


Good Weeds? Alfarabi's Virtuous Subversives

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Abstract

Why would anyone cultivate weeds? Alfarabi's *The Political Regime* prompts this unexpected question. There Alfarabi uses a horticultural metaphor inherited from Plato to describe his ideal regime. His imagined polity is a garden beset by weeds, which threaten to choke the life out of the other plants. Although most of these weeds are to be eradicated for the sake of the garden that is his ideal regime, Alfarabi proposes to cultivate one variety. This kind of weed challenges the official doctrines of the regime. Since the regime is based on false teachings about the universe, such debunking questioning poses a series threat. Yet Alfarabi proposes to indulge and encourage the doubts of these weeds. In this paper, we explore the reasons for Alfarabi's strange treatment of these dissidents. We argue that Alfarabi's proposal reflects an important disagreement with his teacher, Plato, about the extent to which an ideal model ought to be tethered to reality. Our argument helps to illuminate one of the more perplexing aspects of Alfarabi's political thought and his relationship with Plato. Most broadly, we show that we will miss important contributions to ideal theory if we fail to appreciate that what constitutes "ideal" may vary widely.

Keywords

Alfarabi, Plato, utopianism, realism, Islamic political thought, Greek political thought

A Horticultural-Political Problem

Why would anyone cultivate weeds? Alfarabi's *Political Regime* prompts this unexpected question. In that work, Alfarabi uses a horticultural metaphor inherited from Plato to describe his ideal regime. His imagined polity is a garden beset by weeds, which grow up naturally and threaten to choke the life out of the other plants. According to Alfarabi, these weeds represent a variety of different human types, who will naturally but randomly arise within even his ideal city, endangering it in different ways. Some are people who undermine the laws of the city through their shortsighted attachment to pleasure, honor, and wealth at the expense of virtue. Others deliberately subvert the city because they hope to rule and dominate it themselves. Still others inadvertently corrupt the city because they are simply too foolish to understand the city's teachings, and thus behave viciously. Alfarabi terms all of these people "weeds" (*nawābit*), undesirable growths that threaten the health and wellbeing of the garden that is the ideal regime (*Political Regime* [PR] in [Al-Farabi and Butterworth 2015](#), 92–93). It follows logically then that the rulers of the state would uproot such "weeds" for the sake of the common good.

But, Alfarabi also includes one last type of weed in his list: those who are unsatisfied with the official opinions of the ideal regime. This ideal regime is overtly modeled on the City in Speech of Plato's *Republic*. The rulers of Alfarabi's imagined state may be prophets, but they are also still philosopher-kings, and the authority of these rulers is supported by a religion of noble lies (which might more generously be considered half-truths and metaphors). These last weeds recognize that those opinions are simply not true, and they seek after a pure truth. In short, by Alfarabi's own definition, these weeds are philosophers. This poses a real interpretive puzzle: why would Alfarabi's ideal regime—the regime defined by its orientation toward the good and its rule by philosopher-prophet-kings—regard the philosophers among its general citizenry as weeds?

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The puzzle becomes more complicated by Alfarabi's proposed course of treatment. Whereas all the other types of weeds are to be uprooted from the ideal city, these weeds are not only spared, but cultivated. The doubts they raise about the teachings of the good city are to be respected and their intellectual curiosity indulged. Their minds are to be elevated toward the unadulterated truth, until they arrive at it or are satisfied at some intermediate level of understanding. That Alfarabi proposes to nurture these particular weeds would imply that they are not weeds at all, but rather the best fruits of the garden. Yet, Alfarabi never retracts his original categorization of them as pests.

A number of scholars, including Alon (1990), L'Arrivee (2014), and Walzer (1988), have noted the oddity of these weeds, but few have attempted to resolve it. Those who have disagree strongly over what we are to make of it. This disagreement over an apparently small interpretative puzzle implicates issues central to our overall understanding of Alfarabi as a political thinker and raises questions about utopian political theory in general. With regard to the former, Miriam Galston expresses one dominant view, when she argues that the "life of inquiry is antithetical to the peaceful continuance of even the best political order," and therefore this philosophical lifestyle is "politically disruptive" (Galston 1990, 162). This reading takes Alfarabi's ideal regime to be profoundly dogmatic, for which the truth is deadly. Michael Kochin gives voice to the opposite view. Kochin rightly notes that in an unvirtuous city, a philosopher is a weed because his growth toward truth conflicts with the regime's commitment to error. But, the same reasoning cannot hold for the philosopher in a virtuous city, who is not committed to "error." To solve this problem, Kochin makes a move not justified by the text that creates more problems than it solves. He construes such a philosopher as "a weed or, more politely, a wildflower, pushing up toward the sun through the broken asphalt of politics" (Kochin 1999, 400). Kochin's sleight of hand thus does not dwell on a key feature of weeds—that they are problematic and dangerous growths.

In short, those few scholars who do examine Alfarabi's strange treatment of these weeds end up largely ignoring one side or the other of the very dilemma that makes them strange. Kochin can explain why Alfarabi wants to cultivate them, but at the expense of explaining why they should be categorized as weeds in the first place. Galston explains why they are weeds, but not the prescribed treatment of cultivation.

We argue that Alfarabi's argument justifies *both* his judgment that these individuals are weeds and his plan to cultivate them. They are weeds because, even though the ideal regime may be oriented toward the truth, it is governed by lies and images that at best approximate the

truth.¹ The private citizen whose philosophic nature leads him to question these lies undermines the very basis of the ideal city for his fellow citizens.² His otherwise admirable pursuit of the truth will lead him (and possibly many others) into far graver error and doubt. For this reason, he is a toxic weed, threatening the health of the garden. But this danger can be averted by the proper cultivation. The weed *can* become the best plant in the garden, if sequestered from the other plants and given a radically different treatment.

In understanding Alfarabi this way, we can see that he in fact is seeking to innovate on Plato, to whom he is otherwise thoroughly deferential. He presents a practical yet elegant solution to the Platonic problem of how to identify which natures truly are suited to philosophy, and how to train them. Rather than the implausible eugenics program to produce such natures, and the decades-long battery of tests Plato's Socrates proposes to identify them, Alfarabi accepts that such natures must arise naturally if they are to arise at all, and he proposes just one test: the rightful ruler of the city is precisely the person who is most inclined to doubt and challenge the teachings of the ideal city.

