

## Alfarabi's imaginative critique: overflowing materialism in *Virtuous Community*

Joshua M. Hall

Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Samford University, Birmingham, AL, USA  
Current address: Emory University, Oxford, GA, USA  
[j.maloy.hall@gmail.com](mailto:j.maloy.hall@gmail.com)

Though currently marginalised in Western philosophy, tenth-century Arabic philosopher Abu Nasr Alfarabi is one of the most important thinkers of the medieval era. In fact, he was known as the 'second teacher' (after Aristotle) to philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes. As this epithet suggests, Alfarabi and his successors engaged in a critical and creative dialogue with thinkers from other historical traditions, including that of the Ancient Greeks, although the creativity of his part is often marginalised as well. In this article, I offer a new interpretation of Alfarabi's sweeping volume, *The Principles of the Opinions of the Virtuous Community*. My focus is the materialism that overflows Alfarabi's account of soul in general and the imaginative power in particular. The political conclusion of this account is that *Virtuous Community* does not directly present Alfarabi's ideal ruler or community. Instead, it offers a materialist critique that prefigures critical theory and post-structuralism and thereby provides guidelines for how to more effectively engage monotheistic communities in the pursuit of social justice – including along the axes of race, gender and sexual orientation.

Fortunately, the trend of marginalising Alfarabi is beginning to reverse, largely due to two related lines of scholarship inspired by Muhsin S. Mahdi (2010) and Miriam Galston (1990). Contrary to both the dominant historical view of Alfarabi as a straightforward Neoplatonist and the more recent view of him as a Neoplatonist-Aristotelian, these new lines have in common a near-total privileging of political philosophy over metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> And they have also both produced dynamic new scholars: Joshua Parens (1995; 2005) and Christopher A. Colmo (2005). Below, I will give a brief overview of these lines of scholarship, with an emphasis on the most recent work, in order to contextualise my own investigation of Alfarabi. First, however, I will discuss the more mainstream scholarship from which these lines depart, using the examples of Majid Fakhry, Thérèse-Anne Druart, David C. Reisman, and Charles Butterworth.

I begin with probably the most influential and well-known commentator on Alfarabi in English, the Lebanese-born U.S. philosopher Majid Fakhry. His *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (2004) devotes one third of a chapter entitled 'The Further Development of Islamic Neoplatonism' to Alfarabi (with the other two-thirds spent on Ibn Sina, aka Avicenna) (pp. 111–132). As Mehdi Aminrazavi notes in a review, however, both philosophers 'are primarily known as Peripatetics' (2000: p. 148). Another problematic aspect of Fakhry's text, is his claim in the 'Introduction' that Islamic philosophy 'might be conveniently termed Arabic philosophy' (p. xvii). As Muhammad Ali Khalidi (2003: p. 386) observes, Alfarabi actually constructs an explicit argument in favour of ethnic diversity and intermarriage in Alfarabi's book *Political Regime*. I will return to this important point below, to explore how it connects with the affirmation of equality vis-à-vis gender and sexual orientation that I identify in *Virtuous Community*.

There are also other, similar problems in this Alfarabi section of Fakhry's chapter on Islamic Neoplatonism. First, Fakhry asserts (without argument) that *Virtuous Community* was based on

1 See especially Richard Walzer (1962), Majid Fakhry (2002) and Thérèse-Anne Druart (1992).

Plato's *Republic*, which is particularly strange since Alfarabi also wrote a book entitled *Political Regime* (al-Siyāsa al-Madaniya), which title is identical to a literal translation of Plato's *Republic* (that is, as Harold Bloom (1991) notes, *Regime*). Second, Fakhry's summary of *Virtuous Community* consistently emphasises the Platonic elements and minimises the Aristotelian ones with little justification. The most problematic example of this is at the end of the Alfarabi section, where Fakhry attributes a theory of transmigration to the discussion of life after death in *Virtuous Community*, which no other prominent Alfarabi scholar claims, and which allows Fakhry to conclude the section by asserting that Alfarabi's 'view of individual immortality and of the ultimate destiny of the Soul is more akin to Plato's than Aristotle's' (p. 132). Perhaps this bias toward Plato is connected to Fakhry's self-proclaimed ignorance as to the reason for Alfarabi's ending of the *Philosophy of Aristotle* (p. 116). By contrast, as I will show below, Mahdi considers this at length and offers a cogent explanation, which is only possible on the basis of a full appreciation of Alfarabi's Aristotelianism.

Secondly, Druart, in her chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy* entitled 'Philosophy in Islam' (2005), further undermines the certainties of scholars like Fakhry as to Alfarabi's work and intentions and offers support for a metaphorical reading of his surface claims. First, she observes that 'there is still considerable uncertainty as to what philosophical thinkers in Islam had before them' (p. 101), which subverts the assumptions of Fakhry and Richard Walzer (an editor and translator of *Virtuous Community*) that Alfarabi must have been parroting some intermediary secondary text. Secondly, Druart claims that for Ibn Rushd (aka Averroes) philosophy is 'obligatory for an intellectual elite but must be forbidden to ordinary believers' (p. 101, emphasis in original). Druart then makes the same claim for Alfarabi, namely that philosophy is 'accessible only to a small intellectual elite', whereas there 'must be a plurality of true religions, varying from culture to culture, each of them conveying philosophical concepts by means of appropriate symbols' (including Aristotle's 'Agent Intellect' being 'represented by the angel Gabriel') (p. 104). And finally, Druart remarks that 'it may be debated' whether Alfarabi 'actually held these views or used them to flatter and attract prospective *falasifa* [philosophers]' (p. 104).

There are also multiple treatments of Alfarabi in the *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, which collectively illustrate the problems of reductively literal interpretation of Alfarabi and the hermeneutic advantages of being open to additional layers of meaning. In addition to David C. Reisman's full chapter (2005), Alfarabi is also featured prominently in several of the anthology's topical chapters. Beginning with Reisman: he claims that Alfarabi had no political philosophy as such and instead merely constructed elaborate thought experiments in how the world would look to people who think in different ways (p. 68). To buttress this claim, Reisman offers the problematic translation of *The Principles of the Opinions of the Virtuous City* as *The Principles of the Opinions*.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Charles Butterworth's chapter (2005) on 'Ethics and political philosophy' in Arabic philosophy, claims that '[I]inking ethical training or soulcraft with the political or statecraft is the hallmark of Alfarabi's philosophy' (p. 266). Perhaps the most direct evidence in support of Butterworth and contra Reisman lies in the following passage from Alfarabi's *Summary of Plato's Laws*:

the wise Plato did not feel free to reveal and uncover every kind of knowledge for all people. Therefore he followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and

2 In support of this effort, Reisman cites an article by Dimitri Gutas (2002) that categorises Strauss' (1998) reading of Alfarabi as implicitly orientalist (in Edward Said's sense of the term) in that it allegedly projects the religion/philosophy conflict of Western history onto an Islamic world where philosophy could not have been more welcomed (p. 19). Even more surprising is Gutas' claim, given Strauss' Jewish heritage, that this reading is also anti-Semitic. To construct this case, however, Gutas is forced to downplay the significance of Alfarabi's influence on Maimonides (1995) as well as the originality of the latter's ground-breaking *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Gutas also claims that since Strauss did not read Arabic he 'did not know Arabic philosophy' (p. 20). Gutas' description of this result, finally, could have been lifted from every critic of Derrida who never read the latter's actual writings: 'such analysis is closer to *belles lettres* than to historical scholarship', wherein 'anybody's interpretation of a philosophical text would be equally valid' (p. 21). Here, perhaps, is the source of the intense negativity of Gutas' view, namely that Strauss' hermeneutic method reveals the close kinship between medieval philosophy and literature and thereby democratizes philosophical access to the heretofore most compartmentalised and politically-regressive era in the history of philosophy.

difficulty, so that knowledge would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed, or into the hands of someone who does not know its worth or uses it improperly. In this he was right (p. 11).

