

“Meddling in the work of another”: πολυπραγονεῖν in Plato’s *Republic*

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ABSTRACT

The second conjunct of the *Republic*’s account of justice—that justice is “not meddling in the work of another”—has been neglected in Plato literature. This paper argues that the conjunct does more work than merely reiterating the content of the first conjunct—that justice is “doing one’s own work.” I argue that Socrates develops the concept at work in this conjunct from its introduction with the Principle of Specialization in Book II to its final deployment in the finished conception of justice in Book IV. Crucial to that concept’s development is the way in which the notion of “another” comes to refer to members of distinct classes or parts, i.e. takes on an *inter-part* connotation beyond a mere *intra-part* connotation. The first conjunct—that justice is “doing one’s own work”—does

not connote the same divisions, and so the conjuncts should not be understood as equivalent or mutually entailed.

Keywords: Plato; justice; ancient ethics; virtue; meddling; Principle of Specialization

1. TWO CONJUNCTS

In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates has the objective of formulating a conception of justice and defending the just life as always being better, i.e. happier, than the unjust life (2.358b–c). He articulates his conception of justice variously in the following ways:

[T1] “We’ve heard many people say and have often said ourselves that justice (δικαιοσύνη ἐστὶ) is doing one’s own work (τὸ τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν) and not meddling with what isn’t one’s own (μὴ πολυπραγμονεῖν).” (4.433a)¹

[T2] “Then, it turns out that this doing one’s own work (τὸ τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν)—provided that it comes to be in a certain way—appears to be justice (κινδυνεύει [...] ἢ δικαιοσύνη εἶναι).” (4.433b)²

[T3] “Is it (the thing that will make the city good by its presence), above all, the fact that every child, woman, slave, freeman, craftsman, ruler, and ruled each does his own work (ἔπραττε) and doesn’t meddle with what is other people’s (οὐκ ἐπολυπραγμόνει)?” (4.433d)

[T4] “Exchange and meddling is injustice. Or to put it the other way around: For the money-making, auxiliary, and guardian classes each to do its own work (τὸ αὐτοῦ πράττοντος) in the city, is the opposite. That’s justice, isn’t it, and makes the city just?” (4.434c)

[T5] “One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part (μὴ ἐάσαντα τὰλλότρια πράττειν) or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other (μηδὲ πολυπραγμονεῖν).” (4.443d)

The variations here are curious. Though all are ostensibly, per Socrates’ choice of words, specifications of what justice is, they feature varying combinations and omissions of two distinct conjuncts, *a* and *b*—let *a* be the claim that justice is “doing one’s own work” and let *b* be the claim that justice is “not meddling with what isn’t one’s own.” We see that T1 and T3 refer to justice with both *a* and *b*. But T2, T4, and T5 make reference to only one of *a* or *b*. We should wonder, then, what work is being done by conjunct *a* in the formulation provided at T1 and T3 if *a* is not called upon to do any work in T5, and, likewise, what work is being done by conjunct *b* if it is left out of T2 and T4. Deciding these questions is no trivial matter. Justice—the answer to the *Republic*’s τί ἐστὶ question—hangs in the balance.³ What role does each of these conjuncts play in the *Republic*’s ultimate account of justice?⁴

The vast literature on the *Republic* is quiet on this issue of what separate work may be done by *a* and *b*. General consensus seems to be that conjunct *a*—‘doing one’s own work’—exhaustively accounts for Socrates’ working definition of justice. We see this consensus not in any explicit statement, but in the way that Plato scholars regularly omit—without comment—the second conjunct. Bernard Williams states that the “λόγος” of justice is captured in the formula “each of the elements (λογιστικόν, θυμοειδές, and ἐπιθυμητικόν) does its job” (1973, p. 257). Nicholas Smith argues to the conclusion that “the having of one’s own is justice and the doing of one’s own is justice” (1979, p. 381). Nicholas White says, “[Socrates] is asking us to accept [the word justice] as an appropriate one to attach to the notion that he has developed, of the performance of its own task by each of the classes in the city” (1979, p. 119). Rachana Kamtekar lays out the account of justice in the following way: “When Socrates

says that an individual is just in the same way in which a city is just—namely, when each part of *him* (or his soul) does its own work—he invokes the account of what it is for each part of the soul to do its own work, and this involves the rational part ruling with knowledge of what is good for the whole” (2001, p. 4). The list goes on and on.⁵

