

Doing Our Best: Feasibility Constraints and Duties of Justice in The Climate Crisis Era

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Abstract: Can agents be duty-bound towards ends that are infeasible? Some scholars have endorsed a “feasibility constraint” on justice and answered that we cannot be duty-bound to bring about the infeasible. In this paper, I question whether the feasibility constraint on justice should still be endorsed and whether we are duty-bound to pursue some aims regardless of this constraint. I ask: Can an ethical agent be duty-bound to work towards bringing about a state of affairs that is desirable but infeasible? I consider the climate crisis: climate justice may require us to work towards ends that may be infeasible, such as maintaining global climate warming below 1.5°C or mitigating climate change in a way that treats all people affected fairly. I argue that we may be duty-bound or obliged to work towards some desirable goals when faced with the infeasible and conclude that we should reject feasibility constraints on climate justice.

Introduction

Ethical motives are justified in various ways; often because they are deemed good or just by aligning with a given moral framework. Ethical agents or collectives that aim to bring about desirable states of affairs may also justify their actions by binding themselves to the ends of such aims. Those who dedicate themselves to activism often speak of duty, that there is *nothing else they could have done* but fight for a cause. For example, climate justice activists may bind themselves towards mitigating the causes and effects of rising global temperatures in ways that treat the people affected fairly, rather than providing benefits to one group at the cost of another. However, an agent may find it infeasible to bring about a desirable end due to external constraints. In this essay, I look at arguments for and against feasibility constraints. I ask: can an

ethical agent be duty-bound to act to bring about a state of affairs that is desirable but nonetheless infeasible?¹ My goal is to explore how ethical agents can bind *themselves*, other things equal, to infeasible, yet desirable, just causes.²

Some theorists have endorsed a feasibility constraint on the concept of justice where feasibility is a necessary condition for a given action to qualify as a matter of justice. On this account, we are not obligated to bring about an infeasible, yet desirable, state of affairs. Principles of justice have seemed to many to be subject to a feasibility requirement: for a principle of justice to be action-guiding or deontic, it must be possible for these aims to be realized (Kant 1998, 540). This requirement—with origins in the ‘ought implies can’ formula commonly ascribed to Immanuel Kant—has found ground in non-ideal theories of justice responsive to the work of John Rawls (1999).³ This view places feasibility as a decisive constraint on what principles or courses of action are permissible. If a moral principle recommends a course of action that is unavailable to the individual or collective, it cannot be action guiding (Gheaus 2013, 446). Action-guidance is a “necessary conceptual feature of justice,” and—the argument goes—if a course of action cannot be achieved, it also cannot represent a requirement for justice (Gheaus 2013, 446).

Following Anca Gheaus, I define feasibility as a characterization of a situation that “we know we could achieve, if we were to summon sufficient practical will and direct our (individual or collective) efforts in the right direction” (2013, 450). I view infeasibility as holding an epistemic dimension by characterizing our uncertainty about (a) *how* to achieve X and (b) the likeliness of X’s achievability (Gheaus 2013, 450-1). So, by infeasible I mean that which we view as highly unlikely, but I deny that it imposes a strict impossibility constraint. Despite this well-established position *for* the feasibility requirement, some scholars have questioned whether

this view should be endorsed. I will use an exploration of environmental ethics to help center and contextualize this claim.

First, I begin with a set of desirable but infeasible states of affairs having to do with climate justice. This section will be informed by Kyle Whyte's discussion of ecological and relational tipping points. I ask: if there are two desirable states of affairs that we ought to aim towards, where bringing about one will be at the cost of another, how can we justify binding ourselves towards realizing both situations concurrently, even if this is an infeasible activity?

Second, I consider arguments developed by Anca Gheaus, who rejects the feasibility requirement, and endorses evaluative ideals of justice for ethical agents, specifically regarding cases where it is impossible to specify the limits of what is currently feasible (2013, 445). This offers one sensible way to respond to the Whyte-inspired situation. If a state of affairs is undesirable and involves unfairness, it is unjust, in an evaluative rather than deontic (or "action-guiding"), sense—and this may have the benefit of cultivating the deontic duties:

- (i) to attempt to make feasible what we now agree is infeasible;
- (ii) to provide ourselves with an aspirational ideal that may motivate action that, although unable to bring about the infeasible, may bring about other desirable states of affairs.

