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## On Justice as Dance

### Abstract:

This article is part of a larger project that explores how to channel people's passion for popular arts into legal social justice by reconceiving law as a kind of poetry and justice as dance, and exploring different possible relationships between said legal poetry and dancing justice. I begin by rehearsing my previous new conception of social justice as organismic empowerment, and my interpretive method of dancing-with. I then apply this method to the following four "ethico-political choreographies of justice": (1) the choral dance of souls qua winged chariot-teams (from Plato), (2) a dancingly beautiful friendship with the community (from Aristotle), (3) a tightrope-dance of the cool (from Al-Farabi), and (4) humans dancingly reimaged as positioned actors in fluidly moving groups (from Iris Marion Young). I then synthesize these analyses into "dancing justice," defined as the dynamic equilibrium sustained by a critical mass of a community's members comporting themselves like social dancers.

### Keywords:

justice, social justice, Plato, Aristotle, Al-Farabi, Iris Marion Young, dance

Whether on the streets, in the classroom, or on the internet, one frequently today observes conflicts between partisans of justice (who tend to lean center-left politically) and those of social justice (who tend to lean further left). By this opposition, I mean something like a milder version of the traditional struggle between liberal reformers and leftist revolutionaries, the former advocating gradual change from inside existing institutions,

and the latter preferring sudden transformation from the outside.<sup>1</sup> It might be helpful to introduce some tentative, working definitions of these terms (to be superseded later). Justice is rendering each person their due, relative to various hierarchies of ideas, people, and things. Social justice consists of urgent repairs for inequities to sub-communities undermined by community hierarchy. And atomized (as opposed to social) justice is composed of unified systems aiming to slowly raise the average member's receipt of their due.

This opposition between justice and social justice is exacerbated by mainstream sociopolitical philosophy which ever since the Enlightenment, questions of law and justice are framed almost exclusively in terms of contracts and scientific inquiry, most famously perhaps in the work of John Rawls.<sup>2</sup> One problem with this methodological approach is that various other phenomena and forms of inquiry are marginalized, including the popular arts, thereby discouraging the participation of those for whom the popular arts are vital. For example, many (especially nonwhite and queer) young people's attitudes toward legal justice today range from indifference to active hostility. Yet they remain passionate about popular arts and the often-amorphous concept of social justice, as pervasively satirized by far-right social media users who coined the phrase "social justice warrior" (or "SJW") to mock leftist users whose activism seems restricted to the safety of the virtual world. Meanwhile, the real world remains unchanged, at least at the level of the kind of sustainable change uniquely afforded by the stability and permanence of legal justice.

This situation creates both a problem and an opportunity. To wit, how can we get people to care about law and legal justice like they already care about the popular arts and social justice? One answer is provided by the larger project to which the present article belongs, a new conception of law as poetry, of justice as dance, and of the possible new relationships between such poetry-law and justice-dance.<sup>3</sup> The present article focuses exclusively on justice as dance, proposing a revival of multiple powerful conceptions of justice from the history of philosophy that are sufficiently compatible with the popular arts to capture the enthusiasm of young people who would otherwise reserve their energies for extralegal social justice, or fail to engage in any progressive social change whatsoever. The unifying feature of these conceptions, as captured in Agnes Heller's term, "ethico-political conceptions of justice," is that they conceive of justice as no less ethical than political: a virtue possessed by individuals no less than by societies.<sup>4</sup> From their ethical half, these ethico-political conceptions emphasize virtue, relationship, and embodiment, and thereby the embodied axes of race, gender, and sex. The latter, in turn, are central to both social justice and the popular arts on which social justice powerfully and captivantly draws, including dance. Channeling this connection, the present investigation reinterprets four of Heller's ethical-political conceptions of justice from the history of philosophy, as choreographed duets between the partners of the ethical and political, which I term "ethico-political choreographies of justice."

First, I rehearse my dance-resonant conception of social justice (as "organismic empowerment") and my interpretive method of "dancing-with," in preparation for applying them to my four choreographies, in historical order. Among my reasons for this organization is that, as Judith Hamera recently demonstrated, for choreography too (as for philosophy), technique is centrally concerned with the binding of the community

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1) The long history of leftist scorn for the concept of justice includes J. S. Mill's claim that justice is merely disguised vengeance, the Marxist view that justice is merely an ideological construct of the superstructure that perpetuates bourgeois norms of exploitation, and Charles Mills' quotation of the African American folk saying that "When white people say 'Justice,' then mean 'just us.'"

2) Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.

3) See Hall, "On Law as Poetry: Shelley and Tocqueville."

4) See Heller, *Beyond Justice*. In support of her own extension of the ethical to the political in *Justice and the Philosophy of Difference*, Iris Marion Young affirms Heller's "ethico-political concept of justice," and her claim that "justice is primarily the virtue of citizenship," see Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 33.

through historical time.<sup>5</sup> Second, I begin applying dancing-with, whose explicit goal is what I call “poetic social justice,” to my founding ethico-political choreography of justice in Plato’s *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, where he stages the just community as a Dionysian choral dance of chariot souls, winged by their erotic ethical education. Third, I explore the uptake of Plato’s choreographic technique in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* which (for dancing-with) valorizes what I term “equitable-justice” over “lawful-justice,” where the former is understood as a beautiful friendship with the community. Fourth, I turn to the philosopher whom the medievals called “the Second teacher” (after Aristotle), Al-Farabi’s *Virtuous Community*, which (for dancing-with) presents justice as a tightrope-dance in which the imagination regulates the body’s temperature for establishing the soul’s virtue of temperance, and for sustaining a coolly-just community. Fifth, I consider Iris Marion Young’s recuperation of Heller’s ethico-political conceptions of justice in the present, and her dance-like reimagining of humans as positioned actors in fluidly moving groups. Finally, synthesizing these analyses yields what I call “dancing justice,” defined as the dynamic equilibrium sustained by a critical mass of a community’s members comporting themselves like dancers at a social dance. The inspiring and paradigmatic example of such social dance, for me, is the Afro-Latin social dance known as salsa, as I have explored in detail elsewhere, and to which I will return in the conclusion.