Julia Annas does acknowledge the second conjunct. In the course of pointing out that Plato’s notion of justice appears, at first glance anyway, to be made redundant by all the work done by the other virtues, Annas says, “Justice, after all, requires no new range of actions other than what is required by the other virtues, only a refraining from certain things” (1981, p. 119). The “refraining from certain things” is a bit understated. The word “certain” might be taken to imply that the rule applies across only a limited range of “things,” but we should be mindful that the wording of conjunct *b* forbids engagement in an extensive list of activities, exhaustively accounting for every activity that registers as belonging to “another.” Nevertheless, Annas might have alit upon the unique work of the second conjunct: It could be that conjunct *b* is what enables the notion of justice to count as a unique aspect of the city and the soul’s goodness. But this is dismissed by Annas as an overly negative way of conceiving of justice, and she emphasizes that Plato appears to think of justice as consisting in nothing over and above what is already achieved through the other three virtues (1981, p. 119, 132). Effectively, we should not construe justice’s contribution according to its negative conjunct because its positive conjunct already makes a significant contribution. From here, Annas consistently specifies justice according to conjunct *a*: “Why, however, should doing one’s own have anything to do with *justice*?” (1981, p. 119); “the ‘doing one’s own’ principle”

(p. 120, 122); “the ‘doing one’s own’ formula” (p. 121); “the person is just because of the fact that each of his or her parts is functioning properly and ‘doing its own’” (p. 132). And in one place she paraphrases T1 above as saying that “Socrates says that they have heard many people say, and have often said themselves, that justice is doing one’s own” (p. 120). She fully omits conjunct *b* in discussion of a passage where it is explicitly mentioned.⁶

Needless to say, the literature has not yet produced a thorough account of the second conjunct in Plato’s account of justice—that justice consists in “not meddling with what isn’t one’s own.” Somehow it has been lost or underappreciated or underscrutinized. Extensive discussion has been devoted to making sense of how to predicate one and the same conception of justice of both cities and souls, in line with the city-soul analogy.⁷ And careful consideration has been paid to distinguishing strict justice—conceived as the condition belonging exclusively to composites whose parts are each doing their own work (and not doing the work of the other parts)—and a different notion of justice that describes the behavior of each part in its contribution to the justice of the whole.⁸ But all of these discussions have focused on the appropriate subject of predication to the neglect of Socrates’ formulation of the account of justice itself. In this paper, I aim to investigate that neglected facet of justice: its consisting in *not* being something, the meddlesomeness.

2. THE ORIGIN OF THE CONJUNCTS

Socrates first introduces the conjuncts in Book II when he sets out to describe the origin of cities in building his city-soul analogy. It is mutual need that gives rise to cities, he says.

“I think a city comes to be because none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things” (2.369b). By coming together to live in close proximity, we are able to divide our labor in such a way that each specializes in the production of a particular good. This specialization directly optimizes both the quantity and the quality of goods produced, with the result that our needs are not only met, but they are met in a maximally efficient way. The organizing principle of this division of labor is what has come to be known in Plato literature as the ‘Principle of Specialization.’⁹ Socrates formulates this principle in the following way:

“More plentiful and better-quality goods are more easily produced if each person does one thing for which he is naturally suited, does it at the right time, and is released from having to do any of the others.” (2.370c)

Two conditions are presented as essential to the maximization of productivity: each member of society must (i) perform the one task that is proper to their nature and (ii) leaves alone any other tasks. Accordingly, the Principle of Specialization (PoS) appears to have both conjuncts *a* and *b* at its core. “Doing one’s own work” and “not meddling in the work of another” are drawn together and promoted as the arrangement that will, in every case, best ensure that our needs are met.

The PoS is grounded in two observations. The first of these observations concerns the natural aptitudes of human beings. “Each of us is not entirely like the next in nature (ἡμῶν φύεται ἕκαστος οὐ πᾶν ὁμοίος ἐκάστῳ), but differs somewhat in nature (διαφέρων τὴν φύσιν), one being suited to one task, another to another” (2.370a–b).¹⁰ With this observation, Socrates does not mean that one person is a

born farmer, and the next is a born carpenter, and the next a cobbler, and so on. The point is not about our birthright at all. Rather, in saying that we differ in our nature, he is referring to the nature that we come to possess as a result of our upbringing and education. The person who endures the years of training and apprenticeship requisite for becoming a blacksmith is “by nature” a blacksmith. And the person who endures the training that endows a person with skill in baking is “by nature” a baker. The differences between us that result from our cultivating distinct skillsets makes it the case that we are suited to this task rather than that one. What is important to our city’s well-being is that we do that work that we were trained to do and let others do the work that they were trained to do. That is, we must do the work that is our own and let others do the work that is their own.

The second observation that fills out the PoS is that our productivity, construed in terms of both quantity and quality of our production, depends on our ability to apply ourselves to one occupation only. When we mind a single occupation, we devote our cognitive energies to it in such a way that the work will be executed optimally. If we spread our energies across two or more tasks, we fail to properly prioritize the work that is ours and, therefore, run the risk of overlooking what needs doing. “If one misses the right moment (καιρόν) in anything, the work is spoiled” (2.370b). We must not take up any work beyond our own, then, because in taking up other work, we miss our opportunity to do our own work well. Hence, we must both do our own work and leave other work alone.

