

ABU NASR FARABI'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SCIENCE OF KALAM

Abstract. *This article is devoted to examining the great thinker Abu Nasr al-Farabi's attitude toward the science of kalam as presented in his work "Ihsa al-ulum". In this work al-Farabi divides the sciences that existed in his time into five sections and in the fifth section he expresses his view of the science of kalam. Al-Farabi provides one of the most complete definitions of kalam in "Ihsa al-ulum". Some sources even state that the earliest definition of the science of kalam was given by Farabi. The article discusses how Farabi defines the science of kalam and what his views on this discipline are.*

Keywords: *kalam, sinaa, usul al-din, malaka, shi'ism*

INTRODUCTION

If we look at the books that define the science of kalam, we can see that the definitions of kalam have differed from one another throughout history. There are two main reasons for this. First some scholars defined kalam by taking its purpose into consideration. Second others defined it by focusing on its subject matter.

Although there is a view that the science of kalam was first established by the Mu'tazilite school, no explicit definition of kalām is found in Mu'tazilite sources. On the contrary, the famous Mu'tazilite theologian Qaḍi Abd al-Jabbar ibn Aḥmad (d. 415/1024), in his work Sharḥ al-usul al-khamsa, written to explain the five well-known doctrinal principles of the Mu'tazila, presents the foundations of Islamic belief using the term usul al-din instead of "kalam."

Similarly Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash'ari, the founder of the Ash'arite school of Sunni theology, used the terms usul al-din and usul al-tawḥid in place of kalam (Bulut, 1989:335–348). Likewise, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, the founder of the Maturidi school of Sunni

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theology, titled his work on kalam “Kitab al-tawḥid”. This work is considered one of the most important writings that brought al-Maturidi to prominence as a theologian. Indeed, it is a comprehensive kalam text and represents his most significant study from a theological perspective. Therefore, in order to determine Maturidi’s place in the science of kalam and to understand his theological views in a holistic manner, it is essential to analyze this work (Önal, 2013:325–360).

MAIN PART

Abu Nasr Farabi was also a thinker who conducted profound research in the fields of politics, jurisprudence (fiqh), and kalam, developing important theories in these areas. His views in these disciplines continue to serve as a source of inspiration for many scholars and intellectuals today. In politics he emphasized justice, in fiqh, moral principles, and in kalam, the importance of maintaining a balance between reason and revelation. Farabi’s perspectives on politics, fiqh, and kalam demonstrate that he was not only a philosopher, but also possessed deep knowledge as a jurist and a theologian. His ideas were not merely theoretical reflections but practical concepts that could be applied to the life of society (Karaoğlu, 2024:32–33).

Abu Nasr Farabi’s philosophical thought also includes the science of kalam as one of its important domains. Kalam is a discipline that aims to discuss theological issues within a rational framework, and Farabi’s views in this field are likewise distinctive. He establishes a balance between reason and revelation, emphasizing that both are essential for a human being to attain truth.

In kalam Farabi addresses the theory of existence, arguing that everything that exists has a cause. He regards these causes as rooted in a divine being and explains that the origin of all things ultimately derives from this divine existence (Karaoğlu, 2024:32–33).

Abu Nasr al-Farabi’s approach to kalām can be analyzed in two main directions, and it is difficult to give priority to one of these over the other. In the first direction, Abu Nasr Farabi expresses his views on the main subjects of kalam across various treatises. For example, he discusses the following issues: the question of God’s attributes (one of the most central debates in kalam), the concept of the indivisible atom, causality the rational order of motion and change in the universe, whether the world is eternal or originated the well-known theological and philosophical debate concerning the beginning of existence.

These issues occupy an important place in Abu Nasr Farabi’s philosophical thought and demonstrate that he was not indifferent to theological (kalam) problems.

The second direction is that Abu Nasr Farabi, in his famous work *Iḥsa al-ulum* (“The Enumeration of the sciences”), provides a very precise, logically structured definition of the science of *kalam*, which has been regarded throughout history as one of the most comprehensive. Researchers have evaluated this definition as one of the most consistent and scientifically grounded explanations of *kalam*.

Farabi interprets *kalam* as a discipline that defends the foundations of religious belief through logical arguments. In his definition, the function of *kalam* is clearly emphasized as protecting religious doctrines against various intellectual objections, grounding them rationally, and ensuring a stable environment of belief within society.

The definition of *kalam* provided by Abu Nasr Farabi as noted above is presented in his famous work *Iḥsa al-ulum*. This work is one of the unique books that distinguishes Farabi both in a general sense and particularly among Muslim philosophers. It is sufficient to note that it was precisely due to this work that Farabi was granted the title “*al-Muallim al-Thani*” (the Second Teacher). This is because, in this book, he clearly defined the boundaries, subjects, and interconnections of all the sciences existing in his time whether they originated locally or were adopted from external sources (Humaysi, 2000:109–117).