### I. Organismic Empowerment Through Dancing-With

My new conception of social justice as organismic empowerment consists of a bottom-up, grassroots activity, wherein each organism is enabled to engage in transformative, self-cultivating flourishing (as opposed to a top-down, centralized imposition on passive individuals). On this view, social justice is, more precisely, an intuitive maximization of one’s being as a mode or stylization of the cosmos (from Spinoza), who’s maximization erupts in a self-transformation (from Nietzsche), and who’s self-transformation converts the literal muscular tension of oppressed group members into liberating art (from Fanon).

To flesh out this conception, social justice as organismic empowerment involves: (1) a knowledge of the universal via the particular, (2) where knowledge is utilized to overcome the self in favor of empowerment per se, and (3) where overcoming results in a turning of oppression’s tensions against its own forces and institutions. The implications of this three-part process are that (1) universality shines fully through each being, (2) living beings naturally seek empowerment rather than a mere continuance of living, and (3) even the most seemingly apolitical movements of artistic expression involve tensions that can nevertheless be repurposed for liberation. All three aspects of this definition, moreover, are consistent with the abovementioned discussion of the emphasis in social justice advocacy of the arts and aesthetics. On my reading, the best vehicle for Spinoza’s intuition is poetry, especially dramatic poetry when performed; Nietzsche’s fullest treatment of “self-overcoming” is found in his prose poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, specifically in a section that is centrally concerned with dance; and Fanon directly links tension to art via his concept of “combat literature.”<sup>6</sup>

This aesthetic dimension, though mostly implicit in social justice as organismic empowerment, manifests in the very name of my interpretive method, “dancing-with.” In brief, dancing-with is the strategic,

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5) A central theoretical term for Hamera, she describes “technique” as “a pre-existing conversation between bodies, history, and desire,” used by members of the community “to build diverse and compelling communities within the larger global city.” Just so, I will be exploring here the evolution of techniques for justice, as handed down from Plato, to his student Aristotle, to the most important Arab interpretation of them, and to the contemporary philosopher who advocates a return to this tradition of ethico-political conceptions of justice. See Hamera, *Dancing Communities*, 4.

6) See Hall, “Revalorized Black Embodiment: Dancing with Fanon,” 274–88.

creative reinterpretation of canonical historical philosophers, whereby one comports oneself toward them as dance partners, in a posited shared pursuit of the community artwork that is social justice. More precisely, this method consists of four strategic postings, by the *interpreting* theorist, of four corresponding virtues, in the *interpreted* theorist. In brief, these four postings and four virtues involve interpreting theorists as having torsioned their views in pursuit of justice in their own sociohistorical contexts, and as preferring that we creatively reinterpret them in order to continue their (posited) support for social justice in our own socio-historical context. It also requires us to open ourselves to the truths of historical theorists that challenge our present-day assumptions and biases.

To flesh out this method, the interpreting theorist posits that the interpreted theorist is sufficiently (1) just to prioritize social justice, (2) imaginatively farsighted to see the need for creative reinterpretation, (3) flexible to adapt theory to new facts, and (4) wise to see things that are now difficult to affirm in the interpreter's historical era. And in pursuit of this positing, the virtues required of the interpreter are (1) moral imagination in order to imaginatively occupy the interpreted theorist's embodied position and thereby sympathize with their ends, (2) courage in order to read historical theorists against the grain of present-day fads, (3) trust in order to believe the historical theorist hypothetically willing to their views given present-day facts, and (4) flexibility in order to remain open to the possibility that the interpreter's culture's assumptions about some of the interpreted theorist's claims might be wrong.

## II. Plato's Dancing Chorus of Winged Souls

Having identified the goal of the present investigation (social justice as organismic empowerment) and the method of interpretation (dancing-with), I now turn to my first ethico-political choreography of justice. For Plato, I begin with the obvious source location in his corpus, namely the *Republic*. As indicated by the title of an entry by Eric Brown, "Plato's Ethics and Politics in the *Republic*" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the dialogue's primary subject is ethics, specifically the classic Ancient Greek virtue of justice.<sup>7</sup> The reason why the dialogue detours to the political state, at least according to the character of Socrates, is that the complex concept of justice is easier to analyze in its larger form, as a structure of the city.

Though the *Republic* is famously critical of much (dramatic and epic) poetry, there are several factors that mitigate and even reverse this judgment. First, Plato was a tragic poet before meeting Socrates. Second, in his dialogue entitled the *Laws*, Plato openly affirms not only poetry, but also poetry's role in the best possible city and the poetic nature of philosophy. In fact, the *Laws*' interlocutors explicitly call themselves "poets" and their proposed laws "poetry." Moreover, as I have explored in detail elsewhere, the centerpiece of the *Laws*' proposed laws is an educational curriculum founded on dance education.<sup>8</sup> And third, this poetic affirmation is further manifested in Plato's deployment, in the *Republic* and other dialogues, of the formal poetic technique known as "conceit." Also known as "extended metaphor," a conceit is a sustained comparison of two things that links various features of one thing (the metaphor) to the other (the literal object).

In the *Republic*, Plato's conceit is city-justice as soul-justice. And in the *Phaedrus*, which like the *Republic* explores the soul through indirection, Plato's conceit is of the soul as a winged chariot-team. One benefit of recognizing the conceit of the *Republic* is that it recasts Plato's apparent endorsements of totalitarianism, artistic censorship, a rigid caste system, and a life of apolitical quietism for the best philosopher. Instead, these features are all part of Plato's poetic conceit wherein reason (*nous*) is the "guardian" of the soul and controls spirited-

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7) Brown, "Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic."