Here, then, Alfarabi explicitly affirms the intentional use of hidden layers of a text. Thus, at least in Alfarabi's case, Strauss' surface/depth reading strategy and his attribution of an explicitly political dimension to all philosophical knowledge are not a-historic and anti-Semitic modern impositions. The question, then, regards the number of layers that are in play, how to tease them apart, and which layer(s) is more (or most) meaningful.

Returning to the aforementioned two lines of scholarship, for Mahdi's line, Alfarabi demotes religion to the status of a mere imitation of Plato's philosophy, valuable primarily for guiding the masses towards a tolerance for philosophers. For Mahdi himself, this is primarily the Plato of the *Republic* interpreted as the best polis, whereas for Parens (1995) it is primarily the Plato of the *Laws* interpreted as the second-best (and best actually-achievable) polis. Important implications of Parens' innovations on Mahdi's work include interpreting Alfarabi as (1) assigning crucial importance to poetry and (2) opposing a homogenous Islamic empire driven by military *jihad*.

For Galston's line (1990), by contrast, the philosophy to which Alfarabi demotes religion is itself an imitation of religion, valuable primarily for the dialectical training of the elect. For Galston herself, this dialectical method leads Alfarabi toward an Aristotelian political science, whereas for Colmo (2005) it leads Alfarabi to break with both Plato and Aristotle through his own new political science. An important implication of Colmo's innovations on Galston's work is his interpretation of Alfarabi as a precursor of later critics of orthodox modern political thought, including Spinoza and Hegel. Against this background, my own investigation could be understood as blending and extending these two lines.

In sympathy with Mahdi's line, I employ a phenomenological approach, interpret Alfarabi as more influenced by Plato's *Laws* than the *Republic*, and recognise a crucial role in Alfarabi for poetry. I extend Mahdi's line, however, by following my phenomenological reading to its culmination in post-structuralism and by arguing that poetry plays an even more complex and important role in Alfarabi.<sup>3</sup> And in sympathy with Galston's line, I employ dialectical critique, interpret Alfarabi as more influenced by Aristotle than by Plato, and agree that Alfarabi anticipates critical alternatives to orthodox modern philosophy. I extend Galston's line, however, by arguing that Alfarabi anticipates even later Enlightenment philosophers who were critical of modernist political thought (inspired by Spinoza and Hegel), namely the critical theorists and post-structuralists, and by locating Alfarabi in the materialist, Judeo-Arabic tradition of Aristotelian scholarship.

Regarding the latter claim, as Idit Dobbs-Weinstein (2004) explains in both her article in the *Bloomsbury Companion to Aristotle* and in her graduate seminar,<sup>4</sup> there have been two competing historical traditions of Aristotelian interpretation. Most Western philosophers, however, are only familiar with the dominant one in the West, namely the Latin/Christian/Western tradition epitomised by St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Dobbs-Weinstein, this tradition, in order to make Aristotle sanitary for Christian doctrine, interprets him as an idealist whose thought has room for an individual soul capable of personal immortality. The other tradition is the Judeo-Arabic, which interprets Aristotle as a materialist for whom the soul is transpersonal and finite, yet which nevertheless inspired Aquinas' own work as well. Moreover, this materialism for Dobbs-Weinstein can be traced in a direct historical narrative from Aristotle, to the Alfarabian Maimonides, to Spinoza and then (through Hegel and Marx) to Adorno (in whom the transition from Aristotelian materialism to dialectical materialism is completed). In brief, where Aquinas offers a one-dimensional corpus that distorts Aristotle into Judaic monotheism, Alfarabi offers a two-dimensional corpus. One dimension is dedicated to the actual Aristotle (for the elite) and the other to a Thomist-style distortion of Aristotle (for the masses).

3 See, for example, Derrida (1998), *Of Grammatology*.

4 The seminar, entitled 'Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima*' was held in the autumn of 2007 at the Pennsylvania State University.

The present article is divided into four main sections, each of which locates moments in Alfarabi's philosophy in which his materialist accounts challenge — or *overflow* — the superficial, orthodox ones. I use 'overflow' here because the Arabic word Alfarabi chose to translate the Neoplatonist concept of 'emanation' is *fayd*, which literally means 'gushing forth' or 'overflowing' (1998, p. 354). This fluid metaphor, which as Walzer (1962) notes, Alfarabi 'prefers' throughout *Virtuous Community*, will serve throughout my investigation as a condensed image of the materialism at the heart of Alfarabi's philosophy. In outline, these four sections and their arguments are as follows: (I) the front matter *contra Virtuous Community* as advocating an Islamic empire, (II) the sections prior to the discussion of soul<sup>5</sup> *contra* Neoplatonism, (III) the section on soul and imagination *contra* the imagination as either deterministically-enslaved to the body or mystically-overreaching reason and (IV) *Virtuous Community's* remarks on poetry *contra* the *Aphorisms'* account of 'praiseworthy' poetry as a straightforward beneficent tool of virtuous inspiration.

These arguments may seem less counterintuitive in light of a brief consideration of Alfarabi's exemplary life. As Walzer notes in his introduction to *Virtuous Community*, Alfarabi was born the son of a Turkish mercenary employed by the Arab Caliphate. In that world, as in ours, ethnic discrimination and 'tribal arrogance' were the norm, though according to Walzer, Alfarabi 'certainly betrays none himself' (p. 3). This tolerance is best explained, perhaps, by what Parens (1995) describes as the 'most striking feature' of Alfarabi's education, namely 'his deep exposure to a variety of languages, places, and religious and ethnic groups', which rendered him 'clearly a cosmopolitan man' (p. 3). Also in this independent spirit, Alfarabi later became famous for always wearing the brown cloak of the Sufis, which in his era signified, in Walzer's words, those who 'are afraid of compromising their independence by becoming connected with men of wealth and power and prefer to remain self-employed and are content with living on a mere subsistence level' — in short, 'militant intellectuals' (p. 3).

Thus, like critical theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Alfarabi demonstrated solidarity with the poor and the courage to speak truth to power. And like post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Alfarabi was immersed in the Mediterranean's sea of differences, and with a personal stake in subverting oppressive stereotypes of class, race and religion. Like both critical theorists and post-structuralists, moreover, Alfarabi was (a) centrally interested in the arts and aesthetics, as evidenced by his famous *Great Book on Music*<sup>6</sup>; (b) openly affirming of other philosophers' use of literary devices and disguises to convey their views (including what he described as Plato's 'symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty')<sup>7</sup>; and (c) demonised by religious conservatives, such as the massively-influential theologian Alghazali, who wrote that Alfarabi and his followers 'should be condemned as unbelievers' (Alghazali 1997, pp. 88–89). I ask that the reader keep this in mind as I now turn directly to his *Virtuous Community*.

### Materialist front matter

The first materialist moments in *Virtuous Community* are found before the book even begins, in a 'summary' consisting of nineteen sentences (one for each of *Virtuous Community's* chapters), and three appendices to that summary, entitled (a), (b1), (b2) and (b3). The materialist moments therein concern (a) the sociopolitical units being considered (with the possibilities ranging from smaller communities to a global empire), (b) the intended scope of the analyses (whether a narrowly-religious Islamic scope, or an open-ended secular materialist one), and (c) the literal referent of the higher power being invoked as the celestial cause of human intellection (whether Aristotle's *Nous Poetikos*, or the monotheistic god). Altogether, these materialist moments suggest that the front matter is more sympathetic to Aristotelian materialism than Neoplatonist orthodoxy. For his part, Walzer (1962) denies that Alfarabi wrote the summary proper (and speculates that it might

5 I will use 'soul' without a definite or indefinite article throughout my investigation to reflect the ambiguity in discussions of soul in Ancient Greek philosophy and especially in Aristotle's account of intellect and personal immortality.