I conclude that we ought to follow Gheaus in rejecting the feasibility requirement.

Third, I contrast this position with one that builds on work by Kathryn Norlock. Unlike Gheaus, this position would reject that we ought to hold desirable, but infeasible states of affairs as an aspirational ideal. We instead acknowledge that the situation is regrettably hopeless, but do not allow this to prevent us from doing our best.

Finally, I endorse a position building on Norlock's ethic, as it provides us with a more contextualized alternative to a strictly ideal treatment of feasibility constraints. I argue that we

may be duty-bound to work towards change even when faced with the infeasible, *and* while acknowledging that the situation is regrettably hopeless. In general, this paper will work under the assumption that ethics is, in part, concerned with personal development. If someone binds themselves towards an infeasible end because this is the sort of thing that develops choice-worthy moral practices, it ought to be endorsed regardless of feasibility constraints. This paper aims to demonstrate how a rejection of feasibility constraints can aid ethical agents in binding themselves toward the ends of climate justice.

Ecological and Relational Tipping-Points

Large-scale injustices are derived from complex and interconnected networks. Consider the climate crisis, which is subject to, derived from, and accelerated by long-standing dominant institutions and economies (Schenstead-Harris 2018, 15). As outlined in Article 2 of the UNFCCC “Conference of the Parties Adoption of the Paris Agreement,” (a legally binding international treaty), abiding by the target of limiting warming to no more than 1.5°C-2°C degrees above pre-industrial levels is a binding *requirement* for limiting climate change dangers (2015, 22). Yet, we are likely collectively unable to summon the required climate mitigation action to avoid these dangers (Jewell and Cherp 2020, 9). For example, if immediate climate action were taken, historically committed CO₂ emissions from existing fossil-fuel-reliant infrastructure represent more than the entire carbon budget remaining for a 1.5°C degree limit on emissions (Tong et al. 2019, 373). As outlined by the United Nations Environment Program *Emissions Gap Report* (2022), without additional action, current global policies will lead to global warming of 2.8°C; if the full implementation of global net-zero projects is assumed, which is “highly uncertain,” global warming is projected to fall within a 1.8-2.1°C range.

Climate justice must hold some *duty-binding requirements* to motivate action, given that the severity of existential climate change dangers will continue to rise without mitigation (Berkey 2021, 95). Although climate change is a collective action problem, the climate-minded agent may wonder how they can bind themselves to mitigating the climate dangers given the staggering statistics against their favour. These are two separate but interrelated claims. Climate justice must hold duty-binding requirements *for* the agent to assess the value of their actions and to bind themselves towards certain justice goals.

For example, climate change is an intergenerational issue, and “widely accepted claims about the nature and grounds of justice between generations imply that radical changes are required of us as a matter of justice” (Berkey, 2021, 95). Human activity has directly contributed to an 82 percent fall in wild animal biomass since 1970, the destruction of half of all natural ecosystems, and it will also likely be the oncoming cause of the eradication of one million species (Schenstead-Harris 2018, 14). The Earth has an annual atmospheric absorption capacity of approximately 3.1 billion tons of carbon, any emissions that exceed this limit are accumulated into the atmosphere and contribute to global warming (Ghotge 2018, 30). This self-magnification feedback loop makes the Earth inherently unstable once the limits of self-stabilization are surpassed; global carbon emissions are now approximately 3 times the annual absorptive capacity (Ghotge 2018, 31). The temperature limit of approximately 1.5-2°C is the threshold where global warming becomes irreversible, and a 3°C rise will result in half of all species on Earth becoming extinct (Ghotge 2018, 32). If mitigation efforts do not occur, consequences that ought to hold as matters of injustice, such as famine, heatwaves, flooding, mass forced migration, and increased resource wars will become more prevalent (Berkey 2021, 95). Not exceeding the 1.5-2°C limit ought to be held as a requirement for climate justice, regardless of its

infeasibility.⁴ As I see it, employing climate justice obligations is one important aspect for *believing* that our actions can successfully benefit ours and future generations. If the traditional argument for feasibility constraints is accepted, many requirements for climate change mitigation (like maintaining a 1.5-2°C limit) will not be duty-binding and may fall outside the scope of justice.