This understanding of Alfarabi's good weeds helps to resolve much more than a particular textual puzzle. It sheds light on a crucial feature of Alfarabi's engagement with his teacher, Plato, and it offers an alternative approach to utopian political theory. Plato's Socrates famously claims that there will be no end to human misery until philosophers rule as kings (*Republic* in Plato and Bloom 1991, 473d). Many scholars have taken this to be *the* key theoretical problem of classical political philosophy.³ But, in the same passage, Plato denounces not only unphilosophical rulers, but nonruling philosophers—the very people who constitute Alfarabi's "good weeds." Alfarabi attends to this side of the problem more than almost any other Platonic pupil, and perhaps more than Plato himself. But, in doing so, Alfarabi also reveals a profound disagreement with Plato. The reason Socrates' Kallipolis does not need to deal with this problem of freelance philosophy lies in the fact that, as the truly perfect city, there is no *opportunity* for freelance philosophy to exist in the first place. As a result, it is passed over in near-silence. The comprehensive eugenic and educational program of the Kallipolis is meant to ensure the ideal mixture of human types for the city, and each individual will be identified early and molded to fill the appropriate role. Thus, Socrates' ideal regime—by virtue of being the ideal regime—will not have to deal with philosophic weeds. Alfarabi's, however, does. He thus also illustrates more explicitly than Plato the problems that philosophy can cause when it does not ally itself to political rule. We argue that Alfarabi's designation of these individuals as weeds and his proposed treatment of them

indicates Alfarabi's attempt to improve upon Plato's construal of the tension between wisdom and political power.

Most importantly for the general study of politics, the fact that Alfarabi addresses this problem of good weeds sets him apart from the tradition of utopian thinking inaugurated by Plato. It is of course anachronistic to apply the term "ideal" to either Plato or Alfarabi, neither of whom had access to an equivalent word. But, Socrates' explanation of his city in speech as one unlikely ever to exist, but of which "in heaven a pattern is laid up" (*Republic* 592b) captures the notion well, as does thinking of his Kallipolis as the "form" or *eidos* of a polity—the perfect example of the thing by which all others are to be judged. Discussing Plato and Alfarabi's "ideals" thus allows us to draw them into a contemporary debate.

Within contemporary political theory, there is a longstanding debate between ideal theorists and advocates of "realist" political theory. The latter argue that ideal theory fails to take seriously enough the concrete conditions of the world and the limits of practicality (Cf. Rawls 2009, Nozick 1974 with Williams 2009, Shklar 1989, Mouffe 2005). Plato's City in Speech offers the vision of a perfect political regime, which could exist only by reshaping human nature (through a complex eugenics program). In contrast, Alfarabi offers a utopia that is far more realistic. We might call it a model of "chastened" or "humane" idealism, one that is institutionally utopian but still tethered to the less perfect reality of human nature. It offers a standard of perfect political laws and institutions, but the human beings that make it up are as they have always been. Only the truly incorrigibly evil must be removed from Alfarabi's good community, whereas Plato's city excludes a good many others who are not malicious but merely incompatible (or potentially incompatible) with the conditions of political perfection. Alfarabi's ideal must still be imagined existing on earth and suffering from all the inconveniences that human life inescapably presents. Thus, we can see in Alfarabi a model of political idealism that presents an alternative to a Western utopian tradition that runs from Plato, through Rousseau, Marx, and beyond.

To demonstrate this, the first part of this paper will examine the Platonic solution to the problem Alfarabi focuses on. This will enable Alfarabi's divergence from Plato—and from the Platonic model of idealist theory—to appear in sharper relief in the second part. There we illustrate the principled and coherent alternative model of chastened, humane idealism that Alfarabi adopts through an analysis of the problem of the good weeds. At the end of the paper, we explore some ways in which Alfarabi's approach may offer a useful alternative model for ideal theory, one which takes seriously the objections of realists.

Plato and the Problem of the Freelance Philosopher

The nature of Alfarabi's work—whether and to what extent it is utopian—has already been the subject of scholarly debate. For scholars like Omid Bakhsh, "Farabi's utopian thought as a whole is not a theoretical exercise in politics or philosophy but a proposal to reform the city-state of Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Empire, and other similar states around the world" (Bakhsh 2013, 50). L'Arrivee counters that Alfarabi's ideal regime cannot "be easily instantiated in the world," but instead functions like Socrates' unobtainable ideal: "a pattern laid up in the heaven" (L'Arrivee 2014, 434).⁴

We argue that neither characterization is completely accurate, although the latter view is far closer. Alfarabi's work is hardly a program of political reform (and offers little practical guidance for how such reforms might be carried out). But it is utopian in a substantially different way from Plato's City in Speech. To understand why, it is necessary to turn to Plato's Kallipolis and to the problem of knowledge and power.

If Whitehead's famous claim that the history of Western philosophy is little more than "a series of footnotes to Plato" is true, there are few Platonic doctrines that have inspired more footnotes than the philosopher-king. The idea that the solution to humanity's political problems lies in the union of supreme wisdom with power has great appeal for thinkers ranging from modern technocrats to Alfarabi himself, whose supreme rulers are philosopher-kings (with the role of prophet added on for good measure).⁵ It has also provoked serious criticism, rejected by thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Rousseau. Academic scholarship has followed in their wake, exploring the logic, role, and reception of the idea of the philosopher-king.

But the passage in which Plato's Socrates establishes the need for a philosopher-king also makes another claim, one far less frequently considered by philosophers and scholars alike. Socrates claims that the ills of the cities will not cease "unless philosophers rule as kings... and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place, while the many natures now making their way to either apart from the other are by necessity excluded" (*Republic*, 473d, emphasis added).⁶ Socrates denounces not only non-philosophic rulers, but also nonruling philosophers. Those pursuing philosophy without seeking political power *as well as* those pursuing political power without philosophy produce the ills of the cities.⁷ Socrates insists that human misery is caused not only by the failure of "kings and chiefs" to philosophize, but also by the activity of philosophy itself insofar as it is unconnected with political power (*Republic* 473d). This may at first seem quite strange. Does Socrates really mean to denounce those apolitical people who pursue philosophy? After all,

in the *Apology*, Socrates makes it quite clear that he is just such a person, insisting that he never engaged in politics, out of fear for his life (*Republic* 31d-32a). Is he not thereby condemning himself?