6 For more, see Henry George Farmer, *Al-Farabi's Arabic-Latin Writings on Music* (1965).

7 To be precise, Alfarabi claimed that Plato used such techniques to distract readers from occasional moments of clear and genuine expression. See the introduction to his *Summary of Plato's 'Laws'*, where he illustrates this point with his memorable story of a famous ascetic who escapes his tyrannical city by pretending to be a drunken vagabond and 'lying' to the guard at the gate by saying 'I am the ascetic' (quoted in Parens 1995, pp. xxiii–xxiv).

have been a ‘pupil or an editor’ (p. 331). As for the appendices, Walzer attributes the first to the lexicographer Abu Ishaq, the second and third to Alfarabi, and the fourth to a later commentator named Alexander. To focus on this first example, Walzer’s primary reason for denying Alfarabi authorship of the summary is that it ‘contains too many statements which one hesitates very much to attribute to Alfarabi himself’ (p. 331). One could also, however, interpret these statements as a strategic buffer on Alfarabi’s part, intended to bore casual readers with noncontroversial material, and thus discourage such readers from reaching the controversial body of the book (Strauss 1988, pp. 17–18). For reasons of space, however, I will proceed to the main body of the text, after a brief remark about the title of the work.

The first appendix, entitled (a), concerns the Arabic word *madina*. Although Walzer claims in a footnote that ‘town’ (along with ‘state’) is the most generally appropriate translation, for some reason he uses ‘city’ instead for the rest of *Virtuous Community*. To get clearer on this issue, it will be helpful to consider the basic grammatical structure of the Arabic language, in which (as in English) the key to a word is found in its root. According to a present-day textbook on Arabic, it ‘is based on what is normally called a “consonantal root system”’, in which the root, usually three consonants, ‘represents a general, and often quite neutral conception of an action or state of being’ (Awde and Samano 1986, p.15). Then, from this neutral foundation, a change to the root (such as adding a fourth letter to its beginning) ‘produces a new word — and a new meaning: meanings seem to grow out of the root like branches of a tree’ (p. 15).

To return to the case of *madina*, in his footnote Walzer explains that the author of appendix (a) derives the word ‘from the Arabic root d-y-n which denotes inter alia “to comply”, “to submit”, “to owe allegiance” (to a leader), “to profess” (a belief or a religion)’. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the author goes on to emphasise the link between *madina* and submission — which is of course the etymological meaning of ‘Islam’. *Madina* also indicates, according to appendix (a), ‘concurrence <of a people> in obeying a strong ruler who governs them firmly while upholding their rights and accepting the obedience which they owe to him’ (p. 51). Note that, by referencing a ‘strong ruler’, appendix (a) suggests, contra Walzer, that *madina* should be interpreted here as the largest political unit (such as a nation or empire). Finally, appendix (a) claims that the letter *m* was ‘added, and does not belong to the root’, the purpose being ‘to pass from a careless expression to an accurate expression’ (p. 51).

In short, according to the first appendix to the summary, the heart of the political community is submission to a monotheistic god. Perhaps the purpose of this conclusion is to counter the controversial ideas that overflow the (immediately preceding) summary proper, in order to reassure the orthodox that Alfarabi and *Virtuous Community* are also properly submissive. In support of my interpretation, Parens (1995, 2005) argues that Alfarabi is both concerned with various political units (including nations, regions, climatic regions and even global associations of nations), and is also opposed to Islamic imperialism (1995: pp. 51–68; 2005: pp. 23, 89). And in further support of my interpretation, Charles Butterworth and Thomas L. Pangle (2001) note (in their introduction to Alfarabi’s *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*) that Alfarabi uses this kind of strategy throughout his work in order ‘simultaneously’ to ‘embrace and to deny what is “respectable”’; or he can make himself appear to ‘change his mind’ back and forth; or he can take the sting out of the shocking by denying it, before or after having affirmed it (Alfarabi 1996: p.xi). In light of this claim, and to return to these three appendices to the summary of *Virtuous Community*, appendix (b1) makes it possible to defer to religious authority in appendix (a), but still give pagan philosophy the last word.

The net result of these materialist moments from the front matter is that the titular *Virtuous Community* is not necessarily either a city, or a theocratic Islamic society, or a society ruled by a monotheistic god. Instead, virtuous communities might be found anywhere from a log cabin to our increasing globalised world, and can be achieved without any supreme being enthroned in the heavens. Before *Virtuous Community* proper even starts, therefore, things are definitely not as simple, nor as hopelessly outdated, as they might initially seem. From this summary and its appendices, I turn now to the materialist moments in *Virtuous Community* proper leading up to Alfarabi’s (1998) account of soul.

### Groundwork for materialist soul

In outline, the materialist moments that I will explore below from *Virtuous Community* proper, prior to its discussion of soul, involve (a) a minimalist sketch of Neoplatonist ‘emanation’ (as opposed to the long, complex accounts in orthodox Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus), (b) a naturalistic cosmology in which nonhuman entities give rise to humans (as opposed to traditional monotheistic accounts of humanity as the crowning act of creation), (c) an attribution of agency to matter (as opposed to matter being a passive mere reception of form), (d) a self-effacement of the celestial beings in the face of a naturalistic account of earthly generation, (e) a kind of ‘natural distributive justice’ according to which each body is equally deserving of being formed by each soul (rather than a particular soul dominating a particular body), (f) gender equality and social constructivism regarding human intellectual capacities, and (g) a linkage between the exploitation of souls, enslavement and Islam.

To begin, Section 6 of Chapter 1 features a highly technical Aristotelian passage sandwiched between two passages filled with religious rhetoric. Walzer (1998) focuses on the latter, describing this section as Alfarabi’s ‘slight but definite shift towards neo-Platonism’ (p. 343). One could also interpret this section, though, as Alfarabi’s tucking away a little genuine controversy between lots of orthodox verbiage (p. 343). Either way, this middle passage certainly warranted being hidden, insofar as it overflows with the materialist Aristotelianism that was so dangerous in Alfarabi’s era. The centrepiece of this Aristotelian passage is Alfarabi’s direct statement, somewhat surprisingly, that The First ‘is, then, actual intellect’ (p. 71 n.). The First’s essence, Alfarabi continues, is an intellection — an intellection of nothing but itself. That is, ‘the thinker and the intelligible (and intelligised) have in its case one meaning and are one essence and one indivisible substance’ (p. 73). Put briefly, the First is thought-thinking-itself, or pure ideation abstracted away from any given thinker or external referent of thought. Alfarabi states that this identity of thinking-thought-thinker is not also true of humans, however, insofar as we are not identical with our acts of thinking. This raises the question, then, as to whether it (i.e., ‘being identical with its acts of thinking’) might be true of a human able to unite with Aristotle’s *Nous Poetikos*, as Alfarabi later claims of the ‘first ruler’ of the ‘excellent’ city. (As I will suggest below, however, the ‘first ruler’ according to Alfarabi himself might be impossible.)

Given the central importance of this Aristotelian concept of the *Nous Poetikos*, it is necessary to get clearer on what is involved in it. Beginning with the question of translation, although it is usually rendered into English as ‘Active Intellect’ (and sometimes as ‘Agent Intellect’), I will use ‘Poetic Intellect’ here, instead. My reasoning is that ‘Poetic Intellect’ suggests important etymological and conceptual connections (which I have explored elsewhere in regard to Aristotle’s work) between *poetikos* (‘active’), *poiesis* (‘making’) and poetry (Hall 2012). In the present article, ‘Poetic Intellect’ illuminates further connections between (a) Alfarabi’s materialist conceptions of imagination, and (b) the poetic powers of the city’s ruler. In short, the *Nous Poetikos* is appropriately rendered the ‘Poetic Intellect’ in that it amounts to a repository of forms with which earthly matter is imaginatively ‘composed’ into existent beings.

