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THE PROBLEM OF JUSTICE IN THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF AL-FARABI IN MODERN SOCIETY

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ПРОБЛЕМА СПРАВЕДЛИВОСТИ В ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ ФИЛОСОФИИ АЛЬ-ФАРАБИ В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ

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Abstract. This article examines the problem of justice in the political philosophy of Abu Nasr al-Farabi and evaluates its relevance to contemporary societies facing declining institutional trust, inequality, political polarization, and disputes over fair governance. The study reconstructs justice not as an isolated legal rule in al-Farabi's writings but as an ordering principle embedded in his broader account of the virtuous city, happiness, leadership, civic cooperation, moral education, and the distribution of social functions. Using a qualitative comparative design, the article combines close conceptual reading of al-Farabi's political works with a structured comparison to modern theories of justice and contemporary governance frameworks. The analysis identifies five dimensions: teleological justice, distributive/proportionate justice, ethical-political leadership, civic-relational justice, and institutional justice. The findings show significant conceptual affinities between al-Farabi's concern for the common good and modern demands for fairness, integrity, public value, participation, and accountable institutions. At the same time, the article demonstrates important limits: al-Farabi's hierarchical and perfectionist political model cannot be equated with modern constitutional democracy, rights-based equality, or Rawlsian political liberalism. The paper therefore proposes a "normative translation" approach, in which al-Farabi's insights are used to interrogate the moral purposes of governance while modern institutions supply safeguards of rights, pluralism, transparency, and accountability. This combined perspective is particularly useful for debates on public trust, digital governance, social inclusion, and intergenerational fairness.

Аннотация. Рассматривается проблема справедливости в политической философии Абу Насра аль-Фараби, а также оценивается её актуальность для современных обществ, сталкивающихся со снижением институционального доверия, неравенством, политической поляризацией и спорами о принципах справедливого управления. В работе справедливость представлена не как отдельная правовая норма, а как основополагающий принцип, встроенный в более широкую концепцию аль-Фараби, охватывающую идеи «добродетельного города», счастья, лидерства, гражданского взаимодействия, нравственного воспитания и распределения социальных функций. На основе качественного сравнительного анализа в статье сочетаются детальное концептуальное прочтение политических трудов аль-Фараби и их сопоставление с современными теориями справедливости и моделями государственного управления. Выделяются пять аспектов: телеологическая справедливость, распределительная (пропорциональная) справедливость, этико-политическое лидерство, справедливость в гражданских отношениях и институциональная справедливость. Результаты исследования демонстрируют значительную концептуальную близость между идеями аль-Фараби о «общем благе» и современными запросами на справедливость, добросовестность, общественную значимость, участие граждан и подотчетность институтов. В то же время в статье указываются существенные ограничения: политическая модель аль-Фараби — иерархичная и

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перфекционистская — не может быть отождествлена с современной конституционной демократией, равенством, основанным на правах человека, или политическим либерализмом в духе Джона Ролза. Предлагается подход «нормативного перевода»: идеи аль-Фараби используются для осмысления нравственных целей управления, в то время как современные институты обеспечивают гарантии прав, плюрализм, прозрачность и подотчетность. Такой комплексный подход особенно полезен для дискуссий о доверии к власти, цифровом управлении, социальной инклюзивности и межпоколенческой справедливости.

Keywords: Al-Farabi; justice; virtuous city; political philosophy.

Ключевые слова: аль-Фараби; справедливость; добродетельный город; политическая философия.

Justice remains one of the most persistent problems of political philosophy because it links normative ideals to concrete institutions. Societies must decide what counts as fair treatment, how benefits and burdens should be distributed, which inequalities are acceptable, how public power should be constrained, and what citizens may legitimately expect from one another. These questions have become especially pressing in an era characterized by economic insecurity, digital transformation, political polarization, climate risks, and declining confidence in institutions. The OECD's 2024 Trust Survey reported that across 30 participating OECD countries, 39% of respondents expressed high or moderately high trust in national government, while 44% reported low or no trust; perceived political voice was associated with an especially large trust gap [10].

These data suggest that justice is experienced not only through formal law but through participation, responsiveness, integrity, and everyday treatment by institutions. Abu Nasr al-Farabi (c. 870–950) offers a distinctive entry point into this debate. His political philosophy places the question of the good human life at the center of political order. The city is not merely an instrument for security or exchange; it is a cooperative association through which human beings can attain perfection and happiness [1–5].