8) See Hall, "Posture in Plato's *Laws*: An Introduction to Figuration on Civic Education," 59–67.

ness (*thymos*) as the soul's "auxiliary" powers to protect desire (*eros*) as the soul's "producer." In other words, this conceit reveals that the *Republic's* conception of the soul is isomorphic to that of the *Phaedrus*, with the latter's conceit of the soul as a winged chariot-team.<sup>9</sup>

For anyone unfamiliar with the latter, the scholarly consensus on it is that the chariot's "dark horse" represents the lowest/carnal aspect of soul, the "light horse" represents the middle/spirited aspect of soul, and the charioteer represents the highest/rational aspect of soul. Though the dark horse and its desire are often identified as *eros*, I follow scholars who interpret *eros* as distributed throughout the three parts/powers (which I prefer to translate as "carnal desire," "societal desire," and "mindful desire").<sup>10</sup> This is not to say, however, that Plato's conception of justice is limited to the ethical or individual realm. On the contrary, I interpret this *Phaedrus/Republic* conception of soul as Plato's grassroots agenda for creating a more just city, namely by helping people become more ethically just, as modeled by the character of Socrates.

In support of this interpretation, Elizabeth Fiore's bold new reading of the *Phaedrus* persuasively argues that its hyperborean procession of winged chariot-teams is in truth a Dionysian choral dance, with Socrates as a satyr playing the role of the erotic dark horse. In Belfiore's words, "the dances performed by the soul-chariots are similar in many respects to the dithyramb."<sup>11</sup> Belfiore also buttresses my linkage of the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, which implicitly links both more closely to the *Republic* as well. More precisely, Belfiore fleshes out her analogy between the chariot procession and the dithyramb by noting the similarities between the *Phaedrus'* choral dance and the "Corybantic dances, the musical education of children, and the reeducation of older adults at symposia" in the *Laws*.<sup>12</sup>

In short, Plato's winged chariot souls pursue justice both ethically (for their three-part souls) and politically (for their dancing community). Each dancer in the group's chorus only rises to the politics of the heavenly dance on the strength of their wing-inducing, ethical interpersonal development with the lovers and beloveds. A more literal version on this ethical-political ascent, moreover, is precisely what happens with Socrates' interlocutors in the *Republic*; including the disordered "producer" soul of Cephalus, the disordered "auxiliary" soul of Thrasymachus, and the immature "guardian" souls of Glaucon and Adeimantus; who visibly progress in justice as the dialogue unfolds. Put in terms of the *Phaedrus'* winged chariot-team souls, what the *Republic* stages is the ethical, interpersonal development of the interlocutors' winged souls, and what it foreshadows is the political dance performed by the actual individuals historically fictionalized in the dialogues.

### III. Aristotle's Dancingly Beautiful Friends of the Community

In the previous section, I identified the core ethico-political choreography of justice, in Plato, as a Dionysian choral dance of chariot souls winged by their erotic ethical education. I now turn to the most direct and influential inheritor of this choreographic technique for justice, Plato's student Aristotle, in whom Plato's choreography becomes helpfully more explicit. Aristotle repeatedly links ethics and politics in his conception of justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter, *Ethics*), and links this ethico-political justice to aesthetics. Beginning

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9) For more, see Hall, "Plato's *Phaedrus* after Descartes' *Passions*," 75–93.

10) The most influential of these scholars is Ferrari. For two scholars who have followed in Ferrari's interpretive wake see Schiltz, "Two Chariots," 451–648; and Budziszewska, "The Self-Chariots of Liberation," 318–51.

11) Belfiore, "Dancing with the Gods," 205.

12) *Ibid.*, 207–208. She claims, more specifically, that children are like unruly dark horses who need to be disciplined into more orderly movement, "to learn to use their god-given perception of order and disorder so as to move in rhythm and sing in harmony"; as for the elderly, Belfiore sees them as comparable to the overly restrained light horses who need to be inspired with a bit of choreographed energy, "under the guidance of the sober symposiarch" (209–10).

with the ethics/politics linkage, Aristotle writes that (1) “it must not be forgotten that what is being sought is not only what is just simply but what is just in political life”; (2) his treatise in the *Ethics* “is in a certain way political”; (3) “a human being by nature is meant for a city”; and (4) a politician “wants to make the citizens good and obedient to the laws.”<sup>13</sup> In short, ethics assumes the politics of a specific city. (This linkage is further buttressed, as suggested by an early reviewer of this article, by Aristotle’s claim in *Ethics* Book I that politics is the master science).

Turning to the *Ethics*’ related linkage between the ethico-political and aesthetics, Aristotle claims that (1) discourse about the “beautiful and justice” is identical to discourses that “pertain to political matters”; (2) a virtuous person is one who lives “beautifully”; (3) “one who does not delight in beautiful actions is not even a good person”; (4) “the beautiful” “is the end that belongs to virtue”; and (5) actions “in accord with virtue are beautiful and are for the sake of the beautiful” (NE 1095b, 1098a10, 1099a10, 1115b10, and 1120a20). In sum, as Joe Sachs observes in a footnote to his translation, Aristotle’s ethics assumes the politics of an Athenian aristocracy that referred to its members as “the beautiful and the good” (NE 1099a, n18, and p. 13).

In addition to these more obvious linkages among ethics, politics, and aesthetics, the *Ethics* offers an alternate conception of justice as equitability (or decency) in Book 8’s analysis of friendship and justice. The superiority of this conception, on my view, consists in its ethical and aesthetic richness. Before turning to the latter, however, I will first consider the *Ethics*’ first analysis of justice, from Book 5. At the outset of this discussion, Aristotle notes a slight ambiguity in the word “justice.” One meaning, he claims, is roughly synonymous to “equitable,” while the other approximates to “lawful” (NE, 1129b30). The former seems closer to ethics, while the latter seems closer to politics. It is this lawfulness-justice which, according to Aristotle, “often seems the greatest of the virtues,” and which “is complete virtue because it is the putting to use of complete virtue” (NE, 1129b30). By the phrase “putting to use of complete virtue,” Aristotle means applying the virtue indifferently, to anyone and everyone in the city. In short, (lawfulness) “justice, alone among the virtues, seems to be someone else’s good,” which makes it “not a part of virtue but the whole of virtue” (NE, 1130a, 1130a10).

