he fears a greater evil” (83:16–18). Al-Fārābī does not explicitly identify the evil that the courageous person fears more than death, but given the claim that such a person is motivated by the expectation of pleasures to be enjoyed beyond “this ephemeral life,” he can only be referring to the prospect of death without reward or, even more fearsome, death that leads to divine punishment. The ersatz moral virtues scrutinized by al-Fārābī in Aphorism 76 are thus revealed to be a thin veneer for selfish pleasure-seeking, and he reiterates that they are “closer to being vices and vile things (*radā’il wa khasā’is*) than to being virtues” (84:1–2).

We must, however, resist the temptation to conclude that it is because of their selfish character that the virtues described in Aphorism 76 are dismissed as defective. For as we have seen, the truly virtuous man is no less selfish than the self-restrained man. The key difference between them is that the virtuous man, having a passion for the good, has no need to suppress his desires for the sake of future gain. Rather, he acts in accordance with his longings and, as a result, takes pleasure in his actions (34:9–10). In terms of ultimate motivation, the truly virtuous man cannot be distinguished from the self-restrained man, since al-Fārābī asserts that both seek their own good. Nor, in terms of outward behavior, can the virtuous man be distinguished from the man who successfully resists worldly temptations. It is therefore not immediately clear why al-Fārābī singles out the latter for criticism. Indeed, someone who longs for illicit goods but successfully overcomes that longing because he is appropriately fearful of God is, from a certain perspective, more impressive and more praiseworthy than the man who is never tempted in the first place. This is, in essence, the moral position adopted by both al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari. Although these theologians do not speak of a man who is never

tempted, it is made clear in both of their accounts that undertaking *burdensome* obligations is the only path to divine reward.

The reason for al-Fārābī’s position becomes clearer if we revisit the competing views of happiness outlined at the beginning of Aphorism 76. The precise object of al-Fārābī’s criticism is the view that happiness is a reward or recompense rather than the natural result of certain actions. Of course, it is not the virtuous man who views happiness as a recompense, since he takes pleasure in his actions and does not forgo gratification in the first place; one cannot be compensated if there is no sacrifice. It is only the self-restrained man, struggling to resist the temptation of illicit pleasures, who requires compensation and therefore considers happiness a reward. These competing perspectives reflect a critical difference in self-understanding. While the truly virtuous man is perfectly aware that he seeks his own good, this is not the case for the self-restrained man. The latter needs to believe that he is not merely a prudent egoist. If happiness is a recompense, then he must prove (as much to himself as to God) that he is *worthy* of recompense, and this cannot be accomplished unless something is given up. The crucial question to which al-Fārābī thus points us is this: can we see with complete clarity that our actions are in fact driven by self-interest and nevertheless believe that these same actions make us worthy of divine reward? Or is our expectation of recompense based on the belief that we have truly sacrificed? Al-Fārābī’s account of defective virtue suggests that the latter is true. But this presents us with a tremendous difficulty: recompense is earned through sacrifice, but the expectation of recompense nullifies any sacrifice. We may have to face difficult trials in the course of our mortal lives, but patience in the face of these trials would more accurately be characterized as prudent investment than as sacrifice. The self-restrained man acts in the belief that he is ensuring for himself the best possible outcome, and it is his inability or unwillingness to accept this fact, above all, that distinguishes him from the virtuous man.

But in his apparent assuredness that human action is invariably self-interested, al-Fārābī seems to have simply neglected to consider the possibility that pure sacrifice is possible. After all, the self-

restrained man could certainly argue that, in eschewing various worldly goods, he is doing what is *right*, and that such behavior is incidentally rewarded by God because he is just. Of course, as al-Fārābī has indicated, this claim is rendered somewhat problematic if the reward that is expected (even if incidental to the motivation of the actor) consists of the same kinds of pleasures that are avoided. For in this case, it is not immediately clear why the enjoyment of certain pleasures on earth is immoral when precisely such pleasures are hoped for in the afterlife.²⁰ Nevertheless, this is hardly a refutation of the possibility of sacrifice, but merely a difficulty that an intelligent defender of a morality of restraint would need to address.²¹ We must therefore remain open to the possibility that al-Fārābī is mistaken in characterizing the self-restrained man as fundamentally hedonistic, when he may in fact be *moralistic*. Put another way, perhaps al-Fārābī is wrong to suggest that moralism is merely self-deceived hedonism.

A full consideration of this topic would require a comprehensive discussion of al-Fārābī’s treatment of morality, justice, and happiness, not only in the *Aphorisms*, but in his oeuvre as a whole. For the purposes of this essay, it is sufficient to recognize that al-Fārābī is critical of that version of piety that requires believers to undergo hardship in order to prove their worthiness for divine reward. True virtue, according to al-Fārābī, is not the temporary eschewal of happiness for the sake of compensatory happiness, but rather the clear-sighted pursuit of the good.