The "virtuous city" is therefore governed by a substantive conception of the good, and justice must be understood within that teleological architecture. Although al-Farabi does not construct a modern theory of justice in the manner of John Rawls, his works repeatedly address problems that contemporary political theory would recognize as questions of justice: proper ordering, appropriate distribution, leadership, merit, cooperation, education, law, and the relationship between individual and collective flourishing. The contemporary relevance of al-Farabi is often asserted through broad claims about tolerance, good governance, or ideal leadership. Such claims can be useful, but they risk anachronism if medieval philosophical categories are simply mapped onto modern democratic institutions. A more rigorous approach requires two steps. First, al-Farabi's conception must be reconstructed on its own philosophical terms. Second, modern analogies must be treated as interpretive translations rather than historical identities. This article follows that approach. The research objective is to determine how justice functions within al-Farabi's political philosophy and to assess which elements can illuminate contemporary debates about fair governance and social order. The research questions are: 1. What conceptual dimensions of justice can be reconstructed from al-Farabi's political writings? 2. How do these dimensions compare with selected modern approaches to justice and public governance? 3. What are the legitimate limits of applying al-Farabi's ideas to pluralistic, rights-based societies? The article argues that al-Farabi's strongest contemporary contribution lies in reconnecting institutional fairness with the moral purpose of political association, while modern constitutionalism corrects the risks of hierarchy and perfectionism through rights, accountability, and pluralism. The study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative research

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design. The primary material consists of al-Farabi's political writings available in established English editions, especially "The Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City" (On the Perfect State), "The Political Regime", and selected political writings translated and edited by major scholars [1–4].

Secondary scholarship by Muhsin Mahdi, Charles E. Butterworth, Miriam Galston, and entries in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy was used to clarify the conceptual and historical context [3–7].

Contemporary comparison draws on Rawls's theory of justice, Sen's capability-oriented critique of purely institutional approaches, and recent OECD and United Nations materials on fairness, trust, participation, and strong institutions [8–13].

Table 1

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Analytical stage	*Material*	*Procedure*	*Output*
1. Conceptual reconstruction	Primary political works of al-Farabi	Identify concepts connected to order, virtue, happiness, distribution, leadership, and cooperation	Five dimensions of justice
2. Contextual interpretation	Major scholarly studies	Clarify Platonic/Aristotelian background and al-Farabi's distinctive synthesis	Historically grounded reading
3. Comparative analysis	Rawls, Sen, OECD, UN	Compare functions rather than vocabulary alone	Contemporary analogies
4. Critical validation	All materials	Identify incompatibilities with rights, pluralism, and democratic equality	Limits of normative translation

The method consists of four stages. First, conceptual coding was used to identify passages and scholarly interpretations related to happiness, virtue, leadership, distribution, cooperation, law, and civic order. Second, these concepts were grouped into analytically distinct dimensions of justice. Third, each dimension was compared with a modern normative or governance concept. Fourth, the comparison was subjected to an anachronism check: similarities were classified as functional analogies rather than claims of direct doctrinal equivalence. The study is theoretical rather than empirical in the narrow sense: it does not claim that contemporary citizens directly interpret justice through al-Farabi's categories. OECD data are used only to demonstrate the present policy relevance of fairness and political voice, not to test al-Farabi's philosophy statistically. This distinction is important for maintaining methodological clarity.

1. *Justice as a Teleological Principle*. The Common Good and Human Happiness. Al-Farabi's political thought begins from a teleological premise: human beings seek perfection and happiness, but they cannot attain the highest forms of flourishing in isolation. Political association is necessary because individuals depend on one another for the goods, skills, knowledge, and forms of cooperation required for a complete life [1; 3; 5].

The virtuous city is distinguished from defective cities not merely by administrative competence but by the end toward which collective action is directed. Its citizens cooperate for true happiness rather than wealth, domination, honor, or pleasure as final ends [1; 3].

This structure gives justice a purposive character. An arrangement can be orderly yet unjust if its order is directed toward a false or partial good. Political justice therefore cannot be reduced to procedural regularity. Institutions must be judged by what they enable human beings to become. This insight differs sharply from many modern attempts to maintain state neutrality among competing conceptions of the good, but it anticipates contemporary concerns about public value and human-centered governance: efficiency is not self-justifying. The teleological dimension also explains why

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al-Farabi links politics and ethics so closely. The political community is responsible for conditions that cultivate capacities appropriate to a flourishing life. Justice thus includes an educative dimension. Law, persuasion, habituation, and leadership help align individual conduct with the common end [2–4]. In contemporary language, this raises difficult questions about the legitimate boundary between civic formation and paternalism.