I have outlined that the mitigation of climate dangers ought to hold some infeasible ends as requirements for justice. I will now offer a specific situation of environmental injustice that shows how we may be obligated to realize desirable states of affairs with infeasible ends. Kyle Whyte posits that the current relationships between governments, corporations, and Indigenous peoples suggest that achieving coordinated urgent climate action *that would also avoid* injustice against Indigenous peoples is infeasible (2020, 1). Relational qualities—like consent, accountability, trust, and reciprocity are required for political relationships that lend themselves to coordinated action (Whyte 2020, 1). Yet the established global “entwinement of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization” has failed to establish or uphold such qualities across various societies (Whyte, 2020, 1).

Whyte poses two potential scenarios that exemplify what might occur if collective climate change action occurred on a global scale, the first situation entails dominant parties bringing about “sweeping global action to lower greenhouse emissions” (2020, 2). These parties, in their urgent action, fail to acknowledge or motivate essential qualitative relationships with Indigenous populations, which further harms such populations through colonially informed climate decisions (Whyte 2020, 2). The second scenario entails dominant parties first repairing qualitative relationships with Indigenous populations, which takes time, thus offsetting large-scale climate projects until they can be properly informed, leading to additional climate

disturbances and failing to reach the 1.5°C degree goal (Whyte 2020, 2-3). This dilemma points toward two systemic tipping points:

The ecological tipping point concerns how the inaction of societies to mitigate their contributions to atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gasses threatens to have irreversible and dangerous effects. The relational tipping point concerns the inaction of societies to establish or maintain relational qualities connecting societal institutions together for the sake of coordinated action. Such inaction eventually makes it impossible to carry out swift responses to urgent problems without perpetuating injustices. (Whyte 2020, 3)

Climate change is a phenomenon interconnected with qualities of coordinated action, and it is unlikely that “dangerous climate change and its relationship to injustice” can be prevented in a colonialist, capitalist, and industrialist system (Whyte 2020, 5). As Whyte argues, if we hold that anthropogenic climate change is a product of this entwinement, a relational tipping point was crossed years ago (2020, 5). In addition, I argue that the ecological tipping point has also likely been crossed. Whyte does not explicitly state this point, although it would be quite straightforward to argue that it has. If it is infeasible to maintain a global climate warming below 1.5°C degrees, irreversible climate dangers will occur and are already occurring, as a result. In both cases, duties of justice are subject to feasibility constraints in the sense that bringing about one just situation (relationality) entails the infeasibility of another (immediate climate change mitigation) and vice-versa.

Regardless, Whyte maintains that urgent action must be aimed at addressing both ecological and relational tipping points *together* (2020, 6). This is not surprising; across environmental ethics we find situations that require us to try to bring about infeasible states of affairs. If feasibility constraints are held, on Whyte’s account, we find ourselves in a bad place when it comes to mitigating climate change dangers, given that it may be infeasible for either tipping point to be successfully addressed. Yet, it seems wrong to argue for bringing about one

situation at the expense of another. Mitigating both tipping-points is still imaginable: we often center infeasible and desirable states of affairs in our minds and conceptualize how to go about realizing them. As such, I'd like to focus now on an exploration of evaluative and ideal theories of justice. One answer to the situation described above is offered by Anca Gheaus, who rejects the feasibility requirement on justice (2013, 445). Following Gheaus, two potential solutions are offered as a sensible response to Whyte's situation.

Rejecting the Feasibility Requirement: Ideal Theory and Justice

Gheaus offers two potential ways to go about responding to feasibility constraints. Although she uses different language, a distinction between evaluative and deontic senses of justice is drawn; if a state of affairs is undesirable and involves unfairness, regardless of feasibility constraints, it is unjust in an *evaluative* rather than *deontic* sense. This separates justice understood as what is desirable as an ideal principle (evaluative), and justice understood as what is required of agents in action (deontic). Gheaus argues that an evaluative sense of justice is not conditioned on feasibility issues and can offer criteria for action, even if current and corresponding deontic duties are not feasible (2013, 457). A deontic sense of justice is conditioned by feasibility constraints and only demands individual or collective action that abides by such constraints (2013, 447). In adopting the interpretation of 'ought implies can' as what is possible *in principle* in an evaluative sense, rather than what is required *in action* in a deontic sense, Gheaus rejects the feasibility constraint on justice and endorses the claim that we ought to make it possible for future agents to bring about states of justice that are currently infeasible (2013, 459). This interpretation offers us the benefit of corresponding deontic duties:

- (i) to attempt to make feasible what we now agree is infeasible;

(ii) to foster an aspirational ideal that may motivate action that cannot bring about the infeasible but may bring about other desirable states of affairs.