The Virtue of Struggle

In Aphorism 15, al-Fārābī states that “the governor of cities” (*mudabbir al-mudun*) ought to be truly virtuous rather than merely self-restrained (35:7). This is unsurprising, given the distinction drawn in the previous aphorism between these two human types. But shockingly, al-Fārābī goes on to say that

²⁰ Consider, in this context, Qur’an 2:25, 37:45–47.

²¹ To mention only the most obvious counterpoint, it could be claimed that the enjoyment of certain pleasures on Earth imposes harms on the community at large, whereas this conflict between private pleasure and public good need not exist in paradise.

“if the citizen (*al-insān al-madaniyy*) and the one by whom the city is made prosperous *restrains himself* according to what is required by law (*nāmūs*), *he is more virtuous than if his virtues were in him by nature* (*tabā’an*) (35:9–10, emphasis added). For reasons that are in no way immediately apparent, it is more virtuous for the citizen, as opposed to the ruler, to be self-restrained rather than simply virtuous.

Al-Fārābī offers two explanations for this surprising claim. On a practical level, the consequences of a citizen lapsing in the face of temptation are far easier to quarantine than if a ruler does the same (35:11–12). But this remark only assuages our fears about the political dangers of self-restraint while doing nothing to explain why self-restraint should be *preferred* in ordinary citizens. We must therefore look to al-Fārābī’s other explanation: “the self-restrained man and the one who adheres to the law (*nāmūs*) lays claim to the *virtue of struggle* (*faḍīla al-ijtihād*)” (35:11, emphasis added).²² The italicized phrase appears nowhere else in the entire text, and al-Fārābī does not elaborate on its meaning. We are therefore left to try to understand why struggle should be considered a citizen-virtue, a task vastly complicated by al-Fārābī’s meticulous deconstruction in Aphorism 76 of precisely the kind of thinking that would glorify struggle.²³

Fortunately, Aphorism 76, in addition to making al-Fārābī’s preference for self-restrained citizens deeply puzzling, also suggests an explanation for it. As al-Fārābī explains, the moral man who expects to be rewarded for his virtue feels himself entitled to enjoy the very goods he gives up, for “how would he be recompensed for renouncing what does not belong to him?” (83:7). Thus, the man who forgoes pleasure for the sake of compensation holds the opinion “that what he renounced

²² Al-Farabi’s use of the singular verb “*yastabiq*” (*following* the subject) makes grammatically explicit that the self-restrained man and the one who adheres to the law are identical.

²³ Obviously, the difficulties of interpretation that Aphorism 76 casts back onto Aphorism 15 would not be apparent on a first reading of the text, but this is no reason not to attempt to make coherent sense of the work as a whole.

belonged to him” (83:6), just as the man who disclaims money for the sake of compensation “holds the opinion that *all* wealth belongs to him, what he possesses *and what everyone else possesses*” (83:10–11, emphasis added). With respect to the worldly pleasures that he eschews and the wealth of others that he refuses to steal, the self-restrained man never quite overcomes the belief that they are rightfully his. But he must simultaneously recognize his inability to secure these goods in a way that is fully satisfactory, both because their attainment would require violating the bonds of love that bring citizens together (70:3–4) (as in the case of theft), and because, ties of affection aside, any enjoyment of goods in this life is necessarily temporary. Awareness of these facts could, in some cases, be sufficiently strong so as to cause the self-restrained man to relinquish altogether the pleasures of “this ephemeral life” by boldly facing death on the battlefield. This most dramatic act would be motivated by the hope of attaining pleasures that are similar in kind, but far greater, than those available in this world (83:16). The comparative greatness of these goods would then lie primarily in their permanence, a quality that no worldly good possesses.

When al-Fārābī states that it is better for the ordinary citizen to “[lay] claim to the virtue of struggle” than to be naturally virtuous (35:11), he does so with the understanding that it is precisely through struggle that we seek to overcome our most painful limitation as *mortal* beings. True virtue, as described by al-Fārābī, is so rare because it requires recognizing that one’s actions are motivated by self-interest and, *as a result*, abandoning the expectation of recompense. To be clear, eternal happiness may still await the truly virtuous man, but he cannot regard this happiness as having been *earned*, since he merely follows his desires. If the truly virtuous man arrives at paradise, he must instead regard the happiness found therein as the natural consequence of a life devoted to the pursuit of happiness.²⁴

²⁴ In this context, consider al-Fārābī’s statements about happiness after death in 1998, 264:4–266:4 and 2015, 71–72. It must be noted that al-Fārābī never suggests in the *Aphorisms* that the truly virtuous man feels himself entitled to enjoy more than this world has to offer.

We have seen that al-Fārābī does not hesitate to point out the theoretical difficulties involved in the expectation of compensation for undergoing hardship. Nevertheless, he is acutely aware of the psychological basis of that expectation, and it is this awareness that prevents him from advocating (or perhaps even thinking possible) a thoroughgoing public enlightenment, such as would necessarily undermine the deepest hopes of ordinary citizens. For the vast majority of human beings, the belief that struggle is a virtue lends meaning to the more tragic aspects of human life. It is vital that we believe ourselves capable of putting aside narrow self-interest, not only for the secure maintenance of political society, but because as free, moral beings, we enjoy the possibility of a kinder fate than may otherwise be reasonable to expect. Al-Fārābī therefore advocates the adoption by the general public of that very understanding of morality he himself rejects as incoherent.