In addition to translation, a second issue with this ‘Poetic Intellect’ concerns a kind of distancing rhetoric that is evident throughout *Virtuous Community*’s front matter. For example, after claiming that the ‘only felicity for the soul is to be found’ in the Poetic Intellect’s ‘domain’, the author of appendix (b2) then backs away from this claim, writing that the Poetic Intellect ‘ought to be considered as governing man’ and to be considered as ‘guiding’ and ‘directing him to the right aim’ (p. 55, emphasis added). Why, one might wonder, does the author not use more direct phrasing? For Colmo’s (2005) part, and contra Strauss’ claim that the author of the preceding quote is Alfarabi writing indirectly to protect himself, even if the author of (b2) was Alfarabi, Colmo would argue that he did not actually need such distance, since his ‘rhetoric aimed more at flattering the elect than at appeasing the vulgar’ (p. 10). That is, Alfarabi’s desired audience consisted of liberally educated Muslims who would have agreed with Alfarabi that it was best for the masses to believe the Poetic Intellect had such governing power.

Colmo’s (2005) interpretation, however, creates an additional problem. After Colmo notes that Alfarabi elsewhere describes the Poetic Intellect as ‘the Faithful One’ and the ‘Trusty Spirit’, both

‘used in the Qur’an to describe the angel Gabriel’, Colmo then argues that this makes philosophy ‘subordinate to, and ultimately indistinguishable from, revelation’ (pp. 114, 115). One could thus say that, for Colmo, Alfarabi does not in fact distance himself enough from his religious attributions vis-à-vis the Poetic Intellect, and thereby burdens his ‘elect’ with a monotheism-infused concept that his audience mistakenly believes is secular. In contrast, my interpretation of the Poetic Intellect sees Alfarabi as having the resources to avert this danger, namely by emphasising the Poetic Intellect’s connection to imaginative artifice. Put in terms of Colmo’s conclusion regarding the Poetic Intellect — namely, that Alfarabi is ‘playing a dangerous game’ — Colmo appears to emphasise ‘dangerous’, whereas I would prefer ‘playing’ (p. 115). To see why, one can consider the question as to the identity of the one with whom Alfarabi is allegedly playing.

If, on the one hand, Alfarabi were playing with the elect among his readers, then where — on a materialist reading of the Poetic Intellect — would Colmo’s alleged danger lie? It seems to me that the elect among Alfarabi’s audience might even interpret the Poetic Intellect as an allegory of Alfarabi’s own skilful guidance of the community toward virtue, specifically by his inspiring his readers to greater imaginative freedom. (Examples of such readers would include Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides and Aquinas). Or if, on the other hand, Alfarabi were playing with the masses, then what could better undermine a dangerously literal religious interpretation of this passage than disguising Gabriel in what these masses would regard as the silly costume of pagan philosophy’s Poetic Intellect?

Returning now to the main body of *Virtuous Community*, the second set of materialist moments is found in Chapter 3, dedicated to ‘the world above the moon’ (that is, the world of the celestial beings). First, this chapter is among the shortest in the book, even though it constitutes the entirety of Section II of the book. Second, its individual sections are extremely short, too, each consisting of a two-sentence sketch of a celestial existent. And finally, it ends with the first appearance of the phrase ‘separate existents’, but Alfarabi puts the word ‘separate’ in scare quotes (p. 105). Perhaps the reason for the scare quotes (which he uses almost every time that he uses the phrase) is to alert the reader to the doubtfulness of the celestial beings’ alleged separateness, and thereby also alert the reader to the doubtfulness of this entire Neoplatonist sketch (p. 105).<sup>8</sup> Overall then, Chapter 3 leaves the impression that Neoplatonism might be far less significant for *Virtuous Community* — even on its surface, and as the perhaps most superficially Neoplatonist of his writings — than most Alfarabi scholars suppose.<sup>9</sup>

The third set of materialist moments in *Virtuous Community* proper take place in Chapters 4–5. In the former chapter, Alfarabi remarks that ‘the natural entities are a precondition for the voluntary entities, their existence being prior in time to the voluntary entities’ (p. 107). Note that, in Alfarabi’s first look at the earthly beings, the word *human* does not appear at all. Instead, he references humans only indirectly, as part of the group of ‘animals which have speech and thought’, thereby suggesting a non-anthropocentric precursor to modern scientific materialism (p. 109). Similarly, at the end of chapter five Alfarabi observes that matter ‘rises up gradually until its form becomes present in it’ (p. 113). This wording is significant in that it suggests a greater degree of agency for matter than the archetypical Aristotelian example of wooden bed. In particular, the adverb ‘gradually’ puts a strain on a purely metaphorical reading of matter’s rising. Thus, Alfarabi again (as in the final appendix to the summary) attributes an independent principle of self-motion

8 For the reader unfamiliar with Neoplatonist emanation, it essentially claims that the highest being, an immaterial entity often called ‘the One’, creates the cosmos by irradiating its being outward and into a perfectly ordered hierarchy of other immaterial existents, terminating in the material existents of earth.

9 Walzer (1998), for example, asserts in his commentary that Alfarabi’s account is based on a source from a ‘late Greek tradition’ which ‘appears to be lost’, and that Alfarabi’s sole originality here lies in his having ‘transformed into Muslim angels’ the Greek gods who were the celestial existents’ original referents (p. 363). As several other scholars note, however, Walzer merely postulates this alleged Greek source without evidence (Galston 1990, p. 5 n.). Regarding the celestial spheres, Walzer assures the reader that Alfarabi ‘believed in their existence without the slightest hesitation’ (p. 363). Again, however, Walzer provides no evidence, even though this second claim involves the belief state of a person who lived over a thousand years ago (and about whose life we know very little). And finally, regarding the celestial intellects, Walzer writes that Alfarabi chose them not of out ‘metaphysical considerations’, but rather based on ‘a purely astronomical theory’ (p. 363). For a third time, therefore, Walzer offers no evidence. Overall then, Walzer’s validation of this brief flickering of Neoplatonist ‘emanation’ in *Virtuous Community* rests on one hypothetical source.

to matter itself, and this time in a way that recalls Alfarabi's aforementioned claim regarding matter as seeking the forms of the Poetic Intellect.

The fourth set of materialist moments prior to *Virtuous Community's* account of soul are found in Chapter 8's discussion of 'becoming', in a brief, dense account of the celestial bodies' causality vis-à-vis the earthly beings. Walzer (1998), despite the passage's complexity, again denies Alfarabi any originality and instead merely speculates that the ideas 'appear to be derived from some school manual of Peripatetic thought which was used in the late Greek schools and happens to be lost' (p. 378). Colmo (2005), by contrast, emphasises the passage's materialist account of species-generation via the mixtures of basic elements (p. 31). More precisely, this 'mixture' for Alfarabi 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. Alfarabi also deploys here, for the first time in his description of the earth, the word 'human.' 'Man alone', he writes, 'arises as the result of the last mixture' (p. 141). Again, therefore, even the highest, and the only rational, being on earth for Alfarabi is the product of brute matter in physical combination.

The fifth set of materialist moments prior to *Virtuous Community's* account of soul are found in Chapter 9's transition into that account. With explicitly political rhetoric, Alfarabi describes a kind of justice among the forms and matters in nature. The 'forms are contrary', he writes, and 'each of these bodies has a rightful claim to its form and a rightful claim to its matter' (p. 145). He then elaborates on this claim as follows:

[A thing's] right by virtue of its form is to remain in the existence which it has, and its right by virtue of its matter is to assume another matter 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 so that it comes into existence and then remains for some time with its existence preserved, and that then it is destroyed and its contrary comes into existence and neither has a greater right to remain and last than the other, since each of them has an allotted share of existence and duration (pp. 145, 147).

Note that not even the form/matter dyad, for Alfarabi, constitutes a case of superiority/inferiority. Instead, form and matter both have equal 'claims' or 'rights'. In matter's case, the right is to change, and in form's case, it is the right to stasis. Thus, and in contrast to the hierarchical rhetoric that dominates much of *Virtuous Community*, the latter's account of the natural world is strikingly egalitarian. Walzer (1998) too seems sympathetic to this point, observing that "'justice" is very important for Alfarabi when he deals with the sublunary world' (p. 380).

An even more striking instance of Alfarabi's natural distributive justice is found in Chapter 12, where the equality in question is one of sex/gender. To quote Alfarabi's straightforward language, 'in the case of the faculty of sense, the faculty of imagination and the faculty of reason male and female do not differ' (p. 197).<sup>10</sup> To repeat — because the fact that this claim is being made by a tenth-century Arabic philosopher is probably deeply counterintuitive to most readers today — Alfarabi is asserting that *men are no more perceptive, imaginative or rational than women*.