2. *Proportion, Function, and Distribution.* Al-Farabi describes the city through an organic analogy in which differentiated parts perform distinct functions under an ordering principle [1]. The analogy does not imply that every social role has equal authority or status. Instead, political order is hierarchical and functional. From a modern perspective, this is one of the most controversial aspects of his theory because equality is not treated as an unconditional political starting point. Yet the model contains a recognizable concern with proportion: social goods, responsibilities, authority, and recognition should correspond to the structure and purposes of the community rather than arbitrary preference. Justice, on this reading, means putting relations into an appropriate order. The contemporary analogue is not simple equality of outcomes but the broader problem of justified differentiation. Modern public institutions also differentiate roles, powers, salaries, qualifications, and responsibilities, but such differentiation is considered legitimate only when it satisfies public criteria, legal equality, non-discrimination, and accountability. The comparison therefore reveals both affinity and distance. Al-Farabi helps illuminate why distributive questions cannot be solved by sameness alone; function, contribution, need, and social purpose may matter. Modern justice theory, however, insists that differentiation must be constrained by equal basic status. Rawls, for example, makes equal basic liberties lexically prior and permits social and economic inequalities only under specified conditions, including fair equality of opportunity and benefit to the least advantaged [8]. Al-Farabi's hierarchy lacks this rights-based architecture.

3. *Justice and the Moral Quality of Political Leadership*. The first ruler occupies a central position in al-Farabi's political theory. Legitimate leadership depends on a demanding combination of intellectual and moral qualities: knowledge of the ultimate ends, sound deliberation, persuasive ability, courage, and the capacity to order the community toward happiness [1–4].

Political authority is therefore inseparable from epistemic and ethical competence. This view has a clear contemporary resonance in debates about integrity, evidence-informed policy, conflicts of interest, and public-service ethics. The OECD framework treats reliability, responsiveness, integrity, openness, and fairness as major drivers of trust in public institutions [10–11].

The similarity is functional: both perspectives reject the idea that power alone legitimizes rule. Yet modern systems attempt to institutionalize virtue because they cannot safely assume exceptionally wise rulers. Codes of ethics, independent courts, audit institutions, transparency requirements, elections, professional civil services, and checks and balances convert personal expectations into institutional constraints. Al-Farabi himself allows for a form of shared rule when the required excellences are distributed among several persons [3, 5].

This detail complicates a simplistic "philosopher-king" interpretation and provides a conceptual opening toward distributed competence. Nevertheless, his framework remains strongly oriented toward superior knowledge at the apex of political order rather than equal political authorship among citizens.

4. *Civic Cooperation and Relational Justice.* A striking feature of al-Farabi's account is that the city exists through mutual assistance. Human beings need one another, and political excellence depends on the coordinated contribution of different members [1; 3].

Justice is therefore relational as well as distributive. It concerns the quality of cooperation and the way individual functions contribute to a shared end. This dimension is highly relevant to contemporary discussions of social cohesion. A society may possess formally equal laws while large

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groups experience exclusion, disrespect, or lack of political voice. The OECD Trust Survey demonstrates the importance of perceived agency: among respondents who felt they had a say in government actions, 69% trusted national government, compared with 22% among those who felt they did not [10].

The 47-percentage-point gap is not evidence for al-Farabi's theory, but it illustrates a modern institutional fact compatible with the broader insight that political order depends on meaningful relationships between citizens and governing institutions. Contemporary relational justice also differs from al-Farabi because democratic participation includes legitimate disagreement. The common good cannot be defined solely by a philosophically superior elite. It must be contested and revised through public reasoning, elections, civil society, independent media, and legal protections. Thus, cooperation in a pluralistic society requires procedures for disagreement rather than complete substantive consensus.

5. *Institutional Justice: From Virtuous Persons to Just Structures*. The deepest challenge in translating al-Farabi into modern governance is the shift from personal virtue to institutional justice. Medieval political philosophy can place extraordinary normative weight on the ruler because the quality of rule reflects the ruler's knowledge and character. Contemporary constitutional systems are designed around a more skeptical anthropology: even well-intentioned officials require constraints, and institutions must remain legitimate under ordinary, imperfect leadership. This does not make virtue irrelevant. Integrity, professional competence, truthfulness, and public-mindedness remain necessary. But they operate inside structures of law and accountability. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 explicitly links peaceful and inclusive societies with access to justice and effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions [12].