Both observations—the one concerning natural ability and the one concerning productivity—function as sources for the two conjuncts. That is, each of them independently

grounds both conjuncts. That we are naturally suited to a particular work makes it the case that we should both do our own work and leave other work alone, and that our productivity increases when we specialize makes it the case that we should both do our own work and leave other work alone. Socrates is committed to the two conjuncts twice over, then.

As the argument of the *Republic* proceeds, the PoS comes to play a pivotal role in filling out the ultimate account of justice in Book IV. As the texts discussed in my introduction indicate, Socrates ends up insisting that the two conjuncts at the heart of the PoS are central to the account of justice. They do not exhaustively fill out that account—that is, justice is not simply the PoS—but it is the PoS that Socrates refers to when he says that he and his interlocutors had struck upon an “image” of justice earlier in their conversation (4.443c). “The principle that is it right for someone who is by nature a cobbler to practice cobblery and nothing else, for the carpenter to practice carpentry, and the same for the others is a sort of image of justice—that’s why it’s beneficial” (4.443c). Toward the end of the next section, we will return to this qualification that justice is not exactly the PoS but “something of this sort” (4.443c). We will understand Socrates’ qualification only if we appreciate how he conceives of the conjuncts, though, and so we must first examine the logic of the conjuncts and what argumentative work Socrates understands each of them to be doing.

3. MUTUAL ENTAILMENT?

We should wonder why Socrates needed to make the point about justice consisting in not meddling in the work of another. *Prima facie*, it looks as though that ground is already

covered by the stipulation that justice consists in doing one’s own work. If justice is “doing one’s own work,” then it is needless to say that justice involves “not meddling with what isn’t one’s own.” There are two ways of construing this interpretation. On an analytic construal, Socrates is only varying the *description* of justice when he includes both conjuncts or only one or the other, but he is not varying the definition itself. We might think of the two conjuncts as two sides of the same coin, two aspects of a unified concept, or two descriptions of one and the same form. On the synthetic construal, he means something separate by the two conjuncts, but he conceives of them both being realized by the same conditions. When a city or soul realizes conjunct *a*, they will also realize conjunct *b*. After one has grown accustomed to doing their own work, there is no additional work necessary for avoiding meddlesomeness; it will be avoided as a matter of course. And, *vice versa*, if one is avoiding meddlesomeness, they will be minding their own business, that is, doing their own work.

Thinking conceptually about the conjuncts, it is not clear why either mutual entailment or mutual realization should be necessary. The realization of conjunct *b*—avoiding meddlesomeness—strictly requires *not* doing something. It does not at all require or entail the doing of any particular thing. It is compatible with idleness, even death. A class in a city or a part of a soul may achieve a gold star in the realization of conjunct *b* without making any progress whatsoever toward doing their own work. Likewise, it seems perfectly possible for a person to carry out their own responsibilities, complete all their tasks, and still have time left in the day to engage in activities that are not “their own.” This is what we all do when we invest time in hobbies or recreational pastimes. Not only do we think

that such use of our time does nothing to interfere with our ability to be good citizens and productive members of society, but we often think that such activities are a necessary part of any person’s life if they are going to sustain such good standing.

The ideal city in the argument of the *Republic* might not be a place that permits leisure activities, though. What is paramount in that city is that the citizens perform the work that belongs to them, and as Socrates says when laying out the PoS, “the thing to be done won’t wait on the leisure (σχολήν) of the doer, but the doer must of necessity pay close attention to his work rather than treating it as a secondary occupation” (2.370b). It is difficult to imagine how this dictum could be compatible with hobbies. If the citizens must always be poised to perform their work, they cannot also have immersive, distracting recreational pleasures. Any pleasurable activity that might lure them, even for a time, to treat their true occupation as if it were “secondary” will be prohibited. If this is the correct understanding of Socrates, then we could take conjunct *b* to be entailed by conjunct *a* insofar as it is a given that everyone will be engaged in *some* activity. With only one choice of activity and the enforcement of the rule that that one activity must be one’s own work, it will necessarily be the case that no one performs the work of another.