Nevertheless, in stating unambiguously that the truly virtuous ruler is “more excellent” than the self-restrained ruler, al-Fārābī points back to the more lucid alternative offered in Aphorism 14: pursuit of the good that is recognized as such. In the best case, a ruler will not be deceived about his motives and will therefore have tempered expectations regarding the goods available to himself and his citizens. He will not subject his citizens to great hardships in search of great rewards (either on their behalf or by means of them), but neither will he seek to disabuse them of the notion that such rewards await those who engage in virtuous struggle.

III. Political Implications of al-Fārābī’s Treatment of Struggle

Drastic social and political changes over the past millennium notwithstanding, al-Fārābī’s treatment of virtue and self-restraint bears directly upon modern debates in the Muslim world regarding the relationship between revealed wisdom and political practice. Al-Fārābī stakes out a remarkably subtle position regarding pious expectations of divine recompense, whose relevance to modern Islamic political theory I sketch in this section. I proceed by first considering the implications of the *Fuṣūl* for proponents of liberal reform before moving on to discuss their import for conservative legalists. As stated in the introduction, a full account of these complex and variegated aspects of twentieth-century

Muslim political theory is well outside the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, what can be shown with relative concision is the lasting relevance of al-Fārābī’s understanding of religious psychology for modern theorists across the ideological spectrum.

The *Fuṣūl* and Liberal Reform

Juristic discretion has deep roots in the formative centuries of Islamic legal theory.²⁵ Though the precise extent to which individual opinion could legitimately serve as a basis for legal judgment varied among the early schools (*maḏāhib*), the inevitable role of independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) in cases for which the Qur’an and prophetic traditions did not provide explicit guidance was commonly recognized (Hallaq 2004, 317–336; Lambton 1981, 3; Watt 1998, 180–182). As a result, Muslim jurists (*fuqahā’*) developed sophisticated methods for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate applications of discretion (*ra’y*), seeking to address the new legal challenges presented by an expansive caliphate while nevertheless remaining within the limits of divine law.²⁶ Even a passing familiarity with the history of *fiqh* is therefore sufficient to dispel the orientalist myth that Islam is inherently hostile to the exercise of prudence in social, legal, or political matters.²⁷

For liberal Muslim theorists writing in the nineteenth century and beyond, the significance of prudential discretion in the early stages of Islamic jurisprudence serves as an important historical precedent for modern reform efforts (‘Ashmawi 1992, 54–55; Iqbal 2012, 118, 137–142; Kerr 1966, 55–

²⁵ On the historical development of *fiqh*, see Black 2011, 32–39; Hallaq 2004, 317–349; Khadduri and Liebesny 1955, 28–112; Lambton 1981, 1–12.

²⁶ On the conflict between *ahl al-ra’y* and *ahl al-ḥadīth* in the formative years of Islamic thought, see Watt 1998, 180–182.

²⁷ Consider, e.g., Renan’s description of Islam as “closing [the mind] ... to all rational research (1947, 333; citation found in Kurzman 1998, 3).

56; Rahman 1982, 18–28). Nevertheless, these reformists often exceed the boundaries of traditional Muslim jurisprudence by advocating for the *revision* of divine law rather than merely its prudential application. While classical jurists did not hesitate to dispense with the letter of the law in specific rulings when presented with exceptional circumstances (Opwis 2005, 190–191), it is quite another matter to argue that historical changes since the time of revelation have rendered parts of the original law obsolete. Thus, insofar as reformists propose that Muslims take upon themselves the task of legislating according to the exigencies of modernity, they represent an important break with the history of mainstream Islamic jurisprudence (Euben 1999, 112–113; Hallaq 1997, 219; Zaman 2004, 133).²⁸

The argument that divine law ought to be subject to prudential revision in order to keep up with dynamic social requirements presupposes that a major purpose of that law is the satisfaction of believers’ *worldly* needs (Hallaq 1997, 218–219; Kerr 1966, 201–202; Zaman 2004, 132). Otherwise, it could plausibly be argued that believers have a duty to obey divine injunctions in their original form regardless of the difficulties thereby incurred (a position elaborated upon in the following subsection). The cogency of liberal reform in Islam therefore depends on the status of worldly goods as such; the critical question is whether the pursuit of such goods is sufficiently important to justify the alteration of divine law. Several influential Muslim figures of the past century have indicated that it is: God has “left legislation (*tashrīʿ*)—in its particular aspects (*ghayr al-ʿumūmiyyāt*)—for the Muslim community (*umma*) to formulate according to opinion (*tajtahid ... biʾl raʾy*) and to innovate according to reason (*tabtadiʿ ... biʾl ʿaql*), depending on changing conditions of time and place” (ʿAshmawī 1992, 53:24–26);²⁹ it is

²⁸ For the extent to which utilitarian interpretations of Islamic law conflict with classical approaches to *fiqh*, see Hallaq 1997, 214–231; Hourani 2013, 144; Kerr 1966, 197–204; Zaman 2004, 133–139.