In this work Abu Nasr Farabi divides the sciences into five main categories, arranging them according to methodological and educational criteria:

1. First he presents the science of language and its branches (grammar, morphology, rhetoric, and others).
2. Next he enumerates the science of logic and its subdivisions, since language and logic serve as the gateway and tools for all other sciences.
3. Then he describes the mathematical sciences (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy) and the related disciplines
4. After that he mentions natural sciences (physics) and their branches, followed by theology (metaphysics) and its subdivisions.
5. Finally he turns to the cultural-political science (*ilm al-madani*). Among the components of this science are politics, ethics, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and, lastly, the science of *kalam* (al-Farabi, 1925:71).

The reason Abu Nasr Farabi places the science of *kalam* last is that *kalam* is directly related to religious belief (*aqida*) and political governance. Indeed defending religion, preserving doctrine, and strengthening the foundations of faith were ultimately considered

responsibilities of the caliph, ruler, or political leadership. For this reason Farabi evaluates kalam as a science connected to state administration and religious politics.

The first person to provide a definition of the science of kalam was Abu Nasr al-Farabi (Humaysi, 2000:109–117).

In “Iḥṣā al-ulum” Abu Nasr al-Farabi provides the following definition of the science of kalam:

وصناعة الكلام يقتدر بها الانسان على نصره الآراء والافعال المحدودة التي صرح بها واضع الملة وتزييف كل ما خالفها

بالأقويل (al-Farabi, 1925:71)

“Kalam is the science that serves to defend the beliefs and practices established by the founder of religion and to refute opposing views using reasoned argument and discourse.”

A careful study of this definition draws a researcher’s attention to several key concepts, which serve as the key phrases for understanding Farabi’s text: “sinaa (art or craft),” “malaka (habit or acquired faculty),” “beliefs and practical instructions,” “protection (nusra),” and “refutation or exposure of falsity (tazyif).”

When the meaning of these concepts is examined, three main aspects emerge from Farabi’s definition of kalam:

First, Farabi defines the essence and conceptual boundaries of the science of kalam, providing a clear explanation of what kalam is.

Second, he clarifies the relationship between kalām and fiqh. According to Farabi, kalam defends the foundations of belief (aqida), while fiqh regulates the practice of sharia law thus, the two complement each other.

Third, this definition highlights another function of kalam: to outline the methods for protecting religion from both doctrinal and legal (sharia-related) aspects against various objections and opposing views (Humaysi, 2000:109–117).

Farabi begins his definition of the science of kalam with the term sinaa (art or craft). This indicates that kalām is not a discipline accessible to everyone rather, mastering it requires special preparation, intellectual capacity, and practical skills. In other words only those with a certain aptitude can engage with this science.

Ibn Khaldun, when explaining the concept of sinaa, defines it as follows:

“Sinaa is a skill acquired through the mastery of practical activities based on thought. Since it is practical, it manifests in physical, perceptible activities such as construction, carpentry, writing, singing, teaching, and so on. Sinaat are also divided into professions

that serve people's daily needs, as well as activities related to knowledge, arts, and politics that pertain to human intellectual and spiritual capacities" (Humaysi, 2000:109–117).

The same meaning is emphasized by Jurjani, who defines the concept of sinaa as follows:

"Sinaa is a skill formed in a person that enables them to perform certain actions voluntarily, without conscious deliberation. Alternatively, it is also defined as "the knowledge that teaches how to perform a practical task" (Humaysi, 2000:109–117).

Following the term sinaa, Farabi's text introduces the word malaka, emphasizing another important characteristic of the science of kalam. Just as a craftsman can learn a trade and perform related practical tasks, one cannot master a science at a high level or demonstrate creativity in it without an internal inclination, a deep-rooted understanding, and the natural ability required to perform it skillfully.

This inner inclination, innate or cultivated ability, and state of preparedness is what is referred to as malaka.

The author of the definitions, Jurjani, describes malaka as follows:

"Malaka is a stable quality that arises in the nafs (human soul), forming through habit or character"

If a muslim possesses this malaka and has mastered the art of kalam, they are able, through these two factors, to defend religion both in its doctrinal (aqidah) and practical (fiqh) aspects (Humaysi, 2000:109–117).

Scholars of past centuries used the term sinaa in a much broader sense than it is used today. For example, Tahanavi, in his work "Kashshaf" "Istilahat al-funun", notes that the term has two different meanings. Among the general populace, sinaa typically referred to a skill acquired through practical training such as tailoring or weaving which cannot be attained without practice.

However, among scholars and learned individuals, the term sinaa was used in a broader sense. In their view, sinaa denotes knowledge related to methods of practical activity. Here, the aim is not the practical result itself, but rather mastering the knowledge itself. Such knowledge can sometimes be acquired through practice, as in tailoring or carpentry. Yet, at other times, it can be attained theoretically, without practice, through intellectual study for example, in sciences like fiqh, logic, grammar, and ethical philosophy. In his text, Farabi likely refers to this second, theoretical meaning of sinaa (al-Farabi, 1925:71).