It turns out that Socrates is not condemning himself. The whole claim of the *Republic* is that human happiness depends upon the realization of the good regime, the City in Speech. The City in Speech in turn depends on philosophers to lead it. Philosophers by their nature, according to Socrates, are driven by such a passion for acquiring knowledge, that they have no particular desire to rule—nor will they willingly acquire the skills necessary for the job.⁸ In order for the system to work, therefore, the philosophers must be compelled to rule, “whether they want to or not” (*Republic* 499b).

Socrates establishes that this compulsion, as miserable as it will be for the philosophers who eschew rulership, is no injustice to them, since the City in Speech cultivates the philosophers for precisely this purpose, training them in philosophy and virtue, so that they owe their ability to philosophize to the city (*Republic* 520b). As for those who grow up in corrupt regimes, whose philosophy is not encouraged but in fact constitutes a kind of quiet rebellion against the venality and vice of the rest of their city, “it is fitting for them not to participate in the labors of those cities. For they grow up spontaneously against the will of the regime in each; and a nature that grows by itself and doesn’t owe its rearing to anyone has justice on its side when it is not eager to pay off the price of rearing to anyone” (*Republic* 520b). In other words, Athens did not deliberately cultivate Socrates’ philosophic nature, so Socrates in turn does not owe it to Athens to rule.⁹

But, those scholars who have taken notice of this point of Socrates have indicated that there may be another reason why philosophers cannot be allowed to dodge the responsibilities of politics. The City in Speech is based on a set of untruths—the Noble Lie and an accompanying set of deceptions and carefully edited traditional myths. These lies are what make the rigors of the City in Speech and its hierarchical structure palatable to the ordinary inhabitants. The lies reflect and represent true features of justice and necessity (the rank order of souls, the need for civic harmony, the eugenic requirement that only the fittest reproduce) but they present them to the people in a way that they can accept and understand. This is absolutely necessary for the city to survive and flourish.

Yet, the philosophers, by nature, have “no taste for falsehood; that is, they are completely unwilling to admit what’s false but hate it, while cherishing the truth” (*Republic* 485c).¹⁰ Socrates adds: “if truth led the way, we wouldn’t, I suppose, ever assert a chorus of evils could follow it” (*Republic* 490c). One might reasonably ask whether such a philosopher would quietly accept the city’s lies. Unless the philosopher has been guided by the

current philosopher-kings to see the value of the lies, they may well expose them, destroying the illusion for the many silver- and bronze-souled individuals, whose happiness depends on a literal belief in the city’s doctrines. For this very reason, Socrates prohibits the youth from practicing the Socratic questioning form of dialectic: “when lads get their first taste of [dialectic methods], they misuse them as though it were play, always using them to contradict, and imitating those men by whom they are refuted, they themselves refute others...they fall quickly into a profound disbelief of what they formerly believed” (*Republic* 539b–c).¹¹ Socrates’ own activity in Athens was sufficiently subversive of the accepted doctrines to provoke his trial and execution for failing to believe in the gods of the city (and for corrupting the youth). Socrates seems by this to illustrate with his life the danger to *any* regime (and not merely flawed ones) of a philosopher who refuses to acquiesce to its official teachings.

But, the City in Speech need not worry about such a danger. It produces the philosopher-kings it needs by virtue of its eugenics program, according to the complex calculations of the so-called “nuptial number” (*Republic* 546a–e). Those destined to be philosopher-kings in turn are trained so that they only gain access to the potentially subversive skill of dialectics when they are old enough to understand the reason for the city’s institutions, *and* to feel the necessary patriotic gratitude and loyalty to uphold them. In short, Plato’s City in Speech makes and molds the philosophers it needs, through breeding and training, so that the problem of the freelance philosopher does not arise.

Alfarabi’s Alternative

The problem of freelance philosophy does arise for Alfarabi. In most matters, Alfarabi’s overt attitude toward Plato is one of explicit deference. Alfarabi devotes several of his works to the study of Greek philosophy (especially Plato) in translation. Of particular note are *Plato’s Laws*, *The Philosophy of Plato*, and *Attainment of Happiness*, in which Alfarabi engages with the Platonic tradition as a basis for his own political writings.

In his response to Plato’s works, Alfarabi positions himself as a pupil or disciple of Plato: “‘This much of the book has reached us, and we managed to get hold of it. We reflected on it, leafed through it, and extracted those of its notions that dawned on us and that we knew the sage [Plato] had intended to explain...In bringing it forth, we anticipated recompense and a noble name.’” (*Summary of Plato’s Laws* [SPL] in *Al-Farabi and Butterworth* 2015, 173). Moreover, Alfarabi’s interjections such as “what he [Plato] said is true” in his detailed account of Plato’s *Laws* underscore his fidelity to Plato’s teachings (SPL, 135). Alfarabi’s intention to preserve

and even expand on “the philosophy...handed down to us by the Greeks from Plato and Aristotle” is undeniable (*Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle [PPA]* in *Al-Farabi and Mahdi 2002*, 49–50).

Alfarabi uses many of Plato’s fundamental assertions as the basis of his own political philosophy. He credits Plato (and Aristotle) with identifying true philosophy and the true philosopher: “[t]he philosophy that answers to this description, among other more nefarious types was handed down to us by the Greeks from Plato” (*Attainment of Happiness [AH]* in *Parens and MacFarland 2011*, 49). Alfarabi accepts Plato’s distinction between the philosopher or “elite” individual and the common peoples. While the elite members of society, the “imams and the princes, or else to those who should preserve the theoretical sciences,” are equipped to “comprehend many theoretical things by way of imagining them,” Alfarabi, like Plato, argues that “the vulgar ought to comprehend merely similitudes of these principles, which should be established in their souls by persuasive arguments” (*AH*, 35–6).