The modern lesson is therefore dual: institutions must be designed fairly, and officeholders must exercise their roles ethically. Al-Farabi's emphasis on education adds another layer. A just order cannot be sustained only by sanctions. Citizens and officials need habits and capacities that support public reason, restraint, responsibility, and cooperation. Modern democratic systems translate this into civic education, professional ethics, media literacy, anti-corruption culture, and institutional learning rather than state imposition of a comprehensive philosophical doctrine.

Table 2

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF JUSTICE: AL-FARABI
AND CONTEMPORARY INSTITUTIONAL ANALOGUES

Dimension of justice	*Al-Farabi*	*Contemporary analogue*	*Critical difference*
Teleological	Political association aims at true happiness	Human development, public value, sustainable well-being	Modern societies are pluralistic about the good life
Distributive/proportionate	Roles and goods ordered according to function and excellence	Fair opportunity, justified differentiation, equitable services	Equal citizenship and anti-discrimination constrain hierarchy
Leadership	Wisdom and virtue legitimate direction	Integrity, competence, evidence-informed leadership	Authority is limited by law, elections, and checks
Relational/civic	Mutual assistance toward common ends	Participation, social cohesion, political voice	Democracy protects dissent and competing interests
Institutional/educative	Law and formation orient citizens toward virtue	Rule of law, civic education, ethical public service	State neutrality and rights limit perfectionist coercion

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Al-Farabi and Rawls: Common Ground and Fundamental Divergence. Comparison with Rawls is useful precisely because the two frameworks begin from different premises. Al-Farabi asks what political order best directs human beings toward objective perfection and happiness. Rawls asks what principles free and equal citizens could accept as fair terms of cooperation under conditions of reasonable pluralism [8].

Al-Farabi is perfectionist and hierarchical; Rawls is contractualist, egalitarian in basic status, and intentionally political rather than metaphysically comprehensive. Nevertheless, both reject arbitrary rule and treat political organization as a normative enterprise. Both also connect justice to the structure of cooperation rather than isolated acts. The difference lies in the source and content of the standard. For al-Farabi, the standard is knowledge of human perfection and proper order. For Rawls, it is fairness among citizens regarded as free and equal. This contrast helps contemporary scholarship avoid superficial claims that al-Farabi anticipated liberal democracy while still recognizing his contribution to the idea that political structures must be justified by reference to human ends.

Al-Farabi and Sen: Justice Beyond Institutional Perfection. Amartya Sen criticizes theories that focus excessively on identifying perfectly just institutions while neglecting comparative improvements in actual lives [9].

Although al-Farabi constructs an ideal city, his emphasis on human capacities, education, and achieved happiness provides an interesting point of dialogue with capability-oriented thinking. Both perspectives ask what social arrangements enable people to realize valuable forms of life, though they differ sharply on pluralism and individual freedom. A contemporary appropriation of al-Farabi can therefore shift from "Which institutional blueprint reproduces the virtuous city?" to "Which institutional arrangements actually expand human capacities while preserving equal rights?" This reformulation preserves the concern with flourishing while rejecting the attempt to impose a single comprehensive hierarchy of human ends.

Fairness, Trust, and the Contemporary Crisis of Institutions. The contemporary policy relevance of justice is visible in public trust research. The OECD identifies fairness as one of the core governance drivers of trust and emphasizes fair treatment, political voice, integrity, and transparent use of evidence. In the 2023 data reported in 2024, only 39% across participating countries had high or moderately high trust in national government, while 44% had low or no trust [10, 11].

The figures should not be universalized beyond the surveyed countries, but they demonstrate that institutional legitimacy is fragile and closely tied to citizens' perceptions of how power is exercised. Al-Farabi's framework suggests a diagnosis: institutions lose normative legitimacy when public authority becomes detached from a credible common good. Modern democratic analysis adds a second diagnosis: even benevolent claims about the common good are insufficient if citizens lack rights, voice, transparency, and mechanisms of contestation. A just contemporary polity therefore requires both substantive orientation and procedural safeguards.