The way that Socrates utilizes conjunct *b* in the course of his argument supports this reading. At 4.433a (just before the appearance of T1), Socrates reminds his interlocutors that they had earlier agreed that it is best if everyone in the city “practice[s] one occupation among those in the city (ἕνα ἕκαστον ἐν δέοι ἐπιτηδεύειν τῶν περὶ τὴν πόλιν), the one for which his nature is best suited (εἰς ὃ αὐτοῦ ἢ φύσις ἐπιτηδαιοτάτη πεφυκυῖα εἴη).”¹¹ When Glaucon confirms this earlier agreement, So-

crates then points out that a common saying among “many people” as well as “ourselves” is that “justice is doing one’s own work and not meddling with what isn’t one’s own” (4.433a). Taking the two ideas as premises, Socrates draws a conclusion: “Then, it turns out that this doing one’s own work—provided that it comes to be in a certain way—appears to be justice (κινδυνεύει [...] ἢ δικαιοσύνη εἶναι)” (4.433b). The necessity of performing only one job together with the dictum that justice requires conjuncts *a* and *b* amounts to conjunct *a* alone appearing to be justice. Socrates seems to be saying that conjunct *b* is achieved automatically if these other conditions are successfully enforced. This implies that the conjuncts are mutually entailed or, at least, that conjunct *a* entails conjunct *b*.

Of course, he does say that this turns out to be the case—that is, conjunct *a* captures the whole of justice—only “provided that it comes to be in a certain way” (τρόπον τινὰ γιγνόμενον). This is a significant qualification.¹² Mere realization of the conjunct is not sufficient for justice. Rather, that realization must arise in a particular way. What way is this? What are the ways in which a thing *comes to be* doing its own work?

As Socrates advances from here, we see him repeat this logical move of drawing a conclusion that features only conjunct *a* from premises that posit conjunct *b*. At 4.433e, he asserts that the city’s guardians will function as judges in the city and that their principal aim in this work is to ensure that “no citizen should have what belongs to another (ἕκαστοι μήτ’ ἔχωσι τὰλλότρια) or be deprived of what is his own (μήτε τῶν αὐτῶν στέρωνται).” There are two parts to this premise. The first part is a version of conjunct *b* that substitutes *having* for *doing*. That is, it is not only the *doing* of what is properly another’s, but also the *having*

of what is another's that will be prohibited in the ideal city. The second part of this premise seems to be a version of conjunct *a*. It is also cast in terms of possession, but instead of stating the affirmative—that the citizen must have what is their own—it asserts a ban on deprivation of what is one's own. From this premise that encompasses *a* and *b*, Socrates concludes, "Therefore, from this point of view also, the having and doing of one's own would be accepted as justice" (4.433e). This new conclusion echoes the previous conclusion that "doing one's own work—provided that it comes to be in a certain way—appears to be justice" insofar as both are restricted to a conjunct *a* formulation. The difference between them is only that the previous conclusion focused on *doing* while the new formulation focuses on both *having* and *doing*. It is interesting that Socrates twice relies on premises that feature a version of both conjuncts in reaching the conclusion that conjunct *a*. If conjunct *a* is in the premise and conjunct *a* is the conclusion, then it seems that there is no true impact of conjunct *b* on the argument and the conception of justice.

Or maybe we are misunderstanding the argument. Here is the point where we must consider carefully what Socrates intends with his qualification that justice is doing one's own work "provided that it comes to be in a certain way (τρόπον τινά)." The τρόπος that he has in mind for this becoming is one of doing the work that belongs to oneself and simultaneously leaving alone all work that belongs to another. That is, the kind of "doing one's own" or "having one's own" that he has in mind is not the kind that is captured by the sentiment of conjunct *a* alone, but the kind that is captured by both conjuncts together, both the imperative to do and the imperative not to do.

This integration of the conjuncts is on full display just a few lines on:

Consider, then, and see whether you agree with me about this. If a carpenter attempts to do the work of a cobbler, or a cobbler that of a carpenter, or they exchange their tools or honors with one another, or if the same person tries to do both jobs, and all other such exchanges are made, do you think that does any great harm to the city?

Not much.

But I suppose that when someone, who is by nature a craftsman or some other kind of money-maker, is puffed up by wealth, or by having a majority of votes, or by his own strength, or by some other such thing, and attempts to enter (ἐπιχειρῆ ἰέναι) the class of soldiers, or one of the unworthy soldiers tries to enter that of the judges and guardians, and these change their tools and honors, or when the same person tries to do all these things at once, then I think you'll agree that this sort of exchange and meddling (ταύτην τὴν τούτων μεταβολὴν καὶ πολυπραγμοσύνην) brings the city to ruin.

Absolutely.

Meddling and exchange (πολυπραγμοσύνη καὶ μεταβολή) between these three classes, then, is the greatest harm that can happen to the city and would rightly be called the worst thing someone could do to it.