Given that Alfarabi adheres to Plato’s distinction between the elite and vulgar, it is unsurprising that he also upholds the Platonic tradition of esotericism to ensure that only those equipped to grasp the “ultimate truths” are exposed to it: “the wise Plato did not permit himself to present and uncover all kinds of knowledge to all people...In this he was correct.” (*SPL*, 130). Alfarabi also subscribes to Plato’s methods of instruction for elites or philosopher types: “They should be habituated to use all the logical methods in all the theoretical sciences. And they should be made to pursue a course of study and form the habits of a character from their childhood until each of them reaches maturity, in accordance with the plan described by Plato...This, then, is the way to instruct this group; they are the elect who should not be confined to what is in conformity with unexamined common opinion.” (*AH*, 35).

Alfarabi’s *Political Regime* depicts a city similarly organized hierarchically and ranked by the first ruler according to inhabitants’ “innate characters and in accordance with the way they have been educated.” (*PR*, 72). In this city, revelations of “ultimate happiness” are only received by select inhabitants who can “reach the ranking of the active intellect.” (*PR*, 30). Interestingly, this kind of revelation can only be achieved by “attaining separation from bodies,” a theme in Alfarabi which Orwin highlights in his own account of the *Political Regime* (*PR*, 30; *Orwin 2015*, 47).¹² The weeds make their first appearance in the section of the *Political Regime* titled “Cities Contrary to the Virtuous City.” There Alfarabi delineates the following categories of defective associations: the [a] ignorant city, [b] immoral city, [c] errant city, [d] the weeds in the virtuous city, and [e] the people who

are bestial by nature.” (*PR*, 76). Here Alfarabi describes the weeds briefly and unfavorably by likening them to “darnel in wheat, the thorns of plants within the crop, or the rest of the grasses that are useless or harmful to the crop or seedlings.” (*PR*, 76). Though readers must wait to discover more about the nature of the weeds, the other associations appear to be Alfarabi’s answer to the deviant regimes of *Republic VIII*.

In spite of his admiration for Plato, Alfarabi implies that the philosophic project must continue where Plato left off. Alfarabi concludes one work on Plato with, “This, then, is where the philosophy of Plato terminated” (*PPA*, 67). Whereas in Plato’s *Republic* there is no possibility for freelance philosophy, in Alfarabi’s there is a group of “weeds” whose philosophic potential endangers the collective. By specifying the particular downfalls of freelance philosophy to his ideal or virtuous city, Alfarabi attempts to expand upon Plato’s implication that unchecked philosophy is a threat to the ideal regime (Cf. *Ali and Qin 2019*, *Khoshnaw 2014* with *Colmo 1992*, *Sankari 1970*).

On the Meaning of Nawābit

We follow Butterworth, reading “weeds” for *nawābit*. Rosenthal translates it as “spontaneous growths” (*Rosenthal 1953*, 246–278). It is true that the root of *n-b-t* could refer neutrally to plants and things that grow, as does the related Hebrew *nabat*. For instance, Avempace’s “Book of Plants” refers to *nawābit* that truly are spontaneously growing plants—some good and some bad (*Avempace and Asin Palacios 1940*, 288). But as Alon finds in a survey of classical dictionaries, the word is often linked to *gumr*, a root which has clearly negative connotations (*Alon 1990*, 57, 62). Alon reads a negative connotation in *nawābit* as well, partially through its links to other negative roots like *gumr*, but also because of its use as a term of opprobrium in certain religious-philosophic debates in the Islamic world. Alon admits that the latter point is speculative, as he cannot find explicit evidence of Alfarabi’s awareness of its use in those theological disputes (*Alon 1990*, 70). But he produces a great deal of circumstantial evidence to suggest that the Alfarabi probably did know of this meaning and that he employs the term specifically to conjure up an implication of “opposition” (i.e., to suggest that the weeds in his ideal city oppose its aims and views in the same way the skeptical dissenters derisively called *nawābit* did to the prevailing doctrines in the contemporary theological debates) (*Alon 1990*, 71–77).

Al-Qadi rejects Alon’s reading of some of the philological evidence. But she ultimately supports a reading of the word as conveying extreme disapprobation. Examining not only the use of *nawābit* but also *nābita* and *nābitiyya*, she concludes that the word is used as a

pejorative nickname for political and theological opponents. She shows that authors use the word to refer to groups that arise suddenly: “a ‘sprouting’ like the sprouting of plants. Not that they actually appear suddenly, but that somehow they have escaped the attention of the authors in the early stages of their formation and are recognized by them only when they have become quite developed in ideology, power, creed, or whatever” (Al-Qādi 1993, 57–8). Taking all the connotations of the root together, she says *nawābit*, *nābita*, and *nābitiyya* all suggest “contemptible, suddenly powerful, irritating sprouters on the scene” (Al-Qādi 1993, 58).

Beyond the philological evidence (and setting aside whether Alfarabi did in fact know of the term’s use in theological debates), the strongest reason for reading *nawābit* as “weeds” comes from the context of the passage in question. If the term were meant to simply convey a value-neutral idea of “growths,” the passage becomes *more* mysterious, not less. If Alfarabi meant to offer a general discussion of the different sorts of people who arise in the ideal city, the list that follows in woefully incomplete. As Alfarabi discusses elsewhere, the city will include fighters, workers, geometers, and many other human types. None of these are mentioned in Alfarabi’s list of *nawābit*. Nor is the list random: aside from the freelance philosophers, every other group mentioned in his list is unambiguously a problem or threat to the regime. “Weeds” thus seems to be the most appropriate translation.

Alfarabi’s Expansion on Plato

This brings us to the freelance philosophers. To liken vice-prone, criminal, and even rebellious elements of a city to weeds is a perfectly natural analogy. However, Alfarabi’s choice to characterize those in pure pursuit of philosophic truth as weeds in the ideal city appears far stranger. For one thing, a regime organized to be ruled by philosopher-imam-kings would hardly expect to view philosophers (or potential philosophers) as weeds in the first place. But that peculiarity is only compounded because Alfarabi’s plan to deal with such individuals does not correspond to how any gardener would treat a weed. Alfarabi’s perplexing treatment of these freelance philosophers only makes sense once we realize that he is explicitly responding to a similar analogy found in Plato, which Plato deploys at precisely the place in the *Republic* where the issue of freelance philosophy appears.