²⁹ The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (1994) offers an English translation of *L’islamisme contre l’islam*, a partial French translation of *Al-Islam al-Siyasi*. I have consulted, but freely modified, the English translation.

necessary to “rebuild the laws of *Shari‘ah* in the light of modern thought and experience” (Iqbal 2012, 124); “religious laws concerning social transactions³⁰ ... are all susceptible to worldly rationalization and calculation;” hence, “religious jurisprudence, however divine and ahistorical its origins, inevitably becomes historical and assumes a worldly application” (Soroush 2000, 149–150).

It must be noted that al-Fārābī, in the *Book of Religion (Kitāb al-Milla)*, offers a criticism of the rule of law that displays a certain affinity with the political claims of these reformists. In that work, al-Fārābī compares the political art to the medical art, emphasizing that both ruler and physician must respond to the idiosyncratic needs of citizens and patients respectively, needs that cannot be addressed sufficiently by following universal rules (57–58). On this basis, al-Fārābī recommends that rulers who succeed the founding prophet-legislator take upon themselves the task of expanding upon and even altering the legislative stipulations brought by the founder (48–49). Only in this way can the original intention of the founder be preserved in the face of changing historical circumstances (49). Al-Fārābī therefore shares the concern of modern reformists that, in the absence of prudential revision aimed at the worldly benefit of the religious community, divine law will inevitably lapse into obsolescence. Furthermore, he speaks in the *Kitāb al-Milla* as if worldly prosperity necessarily goes hand-in-hand with happiness in the afterlife (54:1–3), a theme that is echoed by reformist figures such as ‘Abduh (77) and Sardar (325).

However, as the foregoing analysis of the *Fuṣūl* shows, al-Fārābī evinces a profound sensitivity to those elements of religious psychology that resist the secularizing tendency to subordinate divine injunctions to the pursuit of worldly benefit.³¹ While it may be reasonable for a secular code of law to

³⁰ The implied contrast is with laws concerning ritual matters. This issue is discussed at greater length below.

³¹ For the connection between secularization and progressive interpretations of divine law in Islam, see Zubaida 2005, 444–445.

focus exclusively on the comfort and ease of those under its authority,³² law that claims a divine origin and that furthermore professes to guide its adherents to a blessed afterlife cannot be limited in this way. As al-Fārābī argues, it is only by giving up the goods they most strongly desire in this life that the generality of human beings sense themselves worthy of attaining greater goods in the next. For this reason, a law that fails to enjoin burdensome obligations on its followers is a law that cannot be trusted to fulfill its highest task.

What therefore becomes clear from a careful study of the *Fuṣūl* is the tenuous character of any reformist project that neglects to engage with the moral vision articulated so clearly by al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari. The pursuit of worldly goods will never suffice for those who hope for more than what this world can offer. Proponents of legal reform that fail to take into account the psychological roots of the human attachment to struggle will find themselves unable to explain the forceful resistance with which their efforts are met. And as al-Fārābī leads us to understand, such resistance will endure as long as human beings remain fundamentally unsatisfied with the ephemeral goods of this world.

The *Fuṣūl* and Conservative Legalism

The *Fuṣūl* are no less challenging to those who argue for humble submission to the divine law in its original form. Such a position is articulated most clearly in the modern world by figures generally categorized as “Islamists,” a term that refers to a range of politico-religious ideologies that share certain key characteristics. Most fundamentally, Islamists locate solutions for modern social and political problems facing the Muslim community in the foundational texts of Islam, interpreted in a literal fashion (Binder 1988, 170–171; Euben 1999, 17; Euben and Zaman 2009, 4).³³ The following

³² Though even this is hardly an uncontroversial statement. Consider, in this context, Nietzsche’s account of the last man (1978, 16–18).

³³ This last qualification is key, since all Muslims may be said to seek in the words of God and his prophet guidance that is applicable to the modern world. Furthermore, a *literal* interpretation of

discussion relies on works by Ruhollah Khomeini, Abul A'la Maududi, and Sayyid Qutb, who collectively offer the most influential argument on behalf of Islamism in the modern world (Rane 2013, 500; Akbarzadeh 2011, 1; Faksh 1997, 3–4). It must be emphasized that these authors do not agree on all particulars, either in matters of religious interpretation or precise political agenda. Nevertheless, a perusal of their political works reveals a common desire to reshape Muslim society according to the express dictates of revelation. For this reason, their views are presented together.