[...] Then, that exchange and meddling is injustice. Or to put it the other way around: For the money-making, auxiliary, and guardian classes each to do its own work in the city, is the opposite. That's justice, isn't it, and makes the city just? (4.434a–c)¹³

Many of the claims in this passage demand attention. Let us begin with noting what Socrates takes to be the upshot. Justice is again understood to consist in “doing one’s own,” but whereas before he qualified this by saying that it must “come to be in a certain way,” here he finally discloses what that “certain way” is: Justice is not each *individual* doing their own work, but it is each *part* in the city doing its own work. Justice comes to be in an entity when (i) that entity has parts, (ii) the parts have their own work, and (iii) each of those parts does their own work.¹⁴

Once we see the qualification that Socrates puts on the simple “doing one’s own” formulation, it is easier to appreciate the role that conjunct *b* is playing as a premise and, ultimately, its contribution in shaping the conclusion. Conjunct *b* conveys both (i) that there is a meaningful sense in which occupations that are not one’s own really do belong to another and (ii) what that sense is. The passage above makes this function of conjunct *b* clear by laying out two senses of “another” and two corresponding kinds of “meddling in the work of another,” and then isolating just one of them as being the concern of justice. The first sense of “another” and corresponding kind of meddling in the passage are described with “a carpenter attempts to do the work of a cobbler.” The cobbler is “another” to the carpenter in the sense of belonging to the same class in the city but having been trained in a distinct skillset. Like the citizens of the first city who are naturally suited to their respective occupations because of differences in their training, the carpenter and the cobbler in the ideal city are differentiated by training alone. The kind of meddling that occurs when people differentiated only in this way trade their work, Socrates and his interlocutors agree, presents little or no risk to the city.

The second sense of ‘another’ and corresponding kind of meddling is dangerous, though. These are observed when “someone, who is by nature a craftsman or some other kind of money-maker, is puffed up by wealth, or by having a majority of votes, or by his own strength, or by some other such thing, and attempts to enter the class of soldiers, or one of the unworthy soldiers tries to enter that of the judges and guardians.” The relevant sense of ‘another’ is no longer the person within the same class who is differentiated only by training. Now it is a person in a *different* class, differentiated in a more fundamental way by the natural characteristics that determine one person to belong to one class and another to another. Whatever it is in a person’s physical and psychic composition that makes it important that they live their lives as producers and leave philosophy alone and, likewise, makes it important that another person take up philosophy and leave craft activities alone, that difference is what informs this second sense of ‘another.’¹⁵ And Socrates says of the kind of meddling that corresponds with this sense of another that it “brings the city to ruin.”

There are two kinds of meddling, then, built on two different senses of ‘another.’¹⁶ Let us call the first of these kinds *intra*-class meddling because it involves doing work that is (i) not one’s own and (ii) belongs to someone within one’s same class in the city. The second kind is *inter*-class meddling because it involves doing work that is (i) not one’s own and (ii) belongs to someone in a class different from one’s own. The difference hangs entirely on the sameness or difference between the one’s own class and that of the person whose work is meddled in. When Socrates says that *intra*-class meddling does “not much” in the way of harming the city, he certainly does imply that such departures from natural suitedness

are not entirely innocuous. When a natural carpenter makes shoes, those shoes will not be of the quality we could expect from a natural cobbler and, likewise, we are deprived of the high-quality tables that this carpenter might have produced if only he had not engaged in this intra-class meddling. But as disappointing as this sacrifice in productivity may be, there is no reason to fear that the city's justice is compromised by it. Inefficiency is not desirable by any stretch, but it is not necessarily destructive of goodness.

It is worth noting that intra-class meddling appears to be possible only for the producer class. Such meddling for the auxiliary and ruling classes is never described in the dialogue, and by insisting that the guardians “will think of the same things as their own, aim at the same goal, and, as far as possible, feel pleasure and pain in unison,” Socrates seems to suggest that there is no meaningful difference in work or in life among the rulers or among the auxiliaries, conceived as distinct classes (5.464d). They are brought up in the same way, trained in the same skills, and end up undifferentiated with respect to their natural suitedness for their occupation.¹⁷ This entirely eradicates the chance of intra-class meddling for these classes. Accordingly, the inefficiencies that are possible through intra-class meddling among the producers will never arise among the guardian classes. This seems likely to be by design since such inefficiencies in the work of the guardians would be much more impactful than the disappointments of shoddy tables and shoes.

Inter-class meddling is an entirely different problem, though. Socrates says that the justice of the city so much depends on the prohibition on inter-class meddling that even an *attempt* to enter (ἐπιχειρῆ ἰέναι) a class that is not one's own will ruin the city, i.e. dissolve its

justice and goodness. Of course, his examples of dangerous meddling in the passage above depict only *upward* attempts at mobility. That is, he imagines a producer attempting the work of the warriors and a warrior attempting the work of the rulers. The restriction, in these illustrations of the dangers of inter-class meddling, might mean that it is only *upward* meddling that presents a great harm. Indeed, in the Myth of Metals passage, Socrates warns that the city will be ruined “if it ever has an iron or a bronze guardian” (3.415).¹⁸ But, due to Socrates' insistence on ensuring that the rulers also never be permitted to partake of activities that are not their own, I hesitate to draw the conclusion that it is upward meddling alone that concerns him. For example, at 3.417a–b, Socrates says that if the guardians of the city handle money or come into possession of private property, “they'll be household managers and farmers instead of guardians. [...] they'll hasten both themselves and the whole city to almost immediate ruin.”¹⁹ This *downward* meddling leads to the same destruction as upward meddling, then. But it is only these varieties of meddling—the *inter*-class varieties—that do so.