This lawful dimension helps explain several otherwise counterintuitive aspects of Aristotle’s account of justice in Book 5. First, he traces the etymology of the word “just” (*dikaion*) to the word “halves” (*dicha*), meaning that the judge is the one who cuts things in half (to distribute the two halves to the competing parties in the community, according to dessert) (NE, 1132a30). This description seems better fitted to juridical justice than interpersonal ethical justice in part because it recalls the sword-wielding Greek goddess of justice (and the famous story in the *Tanakh* of King Solomon threatening to cut a baby in half to determine its true mother).<sup>14</sup> Second, Aristotle defines “what is just” as “a mean between doing injustice and having injustice done to one” (NE 1133b30). Such a mean, qua passive, seems to lack the Aristotelian virtue requirements of (a) being an active condition and (b) being a choice. Third, toward the end of Book 5, Aristotle distinguishes between “natural” and “conventional” justice, linking the former to the gods (among whom, he adds, “nothing changes at all,” including their divine justice) (NE, 1134b30). Finally, and relatedly, he closes Book 5 claiming that the “decent” (or “equitable”) is greater than justice, because equitability is “a setting straight of a law, insofar as [that law] leaves something out as a result of being universal” (NE, 1137b20).

In sum, Aristotle’s lawfulness-justice, in this dancing-with interpretation, is only the sum of all virtues because it is constrained by a society’s imperfect and evolving laws. As Sachs observes in another footnote, “the

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13) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134a20, 1049b, 1097b, 1102a10. Subsequent citations for this work will be referenced parenthetically as NE.

14) I Kings 3:16–28.

heavily mathematical treatment of justice up to this point omits any reference to the beautiful,” the omission of which “suggests that justice is in some way an incomplete, or undeveloped virtue” (NE, 1134a, translator’s footnote). Sachs sees this point as a foreshadowing of friendship in Book 8, where Aristotle implies that a superior form of justice involves the threads left behind earlier in the *Ethics* – including justice’s equitable, natural, and divine forms. From this perspective of dancing-with, one could say that Aristotle divides justice into two sets of halves, and the better half of each pair is close to friendship. The connection to dance, on this subject, is that a group of people united by friendship is more suggestive of a community of dancers than of an impersonal group of citizens.

Returning to Book 8’s alternate conception of justice, in its first chapter Aristotle observes that “lawmakers seem to take” friendship “more seriously than justice” (NE, 1155a30). For one thing, he observes, legislators seek above all to “banish faction,” which is the opposite of “like-mindedness,” and the latter state is “similar to friendship” (NE, 1155a30). Aristotle later buttresses this point with the claim that “like-mindedness seems to be friendship in a political sense” (1167b). Furthermore, even when people “are just there is still need for friendship” (NE, 1155a30). Finally, regarding whatever pertains to justice, he observes that whatever “inclines toward friendship seems to be the most just of all” (NE, 1155a30). Aristotle returns to this point in detail in Chapter 9 with the following three claims: (1) to “share something in common” defines both friendship and justice; (2) “friendship consists in community”; and (3) friendship and justice “are present in the same things and have an equal extent” (NE, 1159b30, 1160a).

This “equal” rhetoric is close to “equitable” (via “equal,” ἴσος), and thus recalls Aristotle’s earlier reference to equitability-justice. Considering these two discussions together, I interpret Book 8’s friendship-like justice as identical for Aristotle to Book 5’s equitability-justice, which suggests the possibility, for a dancing-with interpretation, that equitability-justice might be superior to lawfulness-justice. More precisely, equitable-justice could be understood as superior to lawfulness-justice to the same degree that friendship is superior to (lawfulness) justice. Put formulaically, equitability-justice = lawfulness-justice + equitability. In short, the equitably-just person might be helpfully understood as a friend to the community.

Finally from the *Ethics*, since Aristotle links equitability, qua virtue, to art, aesthetics, and beauty – as I have elaborated in detail elsewhere – the equitable-just could be compared, for him, to fine artists, including dancers.<sup>15</sup> Anticipating my language of dancing justice in the conclusion, this equitable artistry makes Aristotelian justice the kind of beautiful friendship that flows between all the members of a social dance group, coursing indifferently toward each dancer and the group itself, irrespective of the friendship, apathy, or antipathy obtaining between any two dancers. In short, Aristotelian justice, for dancing-with, means to be a dancingly beautiful friend to the entire community, for the sake of all.

Compared to conventional friendship, this Aristotelian political friendship involves less warmth, and thus could be understood as a kind of “cool” or “temperate” friendship. The word “temperate” recalls the related ancient Greek virtue *sophrosyne*, often translated into English as “temperance,” but which I translate more freely here (following the dancing-with method) as “mind-saving.” (The word *syne* means a state of being, and *sophros* is composed of *so*, the root of *soter* (meaning “savior”) and *phren* (meaning “mind/soul”). In this light,

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15) More specifically, I explore how *poesis* functions – in *On Generation and Corruption*, the *Physics*, and *On the Soul* – primarily in the following ways: (1) as “making” or “postulating,” particularly in terms of what a theorist posits as the fundamental layer of reality; (2) as “activity,” particularly in relation to how the basic material elements of reality act on each other, as well as the soul understood as the activating verb to the body’s noun; and (3) as an aesthetic test of philosophical fitness via the poetic aspects of language. My conclusion is that these different aspects of the word *poesis* constitute aspects of a unified conception, which means that *poesis* qua activity in these three texts could also be thought of as a kind of poetry, more precisely the dynamic dancing basis of Aristotle’s materialist philosophy. For more, see Hall, “Core Aspects of Dance,” 1–16.

*sophrosyne* keeps things moderate and balanced, leaving the person equally free to move in any direction, and thus empowers the soul to act. Temperance thus connects to justice; in that equitable-just folks have a calm, cool, and balanced way of comportment; which enables them to rationally assess any dispute and determine the best way to interact with all involved. Not coincidentally, this is exactly the view of the “Second Teacher” after Aristotle, Abu Nasr Al-Farabi.