To be clear, Islamists do not reject wholesale the place of prudence in legislative matters. For example, dispensation from strict adherence to the law may be required by “abnormal and extraordinary situations” (Maududi 1960, 83). More broadly, “in the field of individual and social affairs,” Islam allows “a limited scope for legislation in matters about which the Qur’an and Sunnah are silent” (Maududi 1960, 85). In this way, sharia is not wholly static, but rather, “a progressive, evolving ... system of law” (Khomeini 1981, 30). But crucially, although divine laws may be set aside temporarily due to exigent circumstances (an approach whose basis in traditional *fiqh* has already been noted), matters that are addressed directly by God and his prophet are not otherwise subject to prudential revision: Islam “denies in the clearest terms the light [*si*] of man to exercise any discretion in such matters as have been decided by Allah and His Prophet” (Maududi 1960, 72); “No one has the right to legislate and no law may be executed except the law of the Divine Legislator” (Khomeini 1981, 55); Islam requires “acceptance of the Law (*sharʿ*) of God alone no matter what and abandonment of every other law (*sharʿ*) no matter what” (Qutb 1979, 37:7–8);³⁴ hence, “if there is a [relevant] passage [from

scriptural texts must be distinguished from a *traditional* one. Islamists are often critical of reliance on *taqlīd* and in fact share this critical attitude with many liberal Muslim theorists (Euben and Zaman 2009, 10).

³⁴ Al-Mehri (2006) offers a translation of *Maʿalim*, which I have modified where appropriate.

the Qur’an or Sunnah], then the text is the arbiter (*hakam*), and there is no independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) with respect to the text” (95:3–5).

At times, Maududi, Qutb, and Khomeini appear to argue that strict adherence to the divine law in its original form will benefit the Muslim community *in this world* (Maududi 1960, 155; Qutb 2006 104; Khomeini 1981, 36). However, such claims must be juxtaposed with other indications, offered in the same texts, that worldly goods must be given up in pursuit of a blessed afterlife: “We must become more ascetic than before and completely shun the goods of this world” (Khomeini 1981, 146); “belief ... is only striving, hard work, fighting and martyrdom ... not for the sake of people, or for the allurements and attractions so dear to people. Let him stay away from it who desires pleasures and benefits” (Qutb 2006, 163–164); God wishes “to see whether man is prepared to have such confidence in [Him] as to offer his life and wealth in return for ... a promise that is to materialize in the next world—and whether he is prepared to surrender his autonomy and all the charms which it has, in exchange for a promise about the future” (Maududi 1960, 160).

These dual tendencies of twentieth-century Islamism—the simultaneous insistence that (1) adherence to static divine law brings worldly benefits and (2) worldly benefits must be sacrificed in pursuit of divine reward—are by no means easy to reconcile, and it is not the purpose of this essay to attempt such a reconciliation.³⁵ The first of these tendencies, known to al-Fārābī long before the emergence of Islamism, is addressed by him in the *Kitāb al-Milla*, as previously discussed.³⁶ The second,

³⁵ It may be tempting to address this issue perfunctorily by suggesting that worldly benefits are meant for the community at large, while sacrifice is demanded only of individuals. However, this argument fails to explain why it would not be better for the community as a whole to forgo those worldly benefits proscribed by God.

³⁶ For the most relevant passage in the *Kitāb*, see secs. 14c–d (57–58).

as shown above in Part 2, is a topic taken up in the *Fuṣūl*. Though not as consistent in their subordination of the worldly to the afterworldly as al-Ghazali or al-Zamakhshari, Maududi, Qutb, and Khomeini reveal themselves, at critical moments, to be operating within the moral horizons articulated by these medieval theologians. Thus, the Islamist resistance to legal innovation in the robust sense—that is, the *revision* of divine law rather than its mere prudential application—is not reducible to the belief that divine injunctions will always conduce to the worldly flourishing of the Muslim community. For as these Islamists do not hesitate to assert, divine rewards in the next world require a willingness on the part of believers to shun the goods of this world.³⁷ An appeal to the virtue of struggle succeeds in defending apparently outdated divine laws when appeals to worldly utility fail to do so.

However, in thus adhering to the fundamental moral principle outlined by al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari, Islamists open themselves up to the critical analysis contained in the *Fuṣūl*. If, as al-Fārābī suggests, it is incoherent to expect otherworldly rewards in exchange for having undergone worldly hardships, it becomes far more difficult to defend a law that does not serve our worldly interests. In this way, al-Fārābī provides a serious theoretical challenge to the moral position that most strongly undergirds pious resistance to legal innovation. Those who advocate submission to a static divine law are left with two options: either they must demonstrate the coherence of struggle as a virtue in the face of al-Fārābī’s criticism, or they must insist that in all times and places, the specific injunctions of sharia continue to serve, in ordinary circumstances, the worldly benefit of the religious community. A dedicated legalist may, of course, argue that scriptural injunctions regarding—for example—criminal punishments, the societal role of women, or the institution of slavery, if

³⁷ Indeed, this is the moral root of the political divergence between Islamist revivalism and liberal reformism. Consider, in this context, Soroush’s rejection of the “world-abnegation” of al-Ghazali and Feyz Kashani (47–49).

implemented faithfully, do benefit the community. But such claims are subject to empirical investigation; the mere scriptural presence of a legal injunction is, from this perspective, insufficient to establish its permanently binding character.

