Fourteenth Annual Victor Danner Memorial Lecture

April 6, 2015 at 7:00pm
University Club - President’s Room
Indiana Memorial Union

Between Practice and Theory: Alfarabi’s Political Teaching

Presented by:
Professor Charles Butterworth
University of Maryland, College Park

Opening Remarks by:
Professor Stephen Katz
Chair of NELC

Co-sponsored by Horizons of Knowledge, Islamic Studies, the Center for the Study of the Middle East (CSME), the College Arts & Humanities Institute (CAHI), Philosophy, Religious Studies, the McKinney Family Foundation, and Friends of the Danner Family and former students
Charles Butterworth (b. 1938) is a noted philosopher of the Straussian school and currently an emeritus professor of political philosophy at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Butterworth is also a translator and editor of numerous books about the philosophers Rousseau, Alfarabi, and Averroes.

Butterworth received his B.A. from Michigan State University. He trained in political philosophy and Arabic as well as Islamic civilization at the University of Chicago, where he received an M.A. and Ph.D. in political science. He has also studied at the University of Ayn Shams in Egypt, the University of Bordeaux, and the University of Nancy in France (receiving a doctorate in philosophy from the latter).

For several years he was the Principal Investigator for the Smithsonian-sponsored Project in Medieval Islamic Logic in Cairo. He has also been the Principal Investigator for a project on medieval Islamic logic sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and has organized a two-week Salzburg seminar on the Commonality of Cultural Traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Abstract

How does theory inform practice? Contrary to expectations, that is not Alfarabi’s primary question. Rather, he begins his inquiry from practice. But practice needs guidance. To choose wisely, we need to learn what correct action entails and why it is worth pursuing. Alfarabi’s theoretical answers to those questions lead to the core of his broader political teaching and show why practice alone is insufficient.

Today, we know of Abu Nasr Alfarabi (870-950) as a talented interpreter of Plato and Aristotle, an intriguing analyst of politics and religion, and a gifted musicologist. He was so esteemed by his contemporaries that they dubbed him the “second teacher,” the first being Aristotle. And Moses Maimonides thought so highly of him that he urged his best student to read him carefully, for he judged Alfarabi’s thoughts to be “finer than fine flour.” Born somewhere beyond the Oxus, Alfarabi studied in Harran with Nestorian Christian monks then came to Baghdad where he taught and wrote for several decades. Toward the end of his life, he went to Aleppo, visited Cairo, and eventually died near Damascus.
Professor Victor Danner was born on October 22, 1926, in Irapuato, Guanajuato, Mexico to Arthur James and Maria Lopez Danner. As a young man, he served his country during WWII. After the war he attended Georgetown University where he received his B.A. magna cum laude in 1957. Later that year he traveled to Morocco to become an instructor and eventually Director of the American Language Center, sponsored by the US Information Service. While there he took advantage of the opportunity not only to get acquainted with the country but also to perfect his knowledge of classical Arabic texts.

In 1964, Professor Danner returned to the US for his doctoral studies and graduated from Harvard in 1970. He came to IU in 1967 and was a professor of Arabic and Religious Studies at Indiana University until his death in 1990. He served as Chairman of the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department for five years, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Middle Eastern Studies Program.

He was an internationally renowned scholar in the fields of Islamic mysticism, comparative religion, and classical Arabic literature. In 1976, he was invited to speak at the international World Festival of Islam in London. Professor Danner was also active in a number of professional organizations, including the Washington D.C.-based Foundation for Traditional Studies, for which he served as Secretary-Treasurer. He wrote Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah’s Sufi Aphorisms (1973); Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah: The Book of Wisdom, (1978); and The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction (1988), in addition to over twenty-five articles and reviews.

One of his students, Lauri King Irani, captured his essence: “As a teacher, Victor Danner had few equals. He taught Arabic, classical Arabic literature, Islam, Sufism, the Qur’an, comparative religion, comparative mysticism, and Eastern religions. His dignified bearing, elegant gestures, and verbal eloquence transformed his lectures into performances which had the power to captivate and inspire his students, whether he was discussing Arabic grammar or Islamic theology. His concern for and encouragement of his students, coupled with his understated sense of humor, earned him a well-deserved reputation as a caring and committed educator who taught not only when behind the classroom lectern, but also by example.”

*He who is illumined at the beginning is illumined at the end.*

—from the *Sufi Aphorisms* by Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah (d. 1309)

Translated by Victor Danner
We would like to offer our sincere thanks to the generous people who have already contributed to the Victor Danner Memorial fund, especially Dr. Mary Ann Fadae Danner

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Thank you!

Stephen Katz
NELC Chair & Professor