#### IV. Al-Farabi’s Tightrope-Dancers of the Cool

At this moment in the history of this choreographic technique, justice consists of a Dionysian choral dance of chariot souls, winged by their erotic ethical education (from Plato) who are bound by beautiful friendship to the community (from Aristotle). This is the inheritance on which Al-Farabi proceeds to build, including through his magnum opus. Usually rendered in English as *On the Perfect State*, I translate it more literally as *The Principles of the Opinions of the Virtuous Community*. For readers unfamiliar with medieval Arabic philosophy, especially given the veil of Islamophobia that shadows Western perceptions today, I realize that it may be difficult to accept the originality and progressiveness of Al-Farabi. As an ethnically Turkish philosopher, Al-Farabi lived in the cosmopolitan city of Baghdad in the tenth century, in the Golden Age of Islam, whose achievements included psychiatric hospitals and music therapy for psychosocial dysfunction (of which Al-Farabi was an advocate).<sup>16</sup> For more on his groundbreaking work and contemporary relevance, including his critique of Islamic imperialism and championing of democracy and religious tolerance and pluralism, the reader is encouraged to consult the exciting work of Christopher Colmo, Joshua Parens, and Muhammad Ali Khalidi.<sup>17</sup>

As I have explored in detail elsewhere, Al-Farabi argues that a just community requires souls possessing the virtue of temperance, which in turn requires bodies that maintain a literally cool temperature.<sup>18</sup> Anticipating dancing justice, I imagine this temperate comportment as the balancing act of a tightrope walker, the German term for which translates literally as “rope-dancer,” weaving between the heat of intimate love and the coldness of hostile indifference to suffering strangers. And the phrase “of the cool” is an allusion to Robert Farris Johnson’s classic study of Africana aesthetics, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, which traces the history of a Nigerian philosophy of calm and balanced perseverance through adversity. The relevance of the German and Nigerian contexts here is that they emphasize the trans-cultural and trans-linguistic relevance of this connection between temperature, temperament, and dance.

Al-Farabi’s analysis of this dancing cool temperament relies on his own version of Plato’s poetic conceit. In Al-Farabi’s case, this takes the form of extended analogies among the body, the soul, the community, and the cosmos. To elaborate, in each case a primary ruler provides the material resources for a secondary ruler (or representative) to rationally direct. More precisely, the heart provides heat for the body which the brain distributes to the rest of the organs. The imagination provides the soul with images which reason manipulates to control the movements of the body. The mythical “first ruler” provides the credibility that the actual ruler channels into their governing practices for the community. And the “First” existent is a mere figurehead for the constant material activity of the cosmos’ evolving self-unfolding. Put differently, the First is the static image or representation for the dynamic forces of the cosmos. When the community’s bodies are temperate

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16) For more, see Mithra, “Conceptualising and Addressing Mental Disorders Amongst Muslim Communities,” 763–74.

17) See, for example, Colmo, *Breaking with Athens*; Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions*; and Khalidi, “Al-Farabi on the Democratic City.”

18) See Hall, “Al-Farabi’s Imaginative Critique,” 175–92.



enough for their souls to be temperate enough to mirror the natural temperance of the cosmos, then the community will be just.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Farabi's argument here, in anticipation of dancing justice's emphasis on art, aesthetics and embodiment, implies an important role for the imagination as the power that strides the divide between the body/perception and mind/reason. More precisely, the imagination forms images of things to motivate the body to seek and acquire a healthier temperature. For example, when the body gets physically wet, the imagination's temperament does not imitate that wetness by itself getting wet, but rather by producing imagery suggestive of moisture, such as "water and swimming."<sup>20</sup> And at the community level, these images can also be artistically externalized and circulated to regulate the average temperatures, and thereby temperament, of the community as required for justice. Put in the cognitive science terms of Antonio Damasio (indebted to Spinoza, who was himself indebted to Al-Farabi by way of Maimonides), the body must maintain homeostasis if it is to function, including imaginatively, and for that reason consciousness is an evolutionary tool for maintaining said homeostasis.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the imagination artfully shapes bodies into an ethico-politically just community. Evidence for this power of the imagination can be found in the following passage, where Al-Farabi claims that the imagination "stirs the organs, which have [a given] function, to be prepared for [that function], not as a result of a desire which actually occurs at that moment but because the faculty of imagination imitates the desire through the actions which are usually connected to that desire."<sup>22</sup> One could interpret this passage as claiming that imagination's imitating of past sense-perceptions (by means of images) actually precedes the activity of the desiring power – and that imagination can thus cause actions without recourse to any desire whatsoever. That is, one can (at least in certain circumstances) first imagine something, and then afterwards desire it (instead of the other way around), especially if the causal image is well-crafted. This insight anticipates critical theory's analysis of the desire-fabricating powers of the culture industry. In the latter, too, imaginative works (such as television commercials) create desires which did not previously exist for consumers. Contrarily, and returning to my previous point, the imagination for Al-Farabi could also therefore positively and constructively shape community members toward justice.

With this overview of Al-Farabi's argument in mind, I now offer a close reading of a few of its most salient moments in *Virtuous Community*. Justice is first named in Chapter 2, Section 2, in the section on the cosmos. Al-Farabi describes "the First" as just, specifically insofar as "each existent receives from the First its allotted share of existence in accordance with its rank."<sup>23</sup> That is, the First emanates its essence to each existent exactly in accordance with the existent's relative merits; it is the perfect distributor of being. Justice's second appearance in *Virtuous Community* also concerns the cosmos. In Chapter 9, Section 1, Al-Farabi articulates what I have elsewhere termed "natural distributive justice." In Al-Farabi's words:

It is natural for matter to have one form, as to have its contrary, each of these bodies has a rightful claim to its form and a rightful claim to its matter. Its right by virtue of its form is to remain

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19) More precisely, in their respective regulatory roles, the brain's job is to keep the body from overheating, reason's job is to keep the soul from metaphorically "overheating" through an unrestrained and overactive imagination, and the actual ruler's job is to prevent the community's beliefs (including in the first ruler) from becoming overzealous and neglectful of this world. For more on this relationship, see Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, 173, 175, and 227.

20) Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, 213.

21) Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things*.

22) Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, 219.