Mu‘āmalāt and ‘Ibāda

As al-Fārābī leads us to see in the *Fuṣūl* and the *Kitāb al-Milla*, respectively, neither complete subordination of divine law to the worldly needs of the religious community nor slavish adherence to static divine injunctions is desirable. The crucial question thus raised is how to balance a prudential concern for worldly welfare with an appropriate respect for burdensome religious obligations; the former is necessary for ensuring the continued relevance of divine injunctions revealed in a sociopolitical context dramatically different from that faced by Muslims today, while the latter is necessary for preserving respect for the law as *the* means toward salvation and, therefore, as fundamentally concerned with man’s highest aspiration and ultimate destiny.

As with any case involving apparently competing desiderata, the prospect of a solution that somehow combines the benefits of each while avoiding the associated costs is deeply attractive. With respect to the issue at hand, it is tempting to construct such a solution by appealing to the traditional distinction in Islamic jurisprudence between matters of social interaction (*mu‘āmalāt*) and matters of ritual worship (*‘ibāda*). In addition to enjoying a longstanding basis in *fiqh*, this distinction forms an important aspect of both reformist and Islamist political thought in the modern age and therefore suggests itself as a possible source of broad consensus.³⁸

The relevance of these classical legal categories to the issue under consideration is clear: if burdensome religious obligations are not to come at the expense of prudent legislation, might they not be confined to the realm of ritual, thus allowing matters of social interaction to adapt as necessary to

³⁸ E.g. ‘Ashmawī (1998, 55) and Maududi (1960, 85–86).

the exigencies of historical circumstance? As a result, it would seem, the utilitarian benefits of legislative flexibility might be combined with the psychological and soteriological benefits of undertaking divinely enjoined struggle. Such a solution is more or less in line with the approach to Islam adopted by liberal reformists, who argue for the revision of sharia’s practical dictates but certainly do not go so far as to suggest that matters of worship be subject to human alteration. According to this perspective, God’s guidance in the realm of *‘ibāda*, if in no other, is permanently valid. Believers should, on this basis, be free to undertake private hardships in the form of prayer and fasting, for example, but with respect to matters of decidedly public interest—marriage, inheritance, criminal punishments, torts, foreign relations, etc.—the religious significance of struggle must not be allowed to hinder the development of legislation suited to the worldly needs of the modern religious community. In this view, public benefit (*maslaha*), understood in a straightforward, worldly sense, must be the guiding star of practical legislation.

This approach to divine law is not without merit, sensitive as it is to both the dynamic character of worldly political life and the enduring human need to engage in virtuous struggle. However, it must be noted that the psychological basis of this need as explained by al-Fārābī—the desire to prove ourselves *worthy* of divine reward—is by no means limited to matters of private ritual.³⁹ If it is by

³⁹ Neither al-Ghazali’s nor al-Zamakhshari’s text provide any basis for confining hardship to the private sphere while allowing the social aspects of divine law to take on a utilitarian and worldly character. In the course of his treatment of abrogation and religious obligation, al-Ghazali discusses war and peace (Hammad 1987, 486), sexual relations (488), and criminal punishment (505–507) alongside strictly ritual matters such as fasting, prayer, and pilgrimage. Since these considerations immediately precede the claim that public welfare may best be served by undertaking burdensome obligations, we are not textually justified in excluding matters of public interest from this general principle. As for al-

undertaking difficult challenges that we earn for ourselves a blessed afterlife, if hardship is the means by which God distinguishes his most faithful, and therefore most deserving, followers from humanity at large, why should opportunities for virtuous struggle not be sought in the public sphere as well as the private? Indeed, the greatest hardship of all, facing death on the battlefield, is emphatically a public, political act. And as we have seen, it is this act that al-Fārābī singles out as being especially connected to human hopes of transcending mortality (83:15–18). The Qur’an, too, attaches unique soteriological importance to the trial of battle, saying, “Do you think that you will enter the Garden when God has not yet distinguished those among you who strive (*jāhadū*) and who are steadfast (*ṣābirīn*)” (3:142)?⁴⁰ Thus, whether understood as a divinely imposed obligation or a psychological need, virtuous struggle will not so easily be confined to matters of private ritual. Nor will it ever, as long as the most difficult, and therefore most meritorious, hardships involve the social or political aspects of human nature.

Once it is conceded that our mortal lives are properly directed toward the hereafter, our respect for a worldly social law is necessarily undermined. And as long as hardship is understood to be an

Zamakhshari, although he asserts that God is obligated to show favors (*alṭaḥṣīn*) to those who perform their obligations, he conspicuously declines to say whether such favors must take the form of worldly benefit, instead citing the conflicting opinions on this matter provided by others (1997, 67:15–19). Thus, al-Zamakhshari leaves open the possibility that individuals and communities that follow the sharia do not, as a result, enjoy worldly benefits. It may therefore be the case that the believing community must faithfully implement the dictates of sharia, even when doing so comes at a worldly cost.