The science of kalam is also called the “science of tawḥid and divine attributes.” Abu Ḥanifa (may Allah have mercy on him) referred to these sciences as “Fiqh al-akbar”. According to Taftazani in his work “Sharḥ al-aqaid”, the knowledge related to practical rulings is called the “science of sharia and legal rulings,” while the knowledge concerning fundamental, doctrinal rulings is termed the “science of tawḥid and divine attributes.”

Kalam is also referred to as ilm al-usul al-din (the science of the principles of religion). The author of “Irshad al-qosid” explains that this science involves proving, through rational arguments, the beliefs and doctrines explicitly stated by the lawgiver (sharia), defending them, and refuting all opinions that contradict them (al-Farabi, 1925:71).

Farabi divides this science into two parts: the first part is related to beliefs, and the second part is related to actions (al-Farabi, 2024:54–58).

Farabi explains the difference between the science of kalam and fiqh. According to him, a jurist (fiqh scholar) accepts the beliefs and practices explicitly established by the founder of religion as a correct and foundational point, and then derives the necessary conclusions from them. A kalam scholar, on the other hand, seeks to defend and uphold those points accepted by the jurist without deriving new conclusions.

If a person happens to combine both abilities, they become both a kalam scholar and a jurist. In such a case, upholding the religion comes from their role as a kalam scholar, while deriving conclusions comes from their role as a jurist (2:54-58).

Abu Nasr Farabi defines the science of kalam as follows:

“The art of kalam is a skill through which a person can defend the precise beliefs and practical instructions revealed by the lawgiver of religion and can refute, with evidence, any ideas that contradict them”.

From this point, it becomes necessary to discuss the relationship between the science of kalam and fiqh in Farabi’s thought. This very aspect gives special scholarly significance to Farabi’s definition.

Farabi does not simply define the science of kalam as “the art of proving religious beliefs,” but rather classifies it into five types based on the tasks and methods of kalam scholars. The first group of kalam scholars presents proofs to defend the beliefs of their religion. They use as evidence the miracles of the Prophets and the testimonies of trustworthy and reputable people who came before, or sometimes both. Through this approach, the truthfulness of the Prophet and the impossibility of falsehood are

established. Afterward, the revealed knowledge he conveys must leave no room for reason, reflection, or doubt. The second group of kalam scholars collects various proofs to defend the beliefs established in religion and compares them with other evidence to demonstrate the correctness of the religion. They then examine sensory perceptions (maḥsusat), commonly accepted social matters (mashhurat), and rational concepts (ma'qulat). If they encounter something that contradicts religion, and it is possible at least through interpretation (ta'wil) to reconcile the words used by the founder of the religion with the contradictory matter, they apply such an interpretation. If this is not possible, but the contradictory element can be rejected or explained in a way consistent with the religion, they proceed accordingly. The third group of kalam scholars believes that objections to their religion can sometimes be countered by citing examples from the opposing religions. If a follower of another faith criticizes an aspect of their religion, they respond by pointing out similar or even weaker aspects within that other religion to defend their own.

The fourth group of kalam scholars, recognizing that some of the arguments presented by other kalam scholars were not strong enough to defeat their opponents logically, resorted to alternative methods to compel silence from their adversaries. For example, they might intimidate them, embarrass them, or threaten them with misfortune to enforce compliance and suppress opposition. The fifth group of kalam scholars includes those who consider their religion unquestionably correct. They believe that, by any means, it is necessary to present their religion in the best light before others, eliminate doubts about it, and keep their enemies away from it. For this purpose, they do not regard falsehood, deception, or cunning as improper.

According to them, those who oppose their religion are divided into two types the first type consists of outright enemies, whom they believe may justifiably be countered or subdued through falsehood and trickery. The second type consists of individuals who are not enemies but rather have weak reason or understanding and are unaware of the portion of religion that could be accessible to them. Even such individuals, like women or children being guided, may justifiably be brought closer to religion through falsehood and cunning, directing them toward a share in its teachings (al-Farabi, 2024:54–58).

CONCLUSION

From Farabi's statements above, we can conclude that scholars classify those engaged in the science of kalam into five categories. While he describes their characteristics, he

does not explicitly give them names. Farabi likely preferred to rely on the principle of objectivity in his classification of sciences. Nevertheless, the descriptions allow us to make informed assumptions about each group:

Considering their strict adherence to revelation (wahy), refusal to rely on other sources, and absolute commitment to it, the first group likely corresponds to the Ahl al-hadith. The second group, which supplements revelation with reliance on sensory experience, commonly accepted practices (mashhurat), and reason, can be understood as representing the ahl al-ray. The third group, who counter opponents by citing evidence from the scriptures of other religions, are identifiable as mutakallimun (theologians). The fourth group, due to their rigid and fanatical approach, reminds us of the foreign or external sectarian communities. Based on the characteristics of the fifth group, it is highly probable that Farabi was referring to the shia.

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