23) *Ibid.*, 97.

in the existence which it has, and its right by matter is to assume another existence contrary to the existence which it has. But since it cannot achieve these two contrary modes of existence simultaneously, it follows by necessity that it achieves the one mode for a time and the other mode for a time.<sup>24</sup>

Note his remarkable conclusion. Evolution and history are logically necessary if the cosmos is to be understood as fundamentally just. Al-Farabi scholar Richard Walzer concurs, observing that “‘justice’ is very important for Al-Farabi when he deals with the sublunary world.”

Evidence of this affirmation of evolution can be found in Al-Farabi’s materialist account of species generation via the mixtures of basic elements. More precisely, this “mixture” for Al-Farabi amounts to combinations of fire, air, earth, water and the bodies that “arise” from these elements, namely minerals, plants, non-speaking-thinking animals and speaking-thinking animals. “Man alone,” he concludes, “arises as the result of the last mixture.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, even the highest (and the only rational) being on earth, according to Al-Farabi, is the product of brute matter in physical combination. In support of this anticipation of scientific materialism, Al-Farabi, a few pages later, observes that matter “rises up gradually until its form becomes present in it.”<sup>26</sup> This wording is significant insofar as it suggests a greater degree of agency for matter than the archetypical Aristotelian example (namely a wooden bed). In particular, Al-Farabi’s adverb “gradually” puts a strain on a purely metaphorical reading of matter’s rising. Thus, for a second time in this book, Al-Farabi attributes an independent principle of self-motion to matter itself.

Turning from the cosmos to the body and soul, Al-Farabi’s discussion of the latter is also replete with the rhetoric of justice, including his description of the human heart as the “ruler” of the body, and of the brain as its “steward” and “representative.”<sup>27</sup> More specifically, Al-Farabi describes the brain as redistributing the heart’s heat to the rest of the organs, so that each organ gets what it deserves, as determined by its excellence-based rank in the body’s hierarchy. In his words, “the brain was for this purpose made cool and moist by nature, and a faculty of the soul was established in it by which a definite and complete *adjustment* of the heat of the heart is brought about.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, reason is corporeally situated in the (temperature) cool brain, which can cool the body enough for a (temperament) cool soul, which is thereby able to perform the rational calculations necessary for a (justice) cool community. Put differently, channeling Damasio again, disordered bodies, deprived of equilibrium, lack the homeostatic powers necessary for psychological equilibrium, and thereby the ethico-political virtue of justice. In short, from this dancing-with perspective, the healthy body, virtuous soul, and just community are all tightrope dancers between the destructive excesses of literal or figurative excessive heat and cold.

Also regarding bodily and social justice, Al-Farabi claims that there is a natural distribution of mental powers irrespective of gender, a surprising claim given his fundamentalist cultural context and his Aristotelian inheritance. In Al-Farabi’s words, “in the case of the faculty of sense, the faculty of imagination, and the faculty of reason male and female do not differ.”<sup>29</sup> But Al-Farabi goes still further in what today might be called a queering of this gendered psychology. It is possible, he asserts, “that there are among male human beings some whose

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24) Ibid., 145.

25) Ibid., 141.

26) Ibid., 145.

27) Ibid., 169.

28) Ibid., 181. My emphasis.

29) Ibid., 197.

emotions are similar to female emotions, and among female human beings, some whose emotions are similar to male emotions.”<sup>30</sup> One could describe this conception as a naturally just distribution of stereotypical masculinity and femininity, recognized as potentially obtaining in any body regardless of gender. The connection to dance, here, is that the latter is the artform that most foregrounds embodiment, including gender, and in the form of social dances (such as salsa) it also presupposes a certain degree of gendered equality.

More precisely, this deconstruction, or gender-queering, is also common in present-day Afro-Latin social dance events where conventional gender roles, identities, and performances are much less common, and deviance and innovation are welcome. This gendered flexibility is arguably a source of strength and resilience, a channeling of the Al-Farabian natural distributive justice that normally eludes human communities. Put differently, Al-Farabi’s just community is like a group of tightrope-dancers, balancing on a fine wire in the midst of a broken society, to maintain enough composure and cool to move and be beautifully together. The significance of invoking Al-Farabi on this point is that the progressive goals of contemporary social justice are more common, historically, than one might imagine. That which keeps dancers suspended over the abyss, in any era, is the same thing that makes them beautiful to watch – and even more beautiful to dance with, as in a dancing partnership with my last philosopher, Iris Marion Young.

## V. Young’s Dancing Reimagining of Positioned Actors in Fluidly Moving Groups

The history of this technique is almost complete. As Young inherits it, this ethico-political choreography of justice consists of a Dionysian choral dance of chariot souls, winged by their erotic ethical education, bound in beautiful friendship to the community, wherein they perform a tightrope-dance of imaginative regulation of bodily temperature, to establish the soul’s virtue of temperance, thereby sustaining a coolly-just community. For Young’s part, the importance of dancing aesthetics to her conception of justice is suggested by the title of an anthology of her work – *Dancing with Iris* – several chapters of which make explicit that importance. Additionally, Young is explicit that her philosophy originated, and remained grounded in, the corporeal politics of on-the-ground activism, such as protests and marches (including for women, LGBT+ folks, and people of color). And dance is both the quintessential corporeal art (as noted above), as well as disproportionately linked to disempowered individuals and groups.<sup>31</sup>

Beginning with the *Dancing with Iris* anthology, Michael L. Ferguson’s chapter argues that Young’s method is to seek “resonance” among seekers of social justice, which Ferguson elaborates as locating “some common sound resonating in each of us” which “generates vibrations, movement, and energy.”<sup>32</sup> Bonnie Mann’s chapter argues that there is “a turn to the aesthetic in Young’s descriptions of female body experience, which disclose an imaginary domain” of gender.<sup>33</sup> And pioneering dance studies scholar Susan Leigh Foster, in her chapter, claims that “Young’s theorization of a feminine physicality ... provided a strong foundation for emerging studies in performance and corporeality,” which have shaped today’s dance studies.<sup>34</sup>

This dancingly aesthetic dimension, as for Plato, Aristotle, and Al-Farabi, is connected to Young’s ethico-political choreography of justice, which is most vivid in her *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. The ethical aspects of Young’s choreography are already suggested from the beginning of her introduction.