Alfarabi often makes use of Platonic imagery in his works. But, Alfarabi’s adaptation of horticultural references in Plato’s *Republic* is particularly striking in part because they are often not especially intuitive. However, despite the remarkable resemblance of these agricultural metaphors, few scholars have devoted time to the study of

Alfarabi’s weeds.¹³ Of the few scholars who do take note of this unusual theme, some merely describe the sub-classifications of weeds without accounting for their inclusion in an otherwise negative category of peoples in the ideal city (Alon 1990; L’Arrivee 2014; Walzer 1988).¹⁴

The real significance of the horticultural allusions in Alfarabi’s works becomes clearer upon recognition that they echo the *Republic*. The first garden analogy in the *Republic* occurs as part of a discussion in which Socrates explains to Adeimantus why it is that “the most decent of those in philosophy are useless to the many” (*Republic* 489b). Socrates advances the argument, through a horticultural analogy, that those who inherently possess a superior nature must receive the correct upbringing: “Concerning every seed [*spermatos*] or growing thing [*phoutou*], whether from the earth or animals...we know that the more vigorous it is, the more it is deficient in its own properties when it doesn’t get the food, climate, or place suitable to it” (*Republic* 491d).¹⁵ He goes on to stress that in the absence of appropriate conditions, an elite, philosopher type may actually pose a threat to the status quo: “I suppose that if the nature we set down for the philosopher chances on a suitable course of learning, it will necessarily grow and come to every kind of virtue; but if it isn’t sown, planted, and nourished in what’s suitable, it will come to the opposite, unless one of the gods chances to assist it” (*Republic* 492a). Socrates underscores that those who lack altogether the natural gift for pursuit of higher truths are dangerous when dialectically empowered.

Socrates then describes to Adeimantus the conditions in which a philosopher would privately practice his art: “Then it’s a very small group, Adeimantus, which remains to keep company with philosophy in a way that’s worthy; perhaps either a noble and well-reared disposition, held in check by exile, remains by her side consistent with nature, for want of corrupters; or when a great soul grows up in a little city, despises the business of the city and looks out beyond; and, perhaps, a very few men from another art, who justly despise it because they have good natures, might come to her” (*Republic* 496a–b). But he is careful to emphasize that a philosopher’s gifts go somewhat unrealized when kept as a freelance practice. In Socrates’ words, “if he didn’t chance upon a suitable regime,” the philosopher will not be able to meet his full potential, whereas in an appropriate regime he will serve a public role: “For in a suitable one he himself will grow more and save the common things along with the private.” (*Republic* 497a). The problem, Socrates notes, is that when left unattended to and in the less suitable soil of a *real* rather than *ideal* garden, these philosopher seedlings recede: “not one city today is in a condition worthy of philosophic nature. And this is why it is twisted and changed; just as a foreign seed [*xenikon sperma*] sown in

alien ground is likely to be overcome and fade away into the native stock, so too this class does not at present maintain its own power but falls away into an alien disposition. But if it ever takes hold in the best regime, just as it is itself best, then it will make plain that it really is divine as we agreed it is" (*Republic* 497b–c). In the City in Speech, philosophers are placed into a system of regimented upbringing from a young age, preventing any freelance philosophy from being practiced in the city. For this reason, Socrates stops short of advising Adeimantus on the dealings of private philosophy.

Not only does Alfarabi endorse Plato's denigration of private philosophy, he also expands upon Plato's teachings, using similar garden analogies. Whereas in the City in Speech there is no opportunity for philosophers to arise independently out of the regimented education apparatus, in Alfarabi's virtuous city, these private philosophers can arise as "weeds" among the other plants in the garden. In the *Political Regime*, Alfarabi claims that "The weeds in the virtuous city are of many sorts," and presents the reader with what appears to be an exhaustive list. First among the weeds are "hunters," who seek "honor, rulership, wealth, or something else" in place of happiness. This group is further subdivided into those whose deviations are intention ("distorters") and those who are simply mistaken ("schismatics"). Next, Alfarabi mentions people who are skeptical and may possess the ability to be "elevated to the ranking of truth and made to understand things as they are." These are the potential philosophers, but Alfarabi gives them no special name or term. After these, Alfarabi enumerates another group: those who prove things false to seek domination alone, who are perhaps reminiscent of sophists. The last group of weeds are those who lack the ability to understand the grounds of happiness at all. Their incapacity can manifest in a variety of pathologies, including "perplexity about all objects" and nihilism, or alternatively: blind faith, even in untruths (*PR*, 90–93). Alfarabi concludes that these weeds grow in and amongst the other plants in the garden, an analogy reminiscent of Socrates' *xenikon sperma*: "These then are the sorts [of weeds] growing among the inhabitants of the city. From their opinions, no city at all is attained, nor a large association from the multitude. But they are embedded among the inhabitants of the city as a whole" (*PR*, 94).

This depiction of the ideal regime as still potentially infested with weeds reveals Alfarabi's idealism to be considerably more modest than the sort found in the *Republic*. As Parens puts it, Alfarabi's *Political Regime* offers "worlds in which one can reside" (Parens 2012, 120). But Socrates' City in Speech has no subversives; in the *Republic*, weeds are found only in deviant regimes.

At first glance this might seem to leave Alfarabi's regime a bit closer to that of Plato's *Laws* than his

Republic. Of course, as a model of perfect politics and the source of the horticultural analogy in question, it still seems that the *Republic* is the primary Platonic reference point for Alfarabi's discussion here. Moreover, the *Political Regime* far more resembles Kallipolis in structure than the mixed democratic/authoritarian governance of Magnesia. But, it is true that in the Magnesia of the *Laws*, there are many criminals and problematic individuals. It is true also that the Athenian Stranger there includes six types of subversives who doubt the religious teachings of the city. Given that Alfarabi evinces a familiarity with the *Laws* as well, it is reasonable that he may be responding to Plato's logic there, too.