This response works against the criticism that theorizing about justice at the evaluative level is inadequate because it mandates desirable but unachievable states of affairs (Gheaus 2013, 445).

This criticism finds ground in the argument that, *in principle*, a recommended but infeasible course of action to remedy a situation will not represent a requirement of justice. Rather this situation represents a regrettable calamity, and not an unjust state of affairs; Gheaus responds that a calamity falls under the scope of justice if it could have been prevented, the effects of such could be mitigated, and the victims of which can be compensated—it *particularly* falls under the scope of justice if those who could have undertaken preventative action failed to try (2013, 446).

Large-scale anthropogenic climate crisis understood as a calamity on this account, ought to fall within the scope of justice due to the preventable nature of the situation and the level of inaction seen (particularly by dominant actors and institutions) in the past half-century or so. The specific calamities derived from this ought to fall within the scope of justice too: they could have feasibly been prevented, the effects could have been mitigated, and the victims could have been compensated *if* political and economic institutions had prioritized such actions.

This stance is not without criticism. David Wiens points to some issues with this handling of evaluative and deontic senses of justice. Gheaus notes that realizing a state of affairs *S* can only be the case if we can be reasonably confident that *S* could be realized if we summoned sufficient practical will and directed our efforts towards such (2013, 450). The feasible set, in this case, includes current infeasible states of affairs, under the condition that they are possible to achieve *in principle* in the future (Gheaus 2013, 451).

Wiens, in response, admits that some undesirable states of affairs subject to such constraints may be correctly labelled as unjust (2014, 303-4). One can be an ideal theorist of justice, but when it comes to deontic duties, requiring agents to bring about the infeasible is still held as that which fails to be directly action-guiding (Wiens 2014, 306). According to Wiens, we can be unsure whether a state of affairs is realizable, but this uncertainty still abides by feasibility constraints *and* is action-guiding; it encourages us to seek resolutions and allocate resources towards exploring the bounds of a given feasible set (2014, 306). Feasibility constraints do not necessarily prevent us from theorizing about practical possibilities and subsequent duties at the evaluative level (Wiens 2014, 307).

Returning to Whyte's two climate danger scenarios, in both cases, duties of justice are subject to feasibility constraints in the sense that bringing about one just situation (relationality) entails the infeasibility of another (urgent climate mitigation) and vice-versa. To clarify, on Whyte's account, situation A can only be brought about at the expense of setting aside situation B, and vice-versa. Yet, Whyte holds that both situations ought to be pursued urgently and concurrently. Gheaus' argument does offer one sensible way to respond, since states of affairs linked with climate danger are undesirable and involve unfairness, they can correctly be labelled as unjust in an evaluative, rather than deontic sense. This gives us the aforementioned benefits (i) and (ii). In response to Wiens, Gheaus could conclude that deontic duties may not be compatible with a rejection of feasibility constraints, but an evaluative sense of justice offers us other deontic duties related to infeasible states of affairs. Yet, these duties still hold, as seen in Wiens' criticism, deontic feasibility constraints on the original principles of evaluative justice.

In accepting Wiens' position, we seem to lose the direct connection between aspirational goals and deontic requirements that underlie Gheaus' argument. He notes that we can "probe the

limits of practical possibility without denying that [deontic] justice is, in the end, subject to a feasibility requirement” (2014, 307). Yet, there are reasons to reject this requirement, we may want to hold infeasible states as desirable, and bind ourselves to actions that aim towards such states, even if these actions’ subsequent ends are not feasible for us or others. As seen in the previous climate statistics, it may not be possible to make feasible in the future what is currently infeasible.