Already, then, Alfarabi is occupying similar territory to that of what is known as first wave of feminism, or liberal feminism.<sup>11</sup> He then goes even further — arguably all the way to the third wave, or radical feminism — in a queering of gendered psychology. It is possible, Alfarabi writes, 'that there are among male human beings some whose emotions are similar to female emotions, and among female human beings, some whose emotions are similar to male emotions' (pp. 195–197). While one could of course interpret this as an essentialist claim, the aforementioned context — in which Alfarabi boldly asserts the intellectual equality of men and women — seems to suggest otherwise. Thus, if one reads 'male', for example, as 'stereotypically male', and

<sup>10</sup> In my quotations from Walzer's (1998) translation, I have replaced 'representation' with 'imagination', in part because it seems to me that the latter better captures the range of *phantasia's* three powers in the Aristotelian tradition with which Alfarabi is in conversation.

<sup>11</sup> Relatedly, many scholars claim that a careful reading of the Qur'an shows it to be a proto-feminist text. See, for example, the work of religious studies scholar Riffat Hassan, including 'Members of One Another: Gender Equality and Justice in Islam' (2015), <http://www.religiousconsultation.org/hassan.htm>.



‘female’ as ‘stereotypically female’, then Alfarabi appears to break out of the conceptual confines of two normalised genders and move toward a broader array of gender performances. In this way, he prefigures post-structuralist philosophers such as Judith Butler.

On a related note, Alfarabi claims in this same section that the bodily organs ‘are warmer in the male’, who is also ‘stronger’ in the organs devoted to movement and the “accidents” of the soul which tend toward strength like “wrath” and harshness’ (p. 195). And women are predominant in ‘weaker’ accidents like ‘mercy’ and ‘compassion’ (p. 195). Though these remarks too, might initially seem essentialist, there are three reasons why they are not, especially in the context of Alfarabi’s abovementioned remarks on women as intellectually equal and capable of possessing stereotypically male emotions.

Beginning with this issue of context, since men and women for Alfarabi can both possess ‘male’ and ‘female’ emotions, and since such emotions are closely correlated to these ‘accidents of the soul’ (as in a sad person’s inclination to cry), there must therefore be exceptions to these ‘accidents’ as well. For example, since a woman for Alfarabi can have ‘male emotions’ such as anger, and angry people sometimes channel that anger into courageous acts, there would have to be women who tend to possess the ‘accident’ of courageousness. Second, although Alfarabi describes the two traits possessed by men (on average) as tending ‘toward strength’, and although strength is admittedly a good thing, the actual traits of ‘wrath’ and ‘harshness’ are clearly negative. Similarly, from the opposite direction, although Alfarabi describes the two traits that he links to women (on average) as ‘weaker’, both of these traits in themselves are extremely positive. This is particularly true in an Islamic context and in regard to ‘merciful’, since it is the word most commonly used in the Qur’an to describe god. In short, while a superficial glance at these traits might seem to favour men/stereotypical masculinity, a close reading reveals just the opposite. And third, although ‘warmer’ is typically interpreted as being superior for Aristotelian science in general, for Alfarabi in particular, ‘coolness’ is the one trait that allows the brain to serve as steward of the body, with the specific purpose of promoting justice. Thus, Alfarabi again links women to the virtuous phenomenon of justice.

Similarly resonant with contemporary feminists (and other theorists in today’s progressive coalition), Chapter 9’s prelude to soul also features an incisive metaphorical critique of political and religious oppression and slavery. Having just concluded his account of natural distributive justice, Alfarabi returns in Chapter 9 to the rhetoric of political power, writing of a ‘body which is an instrument that serves another body’ (p. 163). This happens, according to Alfarabi, as a result of the latter body ‘breaking off a little of the strength of its [the former body’s] form, but not as much as would deprive it of its essence; *as one breaks off some of the strength of quarrelsome slaves so that they are kept down and eventually submit themselves and serve*’ (p. 163, emphasis added). Thus, Alfarabi presents a potentially subversive linkage between ‘submission’ — which to repeat, is the etymological basis of the Arabic word ‘Islam’ — and ‘slavery’. In support of this point, Parens offers a detailed analysis of Alfarabi as critiquing Islamic imperialism/proselytisation. Parens’ (2005) conclusion is that, in *Virtuous Community*, compulsion is inherently vicious in regard to actions and compulsion in regard to belief is outright impossible.<sup>12</sup>

Also significant in this regard, finally, this passage with Alfarabi’s slavery metaphor constitutes the final sentence of Section III, ‘The Sublunary World’, before the first sentence of Section IV, ‘Man’. Thus, the immediate precursor in *Virtuous Community* to soul and its alleged rule of the body (according to orthodox accounts of the soul/body relationship) is submission and slavery. One could argue, therefore, that Alfarabi is suggesting, with this final image in the final sentence in the final section on the natural world — characterised overall by its natural distributive justice — that what remains of the book bears the mark of enslavement.

To summarise the second section of my article, the materialist moments in *Virtuous Community* proper leading up to Alfarabi’s account of soul constitute (a) a detailed, ground-up, Aristotelian, materialist and naturalist cosmology — which overflows a superficial, top-down, Neoplatonist, idealist and supernatural cosmology, (b) an embodied basis for even the most presumably

12 See especially Parens (2005), pp. 74–76.

intellectual and spiritual dimensions of human experience, and (c) a series of critiques along the axes of class, gender and religion which strikingly resemble feminism, race theory and other discourses in today's progressive political coalition. With this materialist groundwork in place, I turn now to *Virtuous Community's* account of soul.

### Materialist soul and imagination

The materialist moments in *Virtuous Community's* account of soul and imagination, in outline, are as follows: (a) a consistent privileging of soul's nutritive and sense-perceptive powers (including their necessity for the imaginative and rational powers), (b) the necessity of desire for any activity beyond mere nourishment, (c) the use of the political rhetoric of hierarchy to describe the relationships among the primary powers of soul, (d) the attribution of creativity and freedom to the body-dependent imagination, (e) the twin conceptions of 'temperament' and 'temperature' as illustrative of this body-dependency, and (f) the embodied analysis of even such (apparently) higher-order phenomena as mental illness.

In Chapter 10 as a whole, Alfarabi follows Aristotle in distinguishing five primary powers of soul, namely nutritive, sense-perceptive, imaginative, rational and desiring.<sup>13</sup> Although Walzer (1998) downplays the significance of this Aristotelian section, this creates a significant tension in his interpretation. On the one hand, Walzer claims that 'from an Islamic point of view, whether the faculties of the soul' are 'explained one way or another' is 'irrelevant' (p. 382). But on the other hand, he asserts on the same page that 'the faculty of reason' exclusively 'is assumed to survive after death' — and this, even though 'the soul is basically one and indivisible' (p. 382). Walzer's response to this tension is to casually disregard the entire issue as an 'inconsistency' in Alfarabi (and Aristotle) (p. 382). I will now attempt to show, however, that there is no such inconsistency, and that the exact way these powers are divided is particularly relevant in Alfarabi's Islamic context.

In Alfarabi's opening survey of these powers in Chapter 10, the first power he discusses is the nutritive, which he describes as 'the first thing to arise in' man, 'the faculty by which he takes nourishment' (p. 165). Presumably, Alfarabi means by this that the nutritive power comes first in time (since humans take nourishment in the womb before perceiving, imagining, thinking, etc.). The significance of this claim, along with the fact that Alfarabi introduces soul via the image of nourishment, is that it sets a materialist tone for the remainder of his account of soul.