Yet, when we examine the criminal elements found in the *Laws*, we find most have no clear correspondence to Alfarabi's weeds. However, one type of skeptic is "he who does not believe in the gods, and yet has a righteous nature, hates the wicked and dislikes and refuses to do injustice" (*Laws* 908d). These are to be spared by the city, suffering only a 5-year prison sentence (if they repent at the end of it; the recalcitrant are executed), and are reasoned with by members of the nocturnal council to persuade them of the truth of city's doctrine on the divine (*Laws* 909a). But here the similarities to Alfarabi's treatment of freelance philosophers ends. These virtuous doubters are not elevated to the ranks of the rulers of the city. They are not allowed to "see behind the curtain" into the truth of things. Indeed here the Athenian Stranger does not even concede that the doubts of the skeptics are in any way justified (though they very much are). They either come to accept the public doctrines or are killed. From the perspective of Magnesia's rulers, these individuals pose problems without also providing a potential opportunity. In fact, in their utter intolerance of freelance philosophy we find one of the areas of similarity between Magnesia and Kallipolis. We therefore conclude that Alfarabi differs from Plato fundamentally on the relationship between skepticism and politics based on dogma, regardless of whether one considers the *Republic* or the *Laws*.

Moreover, as the Athenian Stranger notes, Magnesia is only a "second best" regime; it is not meant to reflect political perfection (*Laws*, 739a). Thus, Alfarabi's regime does not seem to correspond to it on the level of ideal theory. Yet, Alfarabi's city will also not be completely successful in imposing its images (noble lies) on the people, nor will it exert the near-total control over the lives of its inhabitants as Plato's ideal Kallipolis does. Its weeds are "embedded among the inhabitants of the city as a whole" (*PR*, 94). While Socrates' ideal city will make itself the master of human nature itself through its eugenic breeding program (the failure of which is to be its downfall), Alfarabi takes people as they are. His regime is thus more ideal than Plato's "second best" but more durable and realizable than his best—the presence of

impurities does not spell its downfall in the same way that the accidental failure of the breeding program will do for Kallipolis.

Still, it is one thing to acknowledge that certain problematic human types are ineradicable, it is another thing entirely to see a problem in the most desirable human type. The second category of Alfarabi's weed stands out from the others in that it is the only type for which the degrading label "weed" seems unfitting. Alfarabi admits that these unnamed weeds are "not contending against the virtuous city" but rather "they are asking for guidance and seeking truth" (PR, 91). Why then, if they are not conniving or misguided, are these specially gifted ones still regarded as weeds? It seems that their very disposition as seekers of truth becomes problematic when the vulgar are led astray by the truths which they cannot comprehend. By practicing philosophy in public as a private citizen, this second type of weed not only fails to fulfill its role to guide the common folk, it can threaten the stability of the regime by undermining public trust in religion or images.

The extra-institutional philosopher poses a great danger to the virtuous or ideal city because he can undermine public faith in the established religion. In *Political Regime*, Alfarabi claims that citizens of the virtuous city attain happiness differently according to their innate capability to comprehend the higher truths. In other words, "Most people have no ability, either by innate character or by custom, to understand and form a concept of those things. For those people, an image ought to be made, by means of things that represent them, of how the principles, their rankings, the active intellect, and the first ruler come about" (PR, 74).

Moreover, Alfarabi argues that it is the responsibility of the philosopher-ruler to use images or approximations of the truths to guide the general public toward happiness. The imitations used to convince the public are products of religion: "For religion is the sketch of these things or of their images in the soul. Since it is difficult for the public to understand these things in themselves and the way they exist, instructing them about these things is sought by other ways" (PR, 75). However, the skeptical, philosopher-type weed cannot bear to disseminate mere approximations of the truth because he is fixated on attainment of the pure truth beyond the images that placate the public: "they are not persuaded by what they have imagined. So, for themselves and for others, they show those things to be false by arguments" (PR, 91). In doing this, they behave as Socrates feared young people permitted to engage in dialectic would, becoming debunkers.

The expansion on the Platonic view which Alfarabi provides is thus: philosopher types must receive the appropriate upbringing according to their "innate disposition." When one is "innately equipped for the theoretical

sciences—that is, fulfills the conditions prescribed by Plato in the Republic, he should excel in comprehension and conceiving that which is essential" and therefore he "will not become a counterfeit or vain or false philosopher" (AH, 60). Alfarabi has an answer for dealing with those philosopher weeds, or freelance philosophers, who refuse their public duty: coercion. Alfarabi advises that "They should be habituated in the acts of the practical virtues and the practical arts by either of two methods. First, by means of persuasive arguments... The other method is compulsion. It is used with the recalcitrant and the obstinate among those citizens of cities and nations who do not rise in favor of what is right willingly and of their own accord or by means of arguments, and also with those who refuse to teach others the theoretical sciences in which they are engaged." (AH, 36). If these philosopher types refuse to contribute their wisdom to the public realm, they must be forced to do so, which is a thoroughly Platonic solution.¹⁶ The justice of this compulsion applies even in the absence of the cultivation that Plato's Socrates thought alone could justify it—instead the needs of the community suffice to provide the obligation.

Thus, Alfarabi's discussion of these freelance philosophers as weeds even in the ideal regime suggests a profound meditation on the second part of the dilemma laid out by Plato's Socrates. To solve the problem of political life, it is necessary not only to put an end to rulers who are not philosophers, but also to put an end to philosophers who do not rule. Although their subversive questioning is dangerous, Alfarabi recognizes the naturalness (reflected in the nature-oriented analogy) of it. In this respect, Alfarabi shows a greater sensitivity than does Plato's Socrates to the revulsion a philosopher would naturally have to the lies that make the ideal regime function. Here too, Alfarabi subtly but importantly diverges from Plato's Socrates on the issue of realism. Even though Socrates' very definition of philosopher requires that a person hate untruth, they apparently have no objections to the enforcement of a regime based on the original "noble lie" (concerning everyone's shared development under the earth and the metals of the souls), the regular rigging of the marital lots, and many other falsehoods (*Republic*, 485c, 460a).