On Gheaus’ account, we may not have action-guiding principles to motivate actions directly related to aspirational ideals. In providing ourselves with an aspirational ideal that cannot bring about the infeasible, but brings about alternative desirable states of affairs, we may feel as though this theoretical move compromises our initial goals. This is not a defeating claim. We often must compromise what is desirable for what is feasible. Yet, this kind of compromise results in the activity of continually re-adjusting goals to suit deontic feasibility requirements, which is a disappointing one. In aspiring towards the ideal realm, an agent may have to continuously re-develop preferences within a range of available options for “making a bad situation more livable rather than striving for what one would prefer to prefer” (Norlock 2019, 11). This adaptive process “may generate a feeling of despair, a death of hope” resulting in psychological and moral damages like burnout (Norlock 2019, 11).

Following (ii), we may have to relinquish what we believe to be the proper object of duty, like a 1.5-2°C limit. This may result in the very weighty compromise to fall back on despair. If (i) has a forward-looking component, by expanding the realm of feasibility to future agents’ capacities, such costs may fall on the future global poor (Berkey 2021, 101). This is not a desirable conclusion. The urgent mitigation of climate dangers *and* the fair distribution of costs are both matters of justice. Furthermore, holding onto the evaluative sense of justice to reject

feasibility constraints may fail to be directly action-guiding, even if it offers aspirational ideals. The ethical agent may be limited by the activity of continuous re-evaluation that compromises original aims if they abide by this treatment of feasibility.

Doing Our Best: A Pessimistic Ethic?

Rejecting feasibility constraints offers agents the motivation to work towards making an infeasible situation feasible in the future, bring about related desirable states of affairs, and allows agents to *imagine* an ideal state where our goals are achieved in the face of high unlikelyness. I see this benefit on Gheaus' account. Yet, I believe there are ways to broaden our desires for climate justice that avoid the disappointing effects of continuous epistemic compromise.

Arguments against climate mitigation are often economic and political; costs and political unwillingness are two consistent constraints on ambitious climate policy. Accepting these constraints reveals problematic implications. They rely on the mere unwillingness of certain people to behave in ways that would make an end feasible, which provides 'sufficient' ground for concluding that this end is no longer a requirement of justice (Berkey 2021, 101). Thus, even if mitigating global temperatures to less than 1.5°C degrees was feasible, it cannot hold as a requirement of justice if dominant actors refuse to oblige due to mitigation efforts imposing significant costs (Berkey 2021, 101). Even if dominant actors were willing to engage in urgent mitigation efforts, this may not avoid significant climate dangers against Indigenous populations. Or concurrently, if all upcoming dangerous projects were halted, existing infrastructure emissions may still push us over the carbon budget for a 1.5°C degree limit. Our current situation is, in part, a historical result of the unwillingness of dominant actors to engage in mitigation efforts; this unwillingness has come to a head and now threatens environmental sustainability.

This is a difficult situation, urgent climate change mitigation and avoiding harm against Indigenous populations are two goals that ought to be pursued as a matter of justice concurrently.

In turning towards the individual ethical agent, I argue that theorizing about and using principles of justice as action-guiding need not rely on feasibility constraints. One way to approach this is by holding desirable but infeasible states of affairs as an aspirational ideal. Yet, the ethical agent may not want to hold such states as an aspirational ideal because of disappointment resulting from re-adjusting expectations to the non-ideal realm due to the consistent unwillingness of dominant actors to act in favor of justice. Instead, we can acknowledge that a situation is regrettably hopeless without this preventing us from “doing our best” (Norlock 2019, 6). A position building on Kathryn Norlock’s work provides us with a radical alternative to other responses in this paper.