There are two kinds of meddling, then, and both have undesirable consequences, though one is vastly more dangerous than the other. Which of these kinds does Socrates mean to prohibit when he says that justice involves not meddling in the work of another? Given the undesirability of both, we could understand him as meaning to take both kinds within the scope of the prohibition. That is, conjunct *b* could be a strict prohibition on *intra*-class meddling as well as *inter*-class meddling. As such, we should understand justice as being, in its essence, a condition that not only guards against dangerous disruptions to the natural hierarchy of ruler and ruled, but also guards against relatively small inefficiencies.

An alternative conception of conjunct *b* is possible though. We can understand Socrates as saying that it is only *inter*-class meddling that matters. On this reading, the carpenter’s meddling in cobblery is not violating conjunct *b* because she is not crossing class lines in her meddlesomeness. Violation of conjunct *b* is an *inter*-class matter, not an *intra*-class matter. Justice, on this conception of conjunct *b*, guards against disruptions to the natural hierarchy of ruler and ruled, but it does not do anything to guard against small inefficiencies.

This reading carves out distinct work for each conjunct. Conjunct *a* is construed along both *intra*- and *inter*-class lines, insofar as what it is to do one’s own work is defined in terms of both (i) which class is one’s own and (ii) which occupation one has been trained in. The carpenter does her own work by (i) keeping to her own class, which is the producer class, and (ii) doing the work that she was trained to do, which is carpentry. Of course, if the second of these conditions is achieved, then *a fortiori* the first is achieved. But the point is that conjunct *a* does seem to take even the second condition within its scope. What it is for the carpenter to ‘do her own’ is not satisfied by (i) alone. As such, conjunct *a* requires each citizen to do the very particular work they were trained to do. Its purpose is to promote maximal efficiency. Conjunct *b*, however, permits exchange of very particular work and prohibits exchange only at the more general level that violates the class divisions. Accordingly, conjunct *b* seems not to aim at efficiency at all, but instead operates as a final safeguard against destruction. Even if the city faces a drought of warriors and rulers, conjunct *b* prohibits the carpenter and the cobbler from reaching beyond the producer class to do work that is not their work. Such meddling can only hasten destruction, never resolve it.²⁰

Ultimately, Socrates endorses the latter reading. He says that “the principle that it is right for someone who is by nature a cobbler to practice cobbler and nothing else, for the carpenter to practice carpentry, and the same for the others is a sort of image of justice” (4.443c). True justice, he continues, is “something of this sort,” but strictly it is achieved as the internal condition of a composite when the parts of the composite are each disallowed from doing the work of another part (μη ἑάσαντα τὰλλότρια πράττειν ἕκαστον ἐν αὐτῷ) or from meddling with one another (4.443d).²¹ Strict justice is not the carpenter doing carpentry rather than cobblery. It is the class of producers doing the producing rather than ruling or enforcing rule, and *mutatis mutandis* for the other classes.

The impact of each conjunct in the account of justice is quite distinct, then, and each is necessary but not sufficient for justice. Conjunct *a* is necessary for ensuring that efficiency is optimized in the just entity, but it fails to be sufficient for justice because it is possible for a person to satisfy conjunct *a* and nevertheless do other work in addition to their own. Conjunct *b* is necessary as a safeguard against total destruction, but it is not sufficient for justice because it is technically compatible with doing no work at all. Justice requires that everyone in the just city do some work. Specifically, they must do the particular work for which they are naturally suited, and they must avoid any work that belongs to individuals of a different class. That is justice.

We can now see that conjunct *a* is not able to convey both necessary conditions of justice on its own. Only in specifying that justice further consists in “refraining from certain things”—to borrow Julia Annas’ phrase—is Socrates able to fill out the full essence of the

concept. Conjunct *b* specifies what must be refrained from and, in so doing, conveys an aspect of justice that is not conveyed by conjunct *a*. Thus, we must understand the conjuncts as doing separate work in the argument.

4. CONCLUSION

The two parts of Socrates' conception of justice in the *Republic* are not variations on the same idea. They each specify a distinct aspect of the nature of justice and, accordingly, each should be specified in any discussion of the account of justice on offer in that dialogue. The insistence that justice consists, in part, in "not meddling in the work of another" has much greater force than first appears. It is built on the observation that justice is found in entities that have parts and that these parts are themselves distinguished through their each having a unique work that is proper to them. 'Not meddling in the work of another' is a prohibition on any part taking up work that is proper to another. The prohibition turns a blind eye to any meddlesomeness that may occur inside of a part, taking inter-class or inter-part meddling to be the activity that is essentially inconsistent with justice.