Alfarabi depicts philosophers as very likely to raise a ruckus over such manifest falsehoods. True, his ideal regime has far fewer outlandish lies of the scale of the Myth of the Metals, but the philosopher will see through the "images" of the divine doctrines taught there just as clearly. Alfarabi's solution also marks another noticeable innovation on Plato. Plato's method for identifying and selecting the philosopher-kings is a complex and lengthy affair which depends on sorting children at a young age into the relative classes. Subsequent tests and a course of learning that stretches from bodily exercise and war to

math and dialectic does not terminate until the philosopher-king candidate reaches 50, at which point Socrates argues those who have made it so far are compelled to rule (*Republic*, 540b). Not until fairly late in this educational process, when they are 30 years old, are the candidates allowed to learn dialectic—the only thing which gives access to the forms (*Republic* 537d). As a result, until then, the regime must rely on extrinsic modes of motivation (honor, sex, etc.) to get the candidates to continue their education, rather than relying on the philosophers' allegedly characteristic love of truth (*Republic* 468c, 537c).

For his part, Alfarabi takes a much simpler approach—he uses the very same questioning habit of the potential philosopher as the sorting mechanism. Immediately after referring to these individuals as a type of weed, Alfarabi discusses how such types are to be treated:

Whoever is like this has his level of imagination elevated to things that the arguments he brings forth do not show to be false. If he is persuaded in thus being elevated, he is left there. But if he is not persuaded by that either and falls upon topics he can contend against, he is elevated to another level. It goes on like this until he is persuaded by one of these levels. But if he does not chance to be persuaded by one of the levels, he is elevated to the ranking of truth and made to understand those things as they are (*PR*, 91).¹⁷

Thus, rather than exterminating these weeds, the ideal regime cultivates them—but cultivates them separately from and differently than the other plants of the garden. The nature of this cultivation is that the skeptical potential philosopher, who doubts the images he is taught by the city, is offered a new set of images, more nuanced and better approximating the truth than those offered to the common people. If he accepts these new images, he is left at that stage of understanding. If he continues to challenge the images, by pointing out their internal contradictions or incongruence with reality, he is given images still closer to the absolute truth, and so on until he is confronted with the truth simply, at which point he becomes the very sort of philosopher the regime needs for ruling (*PR*, 91–2). Presumably this new comprehensive understanding includes a recognition of the salutary—even necessary—role played by the untrue images that the ideal regime depends on.

Alfarabi makes use of the philosopher's own subversive questioning as both the mechanism for sorting and identifying philosophers, and as the motivating force behind their continued education. Rather than a complicated series of tests, Alfarabi allows the potential philosophers to identify themselves to the regime—by challenging it! Alfarabi has also recreated (unerotically, perhaps) the ladder of love of Plato's *Symposium*—

whereby one ascends from various imperfect and partial images to more perfect ones until one reaches the form itself. In both cases, it is ultimately dissatisfaction with the lower level or image that prompts the potential philosopher to reach higher. This is an elegant solution to the problem in Plato's *Republic* of how to identify and motivate the education of potential philosophers.

Conclusion: Alfarabi's Chastened Idealism

From all of this, we can see that Alfarabi's perplexing reference to potential philosophers as weeds in the ideal regime reflects a profound and nuanced response to issues found in Plato's *Republic*. Not only is the imagery of weeds, seeds, and gardens itself drawn from the section of the *Republic* devoted to the rearing of philosophers, but Alfarabi's adaptation of that language reflects an extension *and* a critique of the Platonic argument.

With Plato (or at least Plato's Socrates), Alfarabi agrees that cities will find no rest from ills unless political power is made philosophic, and that non-philosophic rulers are incompatible with the best possible regime. Alfarabi also accepts the claim that nonruling philosophers are likewise deeply problematic for the ideal regime. Based on lies or images that imperfectly approximate the truth, the best regime finds the philosophers' love of truth dangerous unless the philosophers can be taught the utility of untruth. Indeed, it is possible that Alfarabi contemplates even further along these lines than does Plato. Plato himself never explicitly portrays freelance philosophy as threatening to the City in Speech. Alfarabi explores exactly why such unrestrained philosophizing is so dangerous. In doing so, he takes up and expands upon a Platonic point that is too frequently overlooked by even the closest readers among Plato's heirs.

In assuming that such freelance philosophers will arise (along with other more noxious weeds), Alfarabi's ideal regime promises far less of a reformation of human nature than does Plato's. There is no complicated breeding program to provide the perfect ratios of the right kinds of natures. Nor is there an infallible pedagogical-testing apparatus to identify early on who should be a philosopher-king and who should not. For Alfarabi, no matter how well organized the ideal city, it will still have to contend with weeds, who sprout as naturally in it as they would do in even the most well-tended garden. For Plato's ideal regime, even *potentially* unsuitable individuals—born outside the supervision of the city's rulers—must be immediately killed, without waiting to discover whether they actually have problematic natures (*Republic*, 461c). Wise poets, whom even Socrates claims to find appealing and attractive, must be banished as well from the city, insofar as their tales contradict regime's

official teachings about gods and heroes. Besides the obvious barbarity, we may wonder at the fragility of a model city that cannot accommodate even these slight deviations. Worse still, this *may* mean that no true Socratic philosopher could arise in this city, as they will not have the necessary freedom to inquire and question.

Alfarabi's more humane and realistic utopianism leads him to offer a far more pragmatic and less cruel approach. It is true that those with selfish and evil motives will have to be excised from the ideal city. But not so for other innocent sources of problems. Moreover, he offers a more realistically grounded method of identifying and motivating the education of potential philosophic rulers. Rather than five decades of tests, Alfarabi proposes merely one sort of test: how far will you challenge the untruth in the images proffered by the regime? The philosophers' inherent distaste for falsehood (and capacity to recognize it) is motivation enough to carry them through this ascent toward truth.

As a result, we can say that Bakhsh is wrong to imagine that Alfarabi could have seen his ideal as a viable blueprint for reform. But L'Arrivee also overstates the closeness of Alfarabi's and Plato's utopianism. Plato's utopia is not merely ideally organized, it is also filled with exactly the right kind of people, and it breaks down as soon as the latter condition fails. Alfarabi seems to consider the function of his idealism to seek after the first, but to reject the latter. His ideal regime is made for men as they are, not as they might be. For this very reason, it is more practical and durable than Plato's original, which cannot persist once naturally flawed humans arise within it.