The second power of soul Chapter 10 discusses is the desiring, which Alfarabi describes as 'arising' together 'with the senses', as well as being 'joined' to both the imaginative and rational powers (in the form of desire 'towards' the objects of the latter). The third power Chapter 10 discusses is the imaginative, which heralds the advent of truth and falsity, specifically via its 'connections and disconnections' (p. 165). And the last power discussed there is the rational, described as the site of the arising of 'good and evil' and 'the arts and sciences' (p. 165). To summarise this survey of soul's primary powers for Alfarabi, there is no (a) life beyond mere nourishment without desire, (b) false sensing (because falsity requires imagination), or (c) evil imagination (because evil requires rationality). Put affirmatively, for Alfarabi here, animal life is insuperably desirous, perception as such cannot be wrong, and the imagination is a realm of freedom beyond good and evil.

Subsection 2 of Chapter 10 begins Alfarabi's more detailed analyses of these powers of soul. His first analysis, on the nutritive power, opens with a return to the language of politics. 'The faculty of nutrition', Alfarabi explains, 'consists of one ruling faculty and of faculties which are its auxiliaries and subordinates' (p. 167). This ruling power for nutrition is 'the heart among the organs and limbs of the body', and the heart, in turn, is the ruling power of the liver, 'an organ which is both ruled and ruler', since it is ruled by the heart and rules other organs such as the spleen (p. 167). Similarly, Subsection 3, which is devoted to the sense-perceptive power, locates its ruling power in the heart as well, and locates its sense-perception's subordinate powers in the senses.

<sup>13</sup> Walzer's (1998) translation for this last power is 'appetitive', but I prefer the synonym 'desiring'. For one thing, the latter is actually used by native English speakers today (as opposed to the arid abstraction of the Latinate 'appetitive'). Moreover, the latter's connotation of physical hunger gives the potentially misleading impression that Alfarabi is referring here narrowly to an appetite for food.

Subsection 4, however, marks an end to these middle-manager organs. In Alfarabi's words, imagination 'has no auxiliaries distributed in the other organs but is one by itself: it too is in the heart' (p. 169). The significance of this claim is that the imaginative power initially appears to be further removed from the body than the nutritive and sense-perceptive powers, since it lacks any political infrastructure of subordinate organs. On the other hand, in addition to imagination's having (unlike reason) a ruling power in the body (specifically the heart), Alfarabi also grounds imagination indirectly in the body later in *Virtuous Community*. I will return to this issue at length below.

Subsection 4 of Chapter 10 then ends with Alfarabi explaining that the imagination involves at least two distinct abilities. Imagination, he writes,

retains the sensibles when they are no longer present(ed) to sense-perception, and by its very nature controls the sensibles and exercises judgment over them: for it separates them from each other and connects them with each other in various ways, so that it happens that some of the things imagined (or 'represented') agree with those perceived by the senses and others differ from them (p. 169).<sup>14</sup>

Note, to begin, that the first power of imagination for Alfarabi is retention of sense-perceptions, while the second power is the separation and connection of those retained sense-perceptions in the service of judgment.

Examples of judgment, in Alfarabi's sense, would include the following: 'The car is red', 'Obama is a secret Muslim', and 'The unicorn is what is making those galloping sounds'. All such judgements affirm or deny the truth of the combination of two elements (e.g. 'car and red'), and thus facilitate the simultaneous birth of falsehood and fiction. Therefore, to repeat the point I made above, neither falsehood nor fiction can be attributed to sense-perception, because sense-perception reduces to the mere presence or absence of a sense-perceptible.

Despite the complex subtlety apparent in this sentence, Walzer (1998) claims in his commentary that 'Alfarabi does not display any special interest in the many and various aspect of *phantasia*' (the Greek word from which the concept of 'imagination' is derived). This claim appears even more counterintuitive in light of Walzer's immediately subsequent acknowledgement that Alfarabi is concerned with the imagination in terms of 'visionary prophecy and the apparently supernatural experience of outstanding individuals' (p. 390). And if this were not enough, Alfarabi also introduces a third power of imagination (in addition to the two in the above block quote) in Chapter 14's more detailed treatment of prophecy.

In the latter account, again drawing on Aristotle, Alfarabi terms this third power 'reproductive imitation', and defines it as "'imitating" sensibles which have remained preserved in' imagination (p. 211). Shortly thereafter, however, Alfarabi revises this account by claiming that this third power imitates not only (a) sense-perceptions, but also (b) concepts, (c) the nutritive power, (d) the desiring power, and (e) 'the "temperament" in which [the imagination] happens to find the body' at a particular point in time (p. 213). Letters (d) and (e) here are of particular importance to the present article.

In regard to (d)'s imitation of the desiring power, Alfarabi elaborates a few pages later that, when imagination imitates the desire, it either

'resembles through this action sometimes a man who mimics action and sometimes a man who reminds you of a certain action' (p. 217), or

'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' (p. 219).

On a superficial level, both (1) and (2) appear to concern activities that imagination carries out primarily during sleep (except in the case of prophets, who are believed to engage in such activities while awake). More precisely, it appears that imagination causes one to dream of things

14 I have modified the translation here by removing two parenthetical sections added by Walzer (presumably for clarification), because they strike me as unnecessary and interpretively loaded.

that either (1) resemble past experiences or (2) symbolise other sense-perceptions through a kind of pictorial code.

One could also interpret (2), however, 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. One example might be the work of a fashion designer, who first sketches an article of clothing, and then desires that it be created. This latter interpretation has two significant implications.

First, insofar as this phenomenon can happen outside dreaming, imagination for Alfarabi appears to be the sole source of freedom, because it is the only power of soul 'higher' than nutrition not determined directly by desire. (It is important to keep in mind here that for Alfarabi even reason requires desire, and it also requires that the images provided by imagination on which to operate.) Second, Alfarabi's analysis prefigures 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 (see, for example, Marcuse 1972). Moreover, since critical theory is based on Marx's dialectical materialism, any anticipation of it constitutes another materialist moment in *Virtuous Community*.<sup>15</sup>

Though this interpretation may at first seem like a stretch, it is important to remember Druart's (2005) abovementioned point — reinforced by the subsequent quote from Alfarabi regarding Plato's multi-layered methodology — that Alfarabi explicitly claims that religious 'truths' are poetic and metaphorical distortions of rational, philosophical truth; and yet these distortions are at the same time invaluable in the pursuit of political virtue. In short, Alfarabi offers a positive conception of propaganda in the form of religious symbolism needed by the masses in order to indirectly align their lives with the philosophical truths which they are unable to comprehend directly.

Returning to the above list of that which imagination imitates, and having now concluded my analysis of (d), its imitation of desire, I now turn to (e), its imitation of 'temperament'. Alfarabi later explains that the latter consists of imitating the four Aristotelian 'contraries' (namely heat, cold, moisture and dryness) 'through the sensibles which imitate' each contrary. To be precise, the imagination receives 'the temperament which the body puts into it according to its nature, and not as it is natural to bodies to receive the temperaments' (p. 213). 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' (p. 213). This concept of temperament is at the materialist heart of Alfarabi's analysis of imagination, and thus warrants further attention.

According to the OED, the English word 'temperament' comes from the Latin root *temper*, meaning to 'divide or proportion duly, to mingle in due proportion, to combine properly; to qualify, temper; to arrange or keep in due measure or proportion, to keep within limits, to regulate, rule'. In Alfarabi's case, that which is being proportioned are the contraries (the heat, cold, moist and dry qualities of the body) and also the images by which the sense-perceptions of these contraries are symbolised. There are two important points from this definition for understanding Alfarabi's concept.

First, Alfarabi's rhetoric here of 'dividing' and 'combining' calls to mind his first and second functions of the imagination. And second, the definition's etymology reveals that the Latin root (*temper*) is derived, in turn, from the ancient Greek *sophrosune*. The latter word plays a similarly important role in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the influence of which text on Alfarabi is considerable, especially in the *Selected Aphorisms*. For two examples of this influence, the *Aphorisms* (1) claims that '[a]ctions that are good are equilibrated actions intermediate between two extremes' and (2) defines temperance as 'intermediate between avidity and insensibility to pleasure' (2004, aphorism 18, p. 20). It is this second example which provides my primary justification for emphasising this *temper/sophrosune* etymology.