'Doing one's own' does not capture the scope of that prohibition. It may be that in doing their own, the parts of a just entity are able to satisfy justice's requirement that they not intrude on the work of the other parts. But that circumstance does nothing to diminish the necessity of specifying the prohibition in the account of justice itself. This is because "doing one's own" does not itself conceptually necessitate not meddling, and so the specification of the prohibition as well as the clarification of its scope are both crucial to the project of building an account of justice.²²

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Translations of the *Republic* are from G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato’s Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper, 1997. Where I have modified Grube’s translation, I make note and explain why.
- 2 Grube elides the κινδυνεύει and translates this as “this [...] is justice.”
- 3 Socrates demonstrates the centrality of this question when he says, “Glaucón and the others begged me not to abandon the argument but to help in every way to track down what justice and injustice are (τί τέ ἐστιν ἐκάτερον) and what the truth about their benefits is. So I told them what I had in mind...” (2.368c). Whether or not Plato intends any account of justice in the *Republic* to amount to a full-fledged definition is a contentious matter. Rowett, for example, argues that the descriptions of justice in the soul and in the city should neither be generalized nor “equated with ‘what justice is’ in the abstract” (2018, p. 112). Instead, she argues, Socrates utilizes philosophical images for helping us to conjure a conception of justice that makes us knowers of justice even without definitional knowledge. Dominic Scott has provided extensive treatment to Plato’s distinction at 4.435d between the “longer and fuller road” to an account of justice and the shorter one which evidently is on display in Book IV (2015). The former yields a proper definition, and the latter only a less precise, though still useful, conception. I will not enter this treacherous sea of argument in this paper, except to concede that there is good reason to think we likely are not given a *logos* of justice in this dialogue. I will, however, proceed on the assumption that justice in the city and in the soul is of one form, and I will treat as the account of justice the form that Socrates discerns in Book IV (4.434d).
- 4 Also confounding is that collectively these formulations suggest indecisiveness about whether justice is predicated of composites whose parts are behaving in the requisite ways or else predicated of the parts themselves or even partless things. T3, T4, and T5 support predicating justice of composites since, in each of those texts, it is the composite that bears the name just in case the parts of that composite meet the condition specified. T2 is ambiguous between these readings, since the qualification—‘provided that it comes to be in a certain way’—may very well be reference to the idea that is the behavior of parts that makes the whole just, an idea I will defend in the next section. And T1 makes no references to parts or composites whatsoever, leaving us with the impression that such distinctions are irrelevant to the nature of justice. Because these texts occur sequentially in the dialogue, we can assume that Plato presented T1, the simplest—literally, having no reference to parts—first because of the pedagogical advantage of beginning with simple formulations, and that he advances through evermore specific formulations until he reaches, at T5, the most qualified and truest formulation. In the end, the argument of the *Republic* figures justice as predicable only of composites, and not just any composite, but composites whose parts are like those found in cities and souls (4.435b).
- 5 Ferrari says, “Justice is doing one’s part, and a just city is so constructed that each person in it does his part” (2003, p. 41). Singpurwalla explicitly identifies conjunct *a* with the definition of justice: “Plato defines justice as a state of an individual’s soul or psyche where each part of the soul performs its proper function, with the result that the individual attains psychological harmony” (2006, p. 264). Shields includes conjunct *b* in his exposition, but only on the way to concluding (prematurely, I think) that the definition boils down to “harmony” among three parts (2011, p. 94). John Cooper seems to register the second conjunct when he says that justice is “the condition of a person in which each of these three [soul parts] plays always and only a certain single role, one for which it is naturally suited” (1977, p. 151). The “only” here is surely intended to encompass conjunct *b*’s prohibition on alternative work. Nevertheless, Cooper begins from this formulation and does not explain how he understands the separate conjuncts.
- 6 An exception can be observed when Annas specifies not what justice is, but the conditions of its successful predication: “the state is just when each of the classes so conceived is performing its own task—that is, when members of the classes do not do what members of the other classes are supposed to be doing” (1981, p. 150). Annas takes conjuncts *a* and *b* to be equivalent to one another, perhaps as a result of understanding the conjunction between them—the *kai* in “τὸ τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν καὶ μὴ πολυπραγμαίνειν” at 4.433a, for example—to be an exegetical. Indeed, many scholars may be proceeding on the basis of this thought, that the second conjunct further explicates the first and so is superfluous in specifying the *Republic*’s account of justice. But this reasoning is never