Norlock advocates for an ethic grounded in the ‘heavy knowledge’ that future anthropogenic evils will recur, and that it may be hopeless to put an end to these occurrences (2019, 6). The central inquiry of her article aims to construct an ethic around the knowledge that some situations of injustice or ‘evil’ are infeasible—or more strongly, impossible—to prevent. She examines how the individual agent might continue to live well and do their best under the inevitability of recurring evils, and specifically how one can go about justifying their aims to continue contributing to the amelioration of states of affairs (2019, 7). This approach may warrant pessimism, although it can also clarify “appropriate goals, and shifts attention to different sorts of hopes as well as other attitudes” (Norlock 2019, 7). With this knowledge, we can sustain psychic resilience, moral motivation, and cheer, while maintaining infeasible ethical commitments (Norlock 2019, 6-7).⁵

As previously mentioned, holding aspirational ideals can inspire a feeling of despair due to continuous reassessment of feasible options when faced with cases of infeasibility. This can cause persistent epistemic and moral damages, like burnout (Norlock 2019, 11). A pessimistic Norlockian ethic offers the ability for us to be “happier in our efforts if we didn’t cultivate attitudes oriented around a fictive endpoint” (Norlock 2019, 15). This isn’t a cynical account, there is room for hope in Norlock’s theory. We intuitively desire preferable situations and imagine how we might go about contributing to realizing them (Norlock 2019, 8). It would be damaging to fight the natural capacity for day-to-day hope. For example, someone would not wait at a bus stop if they did not hope that a bus would come at all (Norlock 2019, 8). Hope can be cultivated as an attitude, and it is not necessarily mutually exclusive with the *knowledge* that some situations are hopeless or infeasible (2019, 8).

We can hope for a future free from anthropogenic climate dangers and spend a great deal of time thinking about how to realize this, even if we know that our goals are infeasible, or the situation is hopeless. Norlock’s account simply entails adjusting “our hope-goals to a praxis-conception of responding to evil” (2019, 15). This response grounds itself in helping others, accommodating ourselves to receive help, and engaging in collective practices of justice (Norlock 2019, 15). This helps us cultivate attitudes like “a willingness to return to the same task repeatedly, to maintain efforts, and to continually renew commitments” (Norlock 2019, 7). I view this as an ethic grounded in offering *motivations* for aiming towards tasks that we view the ultimate ends of to be infeasible.

It is important to note that Norlock aims to “replace hope in realizing some *change* goals with hope in realizing *adjustment* goals” that ground certain recommendations for living with recurring evils (2019, 7). The latter consists in the “goals of living well in an oppressive context,

whereas change-goals aspire to accomplishing the end of oppression” (Norlock 2019, 17n3).

Norlock’s suggestion here is that in the nonideal realm, we can better conceptualize the fact that evils will recur and equip ourselves with adjustment goals in expectation that our future is one where individuals will not act perfectly in accordance with ideals (Norlock 2019, 8).

My aim is different. I am precisely concerned with how an agent can duty-bind themselves to aim for change goals in the face of feasibility constraints. Still, as Norlock notes:

the nonideal pessimist is not free of moral responsibilities even if she is right that her efforts will not be reflected in a better world for very long. The world presents constant demands. One’s own body can insist, sometimes against one’s inclination, on carrying on. We are called upon to engage in meaningful and moral endeavors, even if we are certain they will eventually fail, or be undone by new challenges and future persons (2019, 14).

It is unclear whether Norlock would view moral responsibilities as interchangeable with obligations here. Still, this passage points towards the *reasons* an agent has for aiming towards infeasible goals. As I see it, reasons can rise to the level of obligation by virtue of being sufficiently weighty or concerned with something we hold to be of utmost importance. A climate-minded agent may want to employ the concept of obligation in sufficiently weighty circumstances to ground their actions, especially since climate justice must hold duty-binding requirements given the severity of the crisis and the urgent mitigation action required of agents.

The demands that we feel from the world, the calling we feel to engage in meaningful moral endeavors, can persist *even* when we know that our aims are bound to fail. We can feel our own body insisting, against our inclinations, to carry on pursuing a goal in the face of dire constraints. This can culminate into adjustment goals, where we cultivate responsibilities for living well under conditions of oppression or injustice. Although, this can also culminate into *change* goals, where we can duty-bind ourselves to aim towards that which we know we may not achieve. We often ‘adjust’ precisely to better equip ourselves to aim towards obligations we have

previously set. This need not culminate in the disappointing re-adjustment to aim for other desirable goals in the face of constraints. Rather, we can cultivate attitudes like a willingness to return to our previous tasks, maintain our efforts, and renew our previous commitments—all of which can ground obligations we hold in aiming towards our initial infeasible goals.