⁴⁰ The surrounding verses make clear that the immediate reference is to those who fight in the cause of God on the battlefield. The word translated as “strive” shares a root with the word al-Fārābī uses in designating the “virtue of struggle” (35:11).

indispensable means toward a blessed afterlife, ephemeral pleasures such as wealth, health, and comfort must remain fundamentally unsatisfying to those who seek greater ends. In short, the merely private exercise of piety is not a proper substitute for the holistic dedication of oneself to God, in all aspects of one’s life, whatever the (temporary) cost. Thus, if we accept the emphatically secondary status accorded this world by the pious perspective elaborated by al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari, we must not fail to grapple with the political consequences thereby generated.

Al-Fārābī provides us with no simple schema for balancing prudential legal revision with an appropriate respect for religiously imposed hardships, but we must recognize that such problems are not subject to schematic solutions. It falls to modern scholars to engage in robust theorizing that would allow a distinction to be made between instances of religious struggle that are politically destabilizing and those that reflect a salutary regard for traditional law and for the innate human need to overcome hardship.

Conclusion

The relationship between revealed wisdom and political practice cannot be properly examined in isolation from broader considerations regarding the status of worldly goods. Al-Ghazali and al-Zamakhshari both argue that the fulfillment of burdensome religious obligations is the sole path to a blessed and happy afterlife. From this perspective, any regime or system of law that privileges the worldly welfare of the political community over obedience to divine commands is fundamentally misguided, purchasing as it does temporary happiness in this life at the expense of permanent happiness in the next.⁴¹ In contrast, in the *Fuṣūl Muntaza‘a*, al-Fārābī criticizes as incoherent the attempt to earn for oneself divine rewards by foregoing worldly goods. By arguing that the eschewal of worldly pleasures for the sake of greater pleasures after death is fundamentally selfish and hedonistic, al-Fārābī undermines the claim of such behavior to be sacrificial in the first place. But in doing so, he

⁴¹ See Qur’an 2:86.

simultaneously reveals the tremendous difficulty involved in accepting that our actions are self-interested, since it is via the transcendence of narrow self-interest that we hope to make ourselves worthy of reward. Al-Fārābī therefore refrains from advocating the popular acceptance of his own moral teaching. Rather, he argues that citizens must be encouraged to develop the “virtue of struggle,” despite the theoretical problems involved in doing so. Moral clarity is, from the perspective of al-Fārābī, not viable as a public good.

This understanding of religious psychology has profound implications for modern Islamic political theory. While practical considerations of public welfare have long played a central role in Islamic jurisprudence, liberal reformists of the modern era often go further than their classical predecessors by advocating the indefinite revision of particular provisions of sharia on the basis of their alleged obsolescence. But for reasons made clear in the *Fuṣūl*, if efforts to modernize sharia go so far as to make worldly comfort the sole criterion by which we judge the suitability of specific divine injunctions, they threaten to sever the perceived connection between obedience to divine law and ultimate happiness. On the other hand, al-Fārābī’s criticism of mere self-restraint (as opposed to true virtue) makes clear that regarding hardship as a means toward recompense depends on a fundamental confusion regarding the meaning of sacrifice. Thus, to the extent that the conservative resistance to legislative innovation in Islam is based on a belief in the virtuous character of struggle, that resistance is, from the perspective of al-Fārābī, incoherent.

This essay has limited itself to presenting al-Fārābī’s exploration of virtue, happiness, and sacrifice in the *Fuṣūl* and demonstrating its relevance to questions about the relationship between religion and politics. Much work in this direction remains to be undertaken. With respect to questions of law, there is great need for robust theorizing regarding the proper way to balance prudential concern for worldly welfare on one hand and an appropriate respect for burdensome religious obligations on the other. Such research, if it is to be directly relevant to the Muslim world, must take note of (and seek

to complement) the rich and variegated tradition of *fiqh*, especially insofar as this tradition attempts to do justice to worldly concerns through principles such as *maṣlaha* and *darūra*.

Despite the increased attention he has received in the last several decades, al-Fārābī remains critically understudied relative to his importance in the history of philosophy. As I have indicated in this essay, more research must be undertaken before a comprehensive picture of al-Fārābī’s moral and political teaching can be constructed. The *Fuṣūl Muntaza’a* form a key component of this picture, but they also present us with interpretive challenges. Most fundamental among these is al-Fārābī’s apparent neglect to consider the possibility that, for the virtuous man, the demands of justice override considerations of his own good. And if what is just diverges from what is beneficial, then perhaps the man who forgoes the latter in favor of the former *is* worthy of recompense. Rather than assume that a thinker of al-Fārābī’s stature left this possibility unaddressed, it would instead be appropriate to keep this question in mind as we continue to gain a deeper understanding of his oeuvre.