Justice in Digital Governance and Artificial Intelligence. Digital governance creates a new arena in which the Farabian distinction between means and ends is especially valuable. Artificial intelligence, automated eligibility systems, predictive analytics, and digital identity infrastructures can increase administrative capacity, but technical optimization cannot determine what counts as a just outcome. Decisions about data, risk, access, error, explainability, and unequal impact remain normative decisions. From an al-Farabian perspective, technology should be subordinated to the proper ends of political association. From a contemporary rights-based perspective, this must be supplemented by due process, non-discrimination, transparency, human oversight, privacy, and avenues for appeal. The synthesis is not historical but normative: intelligent administration must also be just administration.

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Social Inequality and Intergenerational Justice. Contemporary societies face distributive conflicts that extend beyond the allocation of income. Housing, education, health care, environmental risk, digital access, and exposure to economic shocks shape citizens' real opportunities. Al-Farabi's focus on the coordinated whole can encourage policymakers to evaluate whether sectoral decisions support or undermine collective flourishing. Yet the organic metaphor must be handled carefully because it can conceal domination if individuals are treated merely as functional parts. Intergenerational justice presents a similar problem. The OECD 2024 report found that only 37% of respondents were confident that government balances the interests of current and future generations. A Farabian emphasis on long-term ends challenges short electoral or bureaucratic time horizons, while modern democratic accountability requires that long-term policies remain publicly contestable and rights-respecting [10].

Table 3

APPLYING A NORMATIVELY TRANSLATED FARABIAN FRAMEWORK TO CONTEMPORARY JUSTICE PROBLEMS

Contemporary challenge	*Justice problem*	*Farabian insight*	*Modern institutional safeguard*
Declining public trust	Perceived unfairness and lack of voice	Rule must serve a genuine common good	Participation, transparency, review and accountability
Economic/social inequality	Unequal life chances and access	Political order should support human flourishing	Equal rights, social protection, fair opportunity
Digital/AI governance	Opaque or biased automated decisions	Means must remain subordinate to right ends	Due process, explainability, non-discrimination, human oversight
Political polarization	Breakdown of civic cooperation	Mutual assistance is constitutive of political life	Pluralist dialogue, protected dissent, inclusive institutions
Intergenerational conflict	Short-term benefits vs long-term burdens	Politics requires orientation to higher and enduring ends	Sustainability rules, evidence, future-impact assessment

Limits of Contemporary Application. Three limits are essential. First, al-Farabi's political model is not based on modern popular sovereignty. Political wisdom is asymmetrically distributed, and superior knowledge plays a legitimating role [3–7].

Second, his account does not begin from equal individual rights as contemporary constitutionalism does. Third, the virtuous city assumes a stronger substantive agreement about human perfection than is possible or desirable in pluralistic democracies. These differences mean that contemporary use of al-Farabi should be philosophical rather than constitutional. His work is most valuable as a source of questions and evaluative criteria: Does government serve merely wealth and power, or a defensible common good? Are leaders competent and ethically formed? Do institutions cultivate cooperation or exploitation? Are social functions coordinated toward human flourishing? Modern theory must then answer these questions under conditions al-Farabi did not share: equal citizenship, human rights, religious and moral pluralism, mass democracy, global interdependence, and digital technology.

Conclusion

The study reconstructed justice in al-Farabi's political philosophy as a multidimensional principle rather than a narrow doctrine of legal equality. Justice is embedded in the telos of the virtuous city, the proportional ordering of social functions, the moral and intellectual quality of

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leadership, civic cooperation, and the formative role of law and education. Its ultimate criterion is whether political association directs human beings toward genuine happiness and perfection. The comparative analysis identified meaningful contemporary analogies. Al-Farabi's common good can be placed in dialogue with public value and human development; virtuous leadership with integrity and professional competence; mutual assistance with participation and social cohesion; and long-term political purpose with sustainability and intergenerational responsibility. OECD evidence on trust reinforces the contemporary importance of fairness and political voice, while the UN emphasis on effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions demonstrates the institutional form that justice must take in modern governance. At the same time, the article rejects direct equivalence between the virtuous city and modern democracy. Al-Farabi's hierarchy, perfectionism, and epistemic elitism require critical mediation. The most defensible approach is normative translation: retain the questions of purpose, virtue, cooperation, and human flourishing, but embed them in institutions committed to equal rights, pluralism, rule of law, transparency, participation, and accountability. In this form, al-Farabi remains a productive interlocutor for contemporary political philosophy — not because he provides a ready-made institutional blueprint, but because he insists that political order must ultimately be judged by the quality of human and collective life it makes possible.

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