From this we can glean a very useful distinction between different kinds of ideal theory. In fact, relatively little work has been done to offer a typology of utopian theories. Two examples of such attempts are Sargent (1975) and Levitas (2010). But the former seeks only to distinguish utopian thought from utopian literature and utopian communities, and the latter only identifies a divide between liberal-humanist utopianism and a Marxist alternative. Plato's Kallipolis is not the only major example of a city whose perfect laws depend on a reshaped human citizenry to sustain them. Although Rousseau professes that his social contract takes "men as they are and laws as they may be," in fact, his proposed regime also entails a reshaping of human nature (*Social Contract* 1.1). The legislator or founder of such a state will have to be capable of "changing, so to speak, human nature; of transforming each individual" (*Social Contract* 12.7). This logic that ideal politics depends in part on remaking human beings stood behind justifications for the French Terror and attempts to achieve the "new Soviet Man." Alfarabi's model eschews these kinds of aspirations, but he does not then anticipate the anti-utopian realists.

Instead, he affirms the value of utopian thinking, offering a standpoint to evaluate the nature of politics and political problems. But to be valuable, such a utopia must remain faithful to the reality of human nature. For Alfarabi, it seems human beings can remake their laws and institutions, but they cannot remake themselves.

Such utopianism could fairly be called modest or chastened, but it remains nonetheless ideal. Its value lies in providing a model for perfect politics both to aim at and against which to judge existing political arrangements. Like Plato's utopia, it is unlikely ever to be completely realized on earth. One might think that its greater realism is thus a moot point, if it too will probably never be actualized. But it is one thing to offer a model of politics that will likely never be real because the foolishness, vices, and interests of the powerful and the ruled alike conspire to prevent it from ever being born. This much is true of both Alfarabi's and Plato's ideal cities. It is another thing to propose an ideal regime that also could not sustain itself even if it could come into being. Both utopias are near-impossible, but Alfarabi suggests that an ideal regime ought to be one that would function and endure, should it ever come to be. This is the realism of his chastened utopianism.

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Notes

1. Parens elucidates the importance Alfarabi places on preventing the laws of the ideal regime from being doubted, and how Alfarabi draws this view from Plato's Laws (Parens 1995).
2. See Parens (1995, 86–89) for the importance Alfarabi places on preventing the laws of the ideal regime from being doubted, and how Alfarabi draws this view from Plato's Laws.
3. Bloom, for instance, takes the problem of enlightening political rulership to be the central problem of all western thought. Its ancient and modern schools are for him distinguished primarily by their different solutions to the problem. Bloom in Republic: 391–392.

4. Both scholars focus their analysis on the Virtuous City, but both seek to make arguments about Alfarabi's idea of utopia in general.
5. For example, [Bell 2016](#).
6. This position had been foreshadowed in Book 3, where Socrates imagines a poet of comprehensive knowledge "able by wisdom to become every sort of thing and to imitate all things." If such a person were to want to display their talents in the city, they would have to be expelled, Socrates insists (398a-b). Admittedly, this extraordinary individual is not described as a philosopher, but he seems to have knowledge of the forms, and his desire to show off that knowledge appears to be what makes him intolerable in the city.
7. This side of the problem is almost entirely ignored by scholars. Many follow Strauss in noting that Plato makes it clear how philosophic activity might threaten flawed regimes—by calling into question the truth and justice of their essential myths. But this objection does not seem to apply to a regime oriented toward the good (at least as long as Plato's insistence on the identity of the truth and the good is maintained).
8. Such is reflected in Socrates' two famous allegories in the Republic: on the Ship of State, the true pilot has no interest in seizing control of the ship; in the Allegory of the Cave, whoever escapes from the cave would have to be dragged back down into it.
9. This is something of a simplification. Elsewhere in the Platonic corpus (for instance, in the Crito), Socrates credits Athens with making his philosophic life possible and he there seems to accept that he owes it his life.
10. As Bloom puts it, the noble lie, as a lie, is "unacceptable to a rational man" (367). See also: [Strauss 1978](#), 102–3.
11. In the Apology, Socrates predicts a similar danger will arise from his young followers in Athens after his execution. According to him, he had been holding them back causing the same problems. Apology (39c)
12. This may seem as though Alfarabi is following Plato in apparent unconcern for humans' embodied nature as he builds his regime. But in fact, Alfarabi seems instead here to be recommending a mental state conducive to perceiving divine truths.
13. Mahdi, one of the preeminent scholars of Alfarabi's works, does not make any mention at all of the weeds. ([Mahdi 2001](#)). He does, however, agree that the central point of Alfarabi's project is "the question of realization" ([Mahdi 2020](#), 62).
14. Of these, Alon's thesis on nawabit is promising in that he connects Alfarabi to Greek thought. He reasons that due to the improving relations with Byzantium during Alfarabi's time, nawabit could very well be the "transliterationtranslation of the Greek neophytes," or "new plants" ([Alon 1990](#), 74). Of course, neophytes do not carry the pejorative implication of Alfarabi's usage, which is central to the present puzzle.
15. Bloom translates phutou as "thing that grows." In fact, the word often refers specifically to plants, and it seems clear that Plato wishes to play upon that association. We only refrain from rendering it as "plant" here to preserve the coherence of the subsequent phrase "whether from the earth or from animals."
16. Socrates' justification—that the philosophers owe the city for their upbringing—would not unambiguously apply to freelance philosophers, who arise at first on their own. But Alfarabi could conceivably rest the justice of this compulsion (if indeed applied to the freelancers) on the grounds that they did require instruction from the rulers to achieve actual enlightenment.
17. If on the other hand, the individual continues to try to debunk the truth itself, Alfarabi recognizes that such a person is not interested in truth at all, but domination, and is categorically a weed (91–2). Interestingly, Nietzsche would later explicitly claim there is an order of rank among human beings, according to how much truth they can bear, without needing it watered down by images and falsifications ([Nietzsche 1989](#), 59).

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