References

- Al-‘Ashmawi, Muhammad Sa‘id. 1992. *Al-Islam al-Siyasi*. Cairo: Sina Publishing.
- 1994. *Islam and the Political Order*. Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.
- 1998. “Sharia: The Codification of Islamic Law.” In *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*. Edited by Charles Kurzman, 3–26. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Al-Fārābī. 1961. *Fusul al-Madani: Aphorisms of the Statesman*. Edited by D.M. Dunlop. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 1968. “Kitab al-Millah,” in *Kitab al-Millah Wa Nusus Ukbra*. Edited by Muhsin Mahdi, 41–66. Beirut: Dar al-Machreq.
- 1971. *Fusul Muntaza‘ah*. Edited by Fauzi M Najjar. Beirut: Dar El-Mashreq.
- 1998. *Kitab Mabadi’ Ara’ Abl al-Madina al-Fadila*. Edited by Richard Walzer. Chicago: Kazi Publications.
- 2001. “Selected Aphorisms.” In *Alfarabi: The Political Writings*. Translated by Charles E. Butterworth. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 2015. “Political Regime.” In *Alfarabi: The Political Writings, Volume II*. Translated by Charles E. Butterworth. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Al-Ghazali. 1904. *Al-Mustasfa min ‘Ilm al-Usul*, Volume 1. Cairo: Bulaq Press.
- Al-Zamakhshari. 1997. *Al-Minhaj fi Usul al-Din*. Edited and translated by Sabine Schmidtke. Stuttgart: Deutsche Morgenlandische Gessellschaft.
- ‘Abd al-Raziq, Ali. 2013. *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*. Translated by Maryam Loutfi. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Binder, Leonard. 1988. “Introduction.” In *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies*, 1–23. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

- Black, Anthony. 2011. *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Euben, Roxanne L. 1999. *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fakhry, Majid. 2004. *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fyze, Asaf A.A. 2007. “The Reinterpretation of Islam.” In *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*. Edited by John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, 151–156. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Galston, Miriam. 1990. *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gleave, Robert. 2000. *Inevitable Doubt: Two Theories of Shi’I Jurisprudence*. Lieden: Brill.
- Gutas, Dmitri. 2002. “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy.” In *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 1: 5–25.
- Hallaq, Wael B. 1997. *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul al-Fiqh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2004. “Early *Ijtihad* and the Later Construction of Authority.” In *The Formation of Islamic Law*. Edited by Wael Hallaq, 317–350. New York: Routledge.
- Hammad, Ahman Zaki Mansur. 1987. “Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali’s Juristic Doctrine in *Al-Mustasfa min ‘Ilm al-Usul*. With a Translation of Volume One of *Al-Mustasfa min ‘Ilm al-Usul* Volume One.” PhD diss. University of Chicago.
- Hodgson, Marshall G.S. 1974. *The Venture of Islam, Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hourani, Albert. 2013. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Iqbal, Muhammad. 2012. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kerr, Malcolm H. 1966. *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad ‘Abdub and Rashid Rida*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Khadduri, Majid and Herbert Liebesny. 1955. *Law in the Middle East, Volume I: Origin and Development of Islamic Law*. Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute.

Kurzman, Charles. 1998. “Liberal Islam and Its Islamic Context.” In *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*. Edited by Charles Kurzman, 3–26. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2002. “Introduction: The Modernist Islamic Movement.” In *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940: A Sourcebook*. Edited by Charles Kurzman, 3–27. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lambton, Ann K.S. 1981. *State and Government in Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Leaman, Oliver. 1980. “Does the Interpretation of Islamic Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” In *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 4: 525–538.

Maududi, Syed Abul ‘Ala. 1960. *The Islamic Law and Constitution*. Translated by Khurshid Ahmad. Lahore: Islamic Publications.

Mernissi, Fatima. 1991. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*. Translated by Mary Jo Lakeland. New York: Perseus Books.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1978. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books.

Opwis, Felicitas. 2005. “Maslaha in Contemporary Islamic Legal Theory.” In *Islamic Law and Society* 12, no. 2: 182–223.

Ormsby, Eric Linn. 1981. “An Islamic Version of Theodicy: The Dispute Over al-Ghazali’s ‘Best of All Possible Worlds.’” PhD Diss. Princeton University.

Orwin, Alexander. 2017. *Redefining the Muslim Community: Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics in the Thought of Alfarabi*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Parens, Joshua. 1995. *Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's 'Laws'*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Qutb, Sayyid. 1979. *Ma'alim fi la-Tariq*. Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq.

Rahman, Fazlur. 1982. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Renan, Ernest. 1947. *Oeuvres completes*, Volume 2. Paris: Calmann-Livy.

Sardar, Ziauddin. 1987. *The Future of Muslim Civilization*. London: Mansell Publishing Limited.

Soroush, Abdolkarim. 2000. *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*. Translated by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vasalou, Sophia. 2008. *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———2016. *Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Watt, William Montgomery. 1985. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

———1998. *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. 2004. “The ‘Ulama of Contemporary Islam and their Conceptions of the Common Good.” In *Public Islam and the Common Good*. Edited by Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman, 129–155. Leiden: Brill.

Zubaida, Sami. 2005. “Islam and Secularization” In *Asian Journal of Social Science*. 33, no. 3: 438–448.