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30) Ibid., 195–97.

31) For more, see Hall, *Figuration: A New Philosophy of Dance*.

32) Ferguson, “Resonance and Dissonance,” 66.

33) Mann, “Iris Marion Young: Between Phenomenology and Structural Injustice,” 82.

34) Foster, “Throwing Like a Girl, Dancing Like a Feminist Philosopher,” 69.

First, Young rejects any “truly universal and independent” theory of justice, on the dual grounds that this type of theory is “simply too abstract to be useful in evaluating actual institutions and practices,” and that it “conflates moral reflection with scientific knowledge.”<sup>35</sup> Second, Young echoes Jean-François Lyotard’s call for a “listening” to justice (instead of merely looking at it), which requires the intimacy of ethics (as opposed to the distance of politics) (PD, 4). Third, Young rejects “the ideal of impartiality” in mainstream theories of justice, claiming that it “denies difference,” whereas the opposite of impartiality, namely “partiality,” inevitably brings in the interpersonal, and thus ethics (PD, 10). Finally, on this point Young claims inspiration (in her words, “ignition”) from the ethical realm of interpersonal dialogue about politics, specifically “discussions in the women’s movement of the importance and difficulty of acknowledging differences of class, race, sexuality, age, ability, and culture among women” (PD, 13). In other words, Young allowed ethical conflicts among her allies to restructure her initial politics.

Continuing to Chapter 1, ethics for Young remains close to the surface throughout, particularly in her critique and rejection of what she identifies as the “distributive paradigm” dominant in mainstream theories of justice. First, she objects to William Galston’s conception of justice as merely the distribution of possessions, wherein “the possessing subject is prior to and independent of the goods possessed” (PD, 17). Second, Young identifies a “social atomism” in these theories, specifically in their view that “there is no internal relation among persons in society relevant to considerations of justice” (PD, 18). Third, Young echoes the feminist criticism that Marxist theories typically “presuppose family structure, without asking how social relations involving sexuality, intimacy, childrearing, and household labor ought best to be organized” (PD, 21). And fourth, Young objects that the distributive paradigm fails to theorize “culture,” which she describes as “the symbols, images, meanings, habitual compartments, stories, and so on through which people express their experience and communicate with each other” (PD, 23). Clearly, all four of these phenomena involve ethics as well as politics.

Near the end of Chapter 1, Young explicitly acknowledges this ethical emphasis and traces its indebtedness to a cluster of ancient and medieval ethico-political conceptions of justice as follows: “political thought of the modern period greatly narrowed the scope of justice as it had been conceived by ancient and medieval thought. Ancient thought regarded justice as the virtue of a society as a whole, the well-orderedness of institutions that foster individual virtue and promote happiness and harmony among citizens” (PD, 33). Note that Young frames politics here as a kind of macro-ethics, or what might be termed an extension of modern ethical predicates to cover sociopolitical entities. “While I hardly intend to revert to a full-bodied Platonic conception of justice,” Young elaborates, “I nevertheless think that it is important to broaden the understanding of justice beyond its usual limits in contemporary philosophical discourse” (PD, 33). Further fleshing out her predecessor Plato’s ethico-political choreography of justice, Young affirms that “appeals to justice” in his wake “still have the power to awaken a moral imagination” (PD, 35).

The latter phrase brings Young closer to my dancing justice, and at multiple levels. For one thing, it introduces an aesthetic dimension to her conception of justice. For another, it also constitutes one of what I term the “four strategic positings” of my “dancing-with” interpretive method. Young also prefigures my postmodern-influenced dancing justice with her affirmation of “a postmodern turn to an enlarged conception of justice” (PD, 36). Most importantly, Young defends justice theorists’ positing of a new “image” of “human nature,” in order to (a) “shift the imagination to different assumptions about human beings,” and (b) shift the imagination away from the assumptions of the distributive paradigm. While the latter paradigm imagines humans as merely “possessors and consumers,” Young recommends, in addition, an “image of people as doers and actors” (PD, 37). Since “actors” is an ambiguous term, which can refer to both initiators of actions and

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35) Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 4. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as PD with page numbers.

to thespians, who are also typically trained in and perform dance, Young's image is also a tentative first step toward dance, prefiguring other steps (as noted above from *Dancing with Iris*).

Finally, the beginning of Chapter 2 introduces her concept of "social group," which implicitly choreographs the duet between ethics and politics in her conception of justice. The external referents of "social group" for Young here are the subcommunities whose historical struggle for social justice first inspired her, including African Americans, Latinx people, women, queer, and disabled folks. Young defines "social group" as "a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life," the members of which "have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life" (PD, 43). The ethical-political choreographing performed by the phenomenon of the social groups can be found in the fact that they are both the primary intermediate power between the individual and the state (and are thus political), and also necessarily constituted by interpersonal relations (and are thus ethical).

Young then clarifies her conception of "social groups" by differentiating them from both "aggregates" and "associations," with which mainstream justice theorists, in her view, have confused social groups. Whereas aggregates are based on a shared attribute (for example, possessing a PhD), Young claims that there is no attribute or set of attributes shared by every member of a social group (PD, 43). And whereas associations are "formally organized institutions," Young claims here that groups are based on internal relations of identity and interpersonal relationships (though she retracts this view in her later work).<sup>36</sup> Social dance meets these distinguishing criteria as well. Social dancers do not constitute aggregates because we lack any necessary attributes. And we do not constitute association, because we can always move from one event, organization, and city to another (where we interact with a completely different set of individual dancers).