15 For the classic introduction, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2007).

Alfarabi also follows Aristotle in insisting that this ethical ‘intermediate’ (or, as in Dunlop’s translation, ‘mean’) is not a mathematical mean, but a relative one. In Alfarabi’s own example of the latter, ‘the equilibrated nutriment for a youth and that which is equilibrated for an industrious man differs in accordance with the difference in their bodies’ (2004, aphorism 19, p. 22). Thus, it is clear that Alfarabi recognises the ineliminable variety of human beings, which in turn means that his concept of temperament does not include our present-day fixation on statistically ‘normal’ behaviour. In short, there are for Alfarabi different ranges of healthy temperatures/temperaments for different bodies and imaginations.

To summarise this linguistic analysis of temperament, with its creative freedom to divide and combine its elements, along with its basis in an Aristotelian concept of *sophrosune* as a relative mean, Alfarabi anticipates yet again a central concern of today’s progressive political coalition. To wit, Alfarabi too affirms the irreducible singularities of bodies as free agents of creative differences.

Subsection 8 of Chapter 10 then digs even deeper into imagination, the result of which is an even subtler and more complex discussion. Alfarabi describes ‘imagination of a thing’ (1998, p. 173) as happening in the following three ways:

one through the direct action of the faculty of imagination, such as imagining what is hoped for and expected, or imagining what happened in the past, or wishing for something which the faculty of imagination puts together; the second by something being transmitted to the faculty of imagination from the sense-perception of something and having been changed into something else imagined as a thing to be feared or trusted; or through some act of the rational faculty which has reached the imaginative faculty (p. 175).

Note the intimate bond here between imagination and desire, as expressed in the passage’s three ways of imagining. To elaborate, way (1) of imagining a thing for Alfarabi involves (a) what is ‘hoped for’ (and a hope is a desire for something to happen in the future), or (b) what has happened (that is, an event of emotional, and thus desirous, significance), or (c) that which has been mentally fabricated but does not (yet) physically exist. Way (2) of imagining a thing is based on taking something previously perceived and transforming it into an object of repulsion or desire. And though way (3) references only the rational power, Alfarabi asserts earlier in *Virtuous Community* that the rational power only leads to knowledge when it is joined to imagination.<sup>16</sup> Thus, way (3) depends on ways (1) and (2), both of which depend on desire, which depends on the body.<sup>17</sup>

This latter point is of crucial importance for a materialist analysis of *Virtuous Community*. Even though Alfarabi states earlier that the imaginative power does not rely on any subservient powers within the body, it does apparently rely on the body as a whole (albeit indirectly). More precisely, the imaginative power relies on the body insofar as the imaginative power is joined to the desiring power, because the desiring power’s subservient powers are located in the body. In short, Alfarabi yet again affirms that imagination is ultimately a material power.

Buttressing this point, and to conclude the third section of my investigation, Alfarabi’s aforementioned account of prophecy in Chapter 14 is also materially grounded. It can happen to people, Alfarabi writes (of this prophetic phenomenon),

that their temperament is ruined in certain circumstances and their powers of imagination are impaired; they see then, as the outcome of the combinations which the faculty of imagination performs in these ways, things which are neither real nor imitate reality. These are the bilious, insane and madmen and their like (p. 227).

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere in Section 8 of Chapter 10, Alfarabi writes that knowledge ‘may be brought about by the rational faculty and by the faculty of imagination or by sense-perception’ (1998, pp. 171, 173). What this means exactly depends on how one prioritises the logical connectives in this sentence, whether as *[(rational AND imagination) or sense-perception]* or *[rational and (imagination OR sense-perception)]*. Due to this ineradicable ambiguity, the former seems to me the more natural interpretation. If so, then for Alfarabi, rationality without imagination never leads to knowledge, while sense-perception all by itself is sufficient for the task. Insofar as this is accurate, this would then constitute yet another materialist moment in Alfarabi’s discourse on soul.

<sup>17</sup> The only exception to this is variation (c) on way (1), which (as I discussed above) constitutes the free constructive work of the imagination, which is not necessarily dependent on desire. Even in this case, however, this power still depends on the body. Thus my overall conclusion, that the imagination for Alfarabi depends on the body, remains in force.

Alfarabi does not specify the nature of these ruination-causing circumstances (for example, as to whether these circumstances are natural, political, personal, etc.). And it is grammatically ambiguous as to whether the temperament in question is that of the body or of the imagination. Either way, however, it seems clear that the body's temperament (or temperature) is first 'destroyed', and then the imagination's temperament imitates said destruction with appropriate sense-perceptions images. Consequently, for Alfarabi, the basis of even such a (presumably) higher-order phenomenon as mental illness is irreducibly material.

The net result of these materialist moments from *Virtuous Community's* account of soul and imagination is to affirm both the latter's embodied physicality and also its lofty political potential. Thus, in contrast to traditional accounts of the imaginative power (which either minimise imagination's importance because of its enslavement to the body, or exalt imagination as a fantastic, mystical escape that overleaps reason), Alfarabi offers the reader a power that is both humble and ambitious, both idiosyncratic and capable of universalisation. In this way, *Virtuous Community* suggests a politics which channels imagination's artistic freedom into the democratic pursuit of embodied flourishing. And this is exactly the case that Khalidi (2003) makes, in the aforementioned article on Alfarabi's positive assessment of democracy.<sup>18</sup> Before offering my own interpretation of Alfarabi's political philosophy, in the penultimate section of my investigation I will first return to the *Aphorisms*. There, I will consider the phenomenon which bridges the gap between Alfarabi's psychology and political theory, namely the imaginative art of poetry.

### Poetry as broken bridge to *Virtuous Community*

To be precise, Alfarabi erects this materialist poetic bridge between the support poles of the imagination's third power and the ruler's rational virtues. The materials for this bridge are as follows: (a) an embodied basis even for imagination's artistic acts and alleged prophecy, (b) an imaginative power to fabricate desires through propagandistic rhetoric, (c) the consequent necessity for the 'first ruler' to be able to compose inspiring poetry, (d) that ruler's obligation to use the three 'praiseworthy' types of poetry to inspire virtuous community, and (e) the regulation of the feedback loop between temperature and temperament provided by such praiseworthy poetry in pursuit of said virtuous community.

Alfarabi describes imagination's third power in the *Aphorisms* as 'excellence in imaginative evocations', which aims 'to inspire the soul of the hearer to seek or to flee the thing imaginatively invoked, or to have an inclination to or loathing for it, even if he has not assented to it' (2004, aphorism 55, pp. 35, 36). In other words, this 'excellence in imaginative evocations' consists in manipulating the desiring power (which claim also resonates with *Virtuous Community's* aforementioned account of imagination). Appropriately then, in the very next aphorism, Alfarabi claims that 'All poems are brought forth only to make excellent the imaginative evocation of something, and they are of six sorts', three 'praiseworthy and three blameworthy' (aphorism 56, p. 36).

Note first the words 'all' and 'only' here, which makes this a strong claim on the *Aphorisms'* part. That is, the only reason for poetry to exist, according to the *Aphorisms*, is the pragmatic purpose of inspiring the imagination. In one sentence, therefore, this conception of poetry reveals itself to be explicitly social, even propagandistic. And as such, it anticipates W.E.B. Du Bois' (1986) famous thesis, in his 'Criteria of Negro Art' (inspired in part by dialectical materialism), that all art is 'propaganda'.<sup>19</sup> The *Aphorisms* also anticipates Du Bois with its breakdown of poetry into 'praiseworthy' and 'blameworthy' types, in that Du Bois too represents certain types of art as praiseworthy and others as blameworthy, and with the similar intention of influencing black artists to help realise a more virtuous community. Note, however, that in Du Bois' case, those whom he is trying to inspire are other creative artists, rather than political rulers. And this, as I will explore below, makes all the difference.