We can obligate ourselves to pursue these activities, while acknowledging that their motivational ends are unrealizable. Following Norlock, I see the emergence of an alternative set of duties to Gheaus, we can:

- (i) attempt to make feasible in the future what we agree is currently infeasible
- (ii) provide ourselves with an evaluative and aspirational ideal that motivates action that cannot bring about the infeasible, but may bring about other desirable states of affairs

Or

- (iii) accept that eliminating great injustices may be hopeless yet do our best to attenuate suffering and ameliorate states of affairs regardless of large-scale constraints.

I leave it as an open question as to whether these three guidelines are compatible. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, I intuit that there are theoretical approaches that could reconcile these conclusions to move beyond some apparent incompatibilities in ideal and non-ideal theory. A Norlockian account offers an alternative way to understand Whyte's claim that we must aim to ameliorate both states of injustice concurrently and urgently, even if we cannot realize either state. By accepting the 'heavy knowledge' that eliminating great injustices may be hopeless, an agent can guard themselves against despair while obligating adjustment and change goals in the face of feasibility constraints. We can reject evaluative ideals *while* maintaining commitments to pursue infeasible ends and adjust our actions accordingly. Climate justice can require agents to aim towards the infeasible. It also requires, as seen in Whyte's account, fostering relational

qualities of trust, accountability, and reciprocity. Similarly, a Norlockian ethic grounded in the relational qualities of helping others, receiving help, and engaging in collective action ought to be endorsed.

Ethics is, in part, concerned with personal development. If the ethical agent binds themselves towards infeasible ends because this is the sort of thing that develops choice-worthy moral practices, this ought to be endorsed regardless of feasibility constraints. What this highlights, I believe, is a way of thinking about ethical action as that which cultivates choice-worthy practices over and above merely attaining outcomes. Activism is centered around the belief that our lives are meaningful, and subsequently that the things we do can be heroic, useful, and important (Norlock 2019, 15). Dedicating one's life to climate justice ought to be seen as a praiseworthy goal. Often, we deem people heroic in life and literature when they're faced with feasibility constraints yet pursue just ends. Our theories of justice also ought to make room for the encouragement of these sorts of actions.

Aldo Leopold, a notable environmentalist of the 20th century, saw environmental destruction as inexorable, yet this did not prevent him from engaging in the goods of "activism, recreation, and affective and loving relationships [...] loving the outdoors was his motivational sustenance," he found it "inconceivable ... that an ethical relationship to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value" (Norlock 2019, 15). Feasibility constraints are appropriate for many ethical situations. Although, this paper has aimed to demonstrate that it is possible to engage in a climate ethic that rejects these constraints and still motivates duty-binding requirements towards infeasible goals. The purpose of sketching an alternative climate ethic is motivated by the action that the climate crisis demands, even if collective political and economic unwillingness makes such action infeasible. If we cannot avoid

climate dangers, *if* as Jan Zwicky posits, we are facing the 21st century Ship from Delos and are collectively in “Socrates’ position: the ship with the black sails has been sighted. Catastrophic global ecological collapse is on the horizon,” how should we proceed (2018, 43)? I argue that we should follow Leopold's assertion “that the situation is hopeless and should not prevent us from doing our best” (Leopold quoted in Norlock 2019, 6). Or even, more radically, that the situation is hopeless can motivate and *obligate* us to do our best.

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Notes

¹ In this essay, I use ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ as synonymous. By focusing on the individual, I mean any individual decision-maker—politicians, individual citizens, or even genuine collective agents.

² This theory leaves room for other duties (for example: attending to daily duties, like caring for one’s children) to take precedence (Ross, 1930).

³ Amartya Sen (2009) is a notable scholar who grounded this principle in contemporary literature.

⁴ I use a 1.5-2°C limit instead of a 0°C limit because the former acts as the threshold for irreversible climate danger. The latter would more appropriately be characterized as a strict impossibility constraint given our climate change trajectory. Still, I use the former as an example. If it turns out to be impossible, or that a lower threshold becomes possible, my point can adjust accordingly.

⁵ The question arises as to whether injustice and Norlock’s conception of evil can be used interchangeably with irreversible climate danger, although I argue that the climate crisis would fall within the scope of the “great evils of human history” that Norlock outlines.