- disclosed, neither by Annas nor any others, and so should not be assumed.
- 7 See Williams's, 1973, seminal article on this topic as well as Ferrari's, 2003, comprehensive response.
- 8 See, for example, Brown, 2011, who distinguishes "psychological justice" from "just acts," observing the epistemic gap between the philosophers who are motivated by their own knowledge and strict justice to do their own work and the non-philosophers in the city who manage also to do their own work, but without the same motivational explanation. See also Kamtekar, 2001, on the performance of these "imperfect virtues." The handling of this distinction is fumbled on occasions when scholars do not observe that strict justice is predicated of the city when each *part* (not each *citizen*) does its own work and does not meddle. See, for example, Smith, 1979, and Ferrari, 2003, who insist that "justice is primarily to be found not within society but within the soul," on the basis of misreading 4.443c-d.
- 9 For excellent and divergent discussions of the principle, see Greco, 2009; Meyer, 2004; Sawatsky, 2017; and Reeve, 1988, p. 172–176.
- 10 Grube translates this as "we aren't all born alike, but each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others." By construing φύεται as "born," Grube forces us to read Socrates as asserting that we are farmers or carpenters or cobblers by birth. This does not comport with his presentation of the PoS, as I explain presently.
- 11 Grube translates this as "practice[s] one of the occupations in the city for which he is naturally best suited." This is suboptimal because nested the relative clause within the genitive phrase suggests that there could be more than one occupation to which an individual is suited. In fact, the text emphasizes the singularity of occupation to which a nature may be disposed. The earlier agreement was the introduction of the Principle of Specialization at 370c, discussed in my previous section.
- 12 I will leave aside that he has committed to this being only an approximation or, at best, a probable account (κινδυνεύει [...] ἢ δικαιοσύνη εἶναι). There may be additional qualifications to explore in the semantics of his assertion, but I believe that this is not the more significant of the qualifications at work here.
- 13 Grube translates ταύτην τὴν τούτων μεταβολὴν καὶ πολυπραγμοσύνην at line 4.434b6–7 as "these exchanges and this sort of meddling."
- 14 I have argued for this specific conception of justice more extensively in McDavid, 2019.
- 15 In Book IX, Socrates suggests that what explains the differences are deeply rooted desire orientations when he says that "there are three primary kinds of people (ἀνθρώπων λέγομεν τὰ πρῶτα τριτὰ γένη): philosophic, victory-loving, and profit-loving (φιλόσοφον, φιλότικον, φιλοκερδέες)" (9.581b–c)
- 16 We can be sure that Socrates considers them different kinds because he refers to the second as "ταύτην τὴν τούτων μεταβολὴν καὶ πολυπραγμοσύνην." The ταύτην is a demonstrative that picks out the second kind and isolates it for analysis in a way that implies a sufficient difference between the two kinds for allowing differential treatment.
- 17 To be clear: The auxiliaries are undifferentiated among themselves and the rulers are undifferentiated among themselves, but each of these is different from the other. Interestingly, though, they will all be mixed together and share their earliest years of education. This is because the children who have an inborn capacity for philosophy are undifferentiable from the children who have an inborn capacity for being warriors. It is only when the children are given an opportunity to exhibit their unwavering love of truth, or lack thereof, that they will be sorted into the programs that suit their different potentials.
- 18 'Iron' and 'bronze' refers to the idea, conveyed in the "Myth of Metals" or "Noble Lie," that each citizen is born with a type of metal in their soul and that this metal determines the class to which they belong. Iron and bronze souls are producers. Strictly, the passage warns of the horrors of a producer attempting to enter the class of "guardians," but the guardian class, at that point in the dialogue's argument has not been divided into the auxiliary (warrior) and ruling classes.
- 19 We see similar warnings against downward meddling at 3.397e–398b and 5.464b–d.
- 20 Socrates describes the inevitable result of a drought of appropriate rulers in his Book VIII description of how the city will ultimately meet its ruin (8.546a–d). Even the slightly less "good natured" and "fortunate" offspring of the rulers are incapable of righting the ship, and the problem is precisely that "intermixing of iron with silver and bronze with gold that results will engender lack of likeness and unharmonious inequality, and these always breed way and hostility wherever they arise" (546e–547a). For a carpenter to attempt filling the vacancy would mean only a more rapid descent.
- 21 Socrates describes true justice in terms of psychic parts here, which has prompted a lively debate in literature around Plato's argumentative purpose in excluding reference to city-parts, a seeming violation of his assertion that justice will be the same, i.e. have the same form, in both souls and cities. See Irwin, 1995, p. 205 – 212, and Sachs, 1963. I am content with extrapolating from this passage that Plato wants to emphasize that justice is a condition concerned with "what is inside" the composite, whether soul or city, and not with "someone's doing his own externally."
- 22 I am grateful to Emily Hulme, Jeremy Reid, John Proios, J. Clerk Shaw, and Josh Wilburn, for providing constructive and even transformative feedback on various drafts of this project. Any errors in my argument are no doubt due to my misunderstanding their sage advice.