Fleshing out her conception further, Young observes that groups (a) share "a sense of identity," (b) are real "as forms of social relations," (c) "constitute individuals" (instead of being constituted by pre-given individuals), and (d) are something that "one finds oneself as a member of" (PD, 44–46). To do justice to this metaphysical structure of groups, Young claims it is "necessary to conceptualize groups in a much more relational and fluid fashion," including by noting that groups are "aspects of a process" (PD, 47). All these characteristics are also vividly true of Afro-Latin social dancers, and to a greater degree than most groups. Not only are those dance events and communities exceptionally pluralistic in terms of class, education, race, gender, religion, politics, and so forth, but they involve the profound physical, psychological (and potentially romantic and sexual) vulnerability and transformation, including the facilitation of marriages and childbirths across racial, class, national, religious, and other taboo lines, which has long been associated with the most progressive and revolutionary societal institutions. In short, social dance is maximally aesthetic, corporeal, spontaneous self-overcoming and community reconstruction.

This dancing quality of justice grows even stronger in Young's posthumously published book on justice, entitled *Responsibility for Justice* (hereafter, *Responsibility*). This strength is nowhere clearer than in her concept of "position." In addition to the obvious connection to the classic five "positions" of ballet, position is also closely linked to "posture," one of the four central aspects of dance, or "Moves," in my Figuration philosophy of dance. Not only is position one of the most important concepts in *Responsibility*, but it also links its concept of justice to major influences on Young (including Pierre Bourdieu), and it is vital for choreographing her duet between the ethical and political dimensions of justice (despite her attempts in that text to divide ethical and

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36) It is worth noting that, as Mária Martínez observes, Young's "notion of social group" is "one of the most controversial contributions of her work," and that in her later *Inclusion and Democracy* the concept of social group possesses "an empirical character that empties the concept of any reference to identity." Martínez, "On Immigration Politics," 226. This evolution in Young's conception does not, however, change its aptness for social dancers, since we can easily be defined by either identity or by empirical characteristics.

political responsibility). In other words, the conceptual positions of justice begin with the literal poses and postures of the body, which are always with us, and which dance is unique in recognizing, empowering, and rendering mindful.

Position first appears in the hypothetical story of Sandy the would-be renter, in Young's explanation of how structural injustice, contra conservative critics, still leaves room for individual agency and ethical responsibility. "Structures describe a set of socially caused *conditions*," Young writes, "that *position* a large number of people in similar ways."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, she adds, "each person so positioned is responsible for how she or he takes up these conditions."<sup>38</sup> Put in the terms of ethico-political choreography, political structures create ethical positions of varying vulnerability and empowerment. Moreover, as the argument unfolds, Young extends the meaning of "position" in a way that illuminates the implicit ethico-political choreography of justice beneath her conscious attempt to separate ethical and political responsibility. "The social positions of class and gender," Young asserts, "explain much about Sandy's circumstance."<sup>39</sup> In other words, Sandy is not simply an individual unmarried working mom; she is also a member of gendered and raced social groups. Position thus connects to both the individual (ethical) and the social (political).

In short, and to conclude this penultimate section, position is always both ethical and political, just like justice, and dance. Moreover, dance is unique among the arts in recognizing the centrality and corporeal foundation of position, and thereby singularly positioned to provoke transformations in our philosophical conceptions, including that of justice. Alongside the imaginative aesthetic richness of Young's work noted by the contributors to *Dancing with Iris*, such as her strategic deployment of the imagination to style human beings as essentially actors, this emphasis on the positions of group members makes Young's final conception of justice highly compatible with my dancing justice, which it prefigures, and to which I now turn.

## VI. Conclusion: Dancing Justice

Choreographing together the above analyses, I define "dancing justice" as follows: "the dynamic equilibrium sustained by a critical mass of a community's members comporting themselves like social dancers." My privileged referents for "social dancers" here are people who consistently participate, over a long period of time, in Afro-Latin social dance events (or "socials"); which are typically held in bars, restaurants, or professional dance studios/schools; both regularly (usually at least weekly) and for an extended time (usually years or even decades). These dance events normally take place in city spaces, and (to repeat) feature a wide demographic variety, in terms of class, education, race, gender, religion, politics, and so forth, which means that they are much more representative than one might imagine of the larger community. As such, they tend to foster groups that are surprisingly representative of their surrounding communities. And by "critical mass," I intend an allusion to black sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' claim that sustainable progressive politics neither requires the participation of all or most of a community, nor can be achieved by an isolated leader, but instead involves an (indeterminate) percentage of like-minded people in the community working in concert.<sup>40</sup> In sum, dancing justice happens when a critical portion of society dances their lives.

Putting in terms dancing justice's four prefiguring ethico-political choreographies of justice, these social dancers, like Plato's winged chariot souls, must first master an erotic ethics of self-discipline to gain the full

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37) Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 19.

38) *Ibid.*

39) *Ibid.*, 59.

40) Collins, *Fighting Words*, 242–43.

benefits of moving through politicized space. Like Aristotle's dancingly beautiful friends of the community, these dancers must go beyond what public laws require by treating all the dancers equitably and thereby being good friends to the community. Like Al-Farabi's tightrope-dancers of the cool, they must achieve this Aristotelian friendship of balanced coolness through their temperate bodies supporting souls with the temperament to constitute a just community. And like Young's dancingly reimagined humans, they must sustain this community by reimagining humans as positioned actors in fluid moving groups.

As with all four of these ethico-political choreographies of justice, dancing justice markedly emphasizes virtue and embodiment, leading to two major implications – which I imagine in the form of two choreographed moves which both justice advocates and social justice advocates (both reformers and revolutionaries) should be willing and able to perform today. First, dancing justice is not the first theory of its ethico-politically choreographing kind, instead finding existing movement vocabularies in its vaunted predecessors. (This first move should prove reassuring to the more centrist and traditionally inclined justice advocates, and is easily accessible to social justice advocates who are willing to do their share of historical research). Second, dancing justice maintains its connections to the movement patterns of marginalized and disempowered groups. (This second move, which should reassure more leftist and social justice advocates, also hardly seems too much to ask of liberal justice advocates, too, since the latter at least pay lip service to promoting the welfare of those groups who have suffered the greatest injustices, both past and present). By rehearsing and performing the movement patterns of dancing justice, finally, justice and social justice advocates can achieve a more sharable set of comportments, a more unified choreography to move against our shared foes, the explicit opponents of progressive politics.

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