18 More specifically, Khalidi (2003) argues that Alfarabi's positive view derives from (1) his recognition that democracies facilitate the existence of virtuous groups within themselves, (2) his claim that democracy, though not the second-best regime in itself (which honour goes to timocracy) nevertheless is the most easily transformable into the best regime, and (3) democracy's compatibility with universalist Islam and Alfarabi's 'own multicultural experiences' (p. 393).

19 For a close reading of this text, see Hall (2014).

As for what makes such poetry praiseworthy in the *Aphorisms*, it is different for each type. The first, Alfarabi (2004) writes, improves the rational faculty and directs it ‘toward happiness’ (p. 36). It is presumably in this spirit that Alfarabi (1998) insists in *Virtuous Community* that the ‘first ruler’ there should be ‘able to rouse imagination by well-chosen words’ (p. 247). Troublingly, especially in the retroactive light of fascism’s charismatic leaders, Alfarabi then immediately transitions (in *Virtuous Community*) to the power to ‘lead people well along the right path to felicity’ (p. 247). The second type of praiseworthy poetry Alfarabi (2004) describes as ‘intent upon improving and equilibrating those accidents of the soul related to power and breaking them down until they come to equilibrium’ (p. 36). And the third type of praiseworthy poetry performs the same breakdown as the second type, but (in the case of the third type) to ‘those accidents of the soul related to weakness and softness’ (p. 36). The latter two types of poetry, in other words, serve temperance/*sophrosune*, thereby helping to produce moderation in the temperament of the body and of imagination.

Accordingly, Alfarabi (2004) defines ‘the kingly craft’ in the *Aphorisms* as the power to ‘infer what is intermediate and equilibrated with respect to moral habits and actions’ (aphorism 21, p. 22). For this reason, and again improvising on Aristotle’s poetic concept, Alfarabi describes the king as a kind of doctor of soul: ‘The one who cures bodies is the physician, and the one who cures souls is the statesman, and he is also called the king’ (p. 27). That is, the *Aphorisms*’ doctor of soul must utilise imagination and the three praiseworthy types of poetry to practise a political medicine in pursuit of virtuous community. With this move, Alfarabi also of course follows Plato, who in both the *Republic* and *Laws* assigns an explicit role for poetic inspiration to their allegedly ideal rulers.<sup>20</sup> Overall, then, the *Aphorisms* appears to affirm praiseworthy poetry as a straightforwardly beneficent tool for the best ruler.

It is important at this juncture, however, not to move too hastily. In *Virtuous Community*, there are other passages in tension with this account. Recalling Benjamin’s (1969) famous dictum — that fascism aestheticises politics, in response to which Marx’ dialectical materialism politicises art — these passages in *Virtuous Community* all move, not from poetry to politics (as in the *Aphorisms*), but from politics to poetry. And in this way, the same materialism that the reader has seen overflowing at so many points in *Virtuous Community* bursts forth yet again. This time, though, this materialism overflows powerfully enough to undermine the apparent purpose of *Virtuous Community* as a whole, and thereby the purpose of Alfarabi’s entire philosophy.

Toward the end of *Virtuous Community*, Alfarabi (1998) discusses how the ‘first ruler’ of the ‘excellent’ city must possess an imagination that has ‘by nature reached its utmost perfection’, namely the power ‘to obtain through the particulars which he receives [from the Poetic Intellect] “prophecy” of present and future events, and through the intelligibles which he receives prophecy of things divine’ (p. 241). Along with this extremely improbable ‘utmost perfection’ of imagination (and along with various other seeming superpowers), this first ruler must also, according to this description, possess at least one seemingly impossible, and literally un-desirable, trait. It is this last point which ultimately ruptures the ‘first ruler’ and ‘excellent’ city’s claims to supremacy, the moment when Alfarabi’s materialism in *Virtuous Community* overflows them both and washes them away.

This first ruler ‘should by nature’, Alfarabi writes, ‘not crave for food and drink and sexual intercourse, and have a natural aversion to gambling and hatred of the pleasures which these pursuits provide’ (p. 249, emphasis added). Note that the first ruler here does not merely *happen* to be indifferent to food, sex, or illicit pleasure, which would be conceivable, as people can and do develop apathy for all those pleasures in certain circumstances. Nor has the first ruler’s desire merely been repressed by education or socialisation, which is also a widespread phenomenon, at least under the repressive conditions in many monotheistic communities. Instead, this lack of desire in the first ruler is attributed to nature itself. But how, one wonders, could a person even physically survive with a natural absence of desire for food? Not only do scientific data and

20 For a sympathetic, detailed investigation of the relationships among Alfarabi, Plato’s *Laws* and poetry, see Chapter 10 of Parens (1995), pp. 129–142.

common sense both reject this latter claim, but Alfarabi himself offers passages in significant tension with it elsewhere in *Virtuous Community*.

To take just one of many such examples, the first sentence of the section on the ‘excellent’ community asserts that ‘every human being is by his very nature in need of many things which he cannot provide by himself’ (p. 229). According to this, the ‘first ruler’, qua human, would necessarily have needs, which for an embodied being necessarily requires desire. Perhaps for just this reason, Alfarabi immediately concedes (on the same page as the above claim regarding the ruler’s natural lack of desire) that it may be impossible to find such a ruler. In what is perhaps an ironic understatement, Alfarabi remarks that ‘such men are rare’ (p. 229). As an alternative, therefore, Alfarabi goes on to suggest a two-person form of government in which, hearkening again to Plato, one of the two is a philosopher. However, by both Plato’s famous definition, and also the etymology of the word ‘philosopher’, the core of a philosopher is nothing other than desire. Thus, in Alfarabi’s pragmatic solution to this issue, desire is not in fact eliminated from the community’s rulers.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion: reimagining virtuous communities

This, then, is the reason why *Virtuous Community*’s ‘first ruler’ and ‘excellent’ city fail to be virtuous, as Alfarabi subtly acknowledges in the rest of the book, as well as elsewhere in his corpus. What, then, might be Alfarabi’s purpose in presenting this ruler and city? In sympathy with a phenomenological reading of Plato’s *Republic*, I would suggest that Alfarabi might instead be dramatising the problem, exemplified in the character of the philosopher as such, of the relationship between community and desire.<sup>22</sup> In support of this interpretation, Parens’ analysis of Alfarabi’s *Attainment of Happiness* concludes that Alfarabi also views the ideal ruler there as an impossible phenomenon.<sup>23</sup>

In, by contrast, their genuinely virtuous forms, Alfarabi’s first rulers and excellent communities would be empowered to ride the wave of the materialist overflow of the following orthodox conceptions: of (I) the virtuous community as an Islamic imperialist state, (II) Neoplatonism as metaphysical truth, (III) imagination as either deterministically enslaved to the body or mystically superseding reason, and (IV) praiseworthy poetry as straightforwardly beneficent tool of virtuous persuasion. Thus empowered, moreover, these figures of genuinely virtuous first rulers and excellent communities suggest the following constructive guidelines: a (I\*) tolerantly pluralistic society, (II\*) committed to a materialist metaphysics of singularised embodiment, which (III\*) facilitates respect for the free creativity of imagination as an embodied power, and which is (IV\*) a society ruled by those who are mindful of poetry’s potential for manipulation in the hands of the rulers (as opposed to the hands of the poets).

In conclusion, these guidelines — though they overflow from a tenth-century ethnically Turkish philosopher, living in cosmopolitan Baghdad, at the centre of the religiously-tolerant Golden Age of Islam — nevertheless remain relevant for today’s globalised world. And as such, they could also overflow Alfarabi’s considerable historical and religious authority onto today’s progressive political coalition, including the feminist theorists, race theorists, critical theorists and post-structuralists whom Alfarabi anticipates. Perhaps, with his help, we can more effectively inspire our own monotheistic communities toward a more idiosyncratically materialist virtuous world.

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21 For a sympathetic analysis of the tensions in Alfarabi’s account, see the third section of Chapter 3 of Parens (2005), pp. 38–46.

22 See, for example, Sallis (1996).

23 See especially Parens (2005), pp. 29–38. For Alfarabi’s text, see Alfarabi (2001).



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