

Theories of government: possible, feasible, possibility-sensitive, feasibility-sensitive

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Abstract. In this paper I make some distinctions, which I hope are of help for Laura Valentini and others. Are the recommendations of a theory of what the government should do possible and are they feasible? Is the project of the theorist possibility-sensitive and is the project feasibility-sensitive?

Draft version: Version 2 (11th November 2022, “natural”, “I mean...” “exceptionless”)

“Definitely some kind of sensitivity-T

Behind such demand to be free”

Let’s suppose that you have got a theory of what the government in your country should do. If a theory is just some general propositions specifying what the government should or should not do, who hasn’t? “The government should protect the right to freedom of expression”, “The government should continue to exist,” etc. Below are some distinctions which might help some academics who theorize about government a lot.

Possible or not, feasible or infeasible

A question it is natural to ask about some recommendations is whether they are possible. I mean whether what they recommend is possible, not whether it is possible to make that recommendation, to even utter it or write it! “The government should ensure that everyone is always happy.” Is that even possible? But I am not interested in this particular question, rather

the definition of possibility for this context:

(Entirely possible: initial definition) A recommendation for what the government should do is entirely possible if and only if:

- (i) It is logically consistent – there is no contradiction, as there is in “All members of government should be poets and no members should be poets.”
- (ii) It is consistent with the laws of natural science and any laws of social science.

The definition may need to be refined, but it will suffice for here. By the way, I think laws have to be exceptionless for this definition, rather than laws of normal circumstances.

Now apart from asking whether the recommendations are possible, you might also ask whether they are feasible. But what does that mean? Again here is an initial definition.

(Feasible: initial definition) A recommendation for what the government should do is feasible if and only if:

- (i) It is entirely possible.
- (ii) It is not unlikely to be achieved.

If there is some subtle distinction between the use specified and ordinary language use of “feasible,” I am going to skip past it here.

Now what is the relationship between possibility and infeasibility? Here is one way of conceiving the relationship: a recommendation can be infeasible in two ways, either by being impossible or by being possible but unlikely to be achieved. That seems to be Laura Valentini’s conception. But here is another way of conceiving the relationship. There is an order of questions. First, we ask whether a recommendation is possible or impossible. If the answer is “possible,” then we ask whether it is feasible or infeasible. So (!) to be feasible is to be possible and not unlikely, whereas to be infeasible is to be possible but unlikely. Infeasible presupposes

possible. (This other conception makes me think of R.G. Collingwood and P.F. Strawson on presupposition. See Beaver, Geurts, Denlinger 2021.)

Possibility-sensitive and feasibility-sensitive

Let's imagine that you meet a devil-worshipper, but he is not doing anything evil at the moment. He is just buying groceries. Later he tortures a cat. "That's evil," you say. (Maybe the earlier act was evil too, because it was just for giving him the energy for this, but let's assume it was not.) He's not sensitive to your criticism. He does not take the "That's evil" claim as a problem for him, even if you convincingly argue for it. So sometimes he is not doing evil and sometimes he is but all the time he is insensitive to the criticism "That's evil." He does not regard being evil as a problem.

Now here is a definition, prompted by the material above:

(Possibility-insensitive: initial definition) A project of theorizing what the government should do is possibility-insensitive if and only if: granting certain assumptions of the project, a sound argument that its recommendations are impossible is not a problem for it.

The recommendations that emerge may or may not be impossible, but the crucial question for applying this concept is whether if they are impossible, this is a problem for the project when taken in its own terms. Now it seems strange to think any project of theorizing what the government should do is possibility-insensitive, but maybe Joseph Raz's approach to saving lives is (2003: 353). Each life is of value so if three are drowning on one side of a lifeguard and two on another, the recommendation is to save all five, even if you physically cannot. The way the lifeguard is supposed to apply the recommendation is by making decisions so as to come as close as they can to realizing the recommendation: in this case, save the three. And the same approach

will be extended all the way to government. Sometimes the recommendations from summing value will be possible, sometimes not.

Here is a related definition:

(Feasibility-insensitive: initial definition) A project of theorizing what the government should do is feasibility-insensitive if and only if: granting certain assumptions of the project, a sound argument that its recommendations are infeasible is not a problem for it.

I think any theoretical project which is possibility-insensitive will also be feasibility-insensitive.

Laura Valentini has written multiple guides to ideal theory, where she says one sense of ideal theory refers to the feasibility-insensitive (2012; 2018). But she does not distinguish between “The theory makes recommendations which are impossible” and “The theoretical project is possibility-insensitive”; likewise she does not distinguish between “The theory makes infeasible recommendations” and “The theoretical project is feasibility-insensitive”. She writes:

There are two broad classes of feasibility-insensitivity for normative theories.

First, there are theories whose prescriptions are genuinely impossible to realize.

Second, there are theories whose prescriptions are unlikely to be acted upon.

(2018: 671)

Some theories with impossible or unlikely recommendations may be within projects which are feasibility-sensitive. Something has gone wrong in pursuing those projects to arrive at those recommendations: someone has not applied their method properly, made a miscalculation say. (I raised the question of who gets what credit previously, vulgarly perhaps. Deciding to make a map of all the senses of “ideal theory” was a good idea and making a distinction between possible and feasible was a good idea, and talk of feasibility-sensitive was a good idea. But the oversights identified above complicate the matter of credit, I think! By the way, I also think it is

worth distinguishing one sense of ideal theory which refers to projects that are possibility-insensitive and another sense referring to projects which are feasibility-insensitive, which covers all the former projects but probably some other ones too. See Edward 2022.)

References

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