

“Actual” Does Not Imply “Feasible”¹

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I. The Appeal to History

The familiar complaint that some ambitious proposal, while appealing in theory, is infeasible in practice naturally invites the following retort: History abounds with instances of things that seemed infeasible at the time, yet that have actually come to pass. Think of the abolition of slavery, the enfranchisement of women, the election of a black president in the United States, and the creation of the International Criminal Court. Each of these things must have seemed frankly fanciful prior to their realization. Yet, they were actually achieved. Presumably, then, many of the ambitious proposals that seem infeasible in our own time may well turn out to be perfectly feasible as well. Those who insist on the infeasibility of, say, eliminating global poverty, reversing climate change and creating a world state have simply failed to learn the lessons of history.

The *Appeal to History*, as we shall call it, is relatively pervasive. Thomas Pogge seems to have it in mind in responding to the charge that fundamental transformation of international trade practices is infeasible:

Even a few thousand of us can² change the world forever. [...] The people of Manchester proved this in 1787 when they joined the uphill battle against slavery with a petition signed by 11,000 of them. [...] If they could recognize and stop their country's crime, then so can citizens of a depressed steel town in today's United States (Pogge 2005, p. 81).³

Holly Lawford-Smith also seems to evoke the Appeal to History in questioning the infeasibility of effectively targeting factory farming, climate change, and nuclear proliferation:

We only have to go back fifty years to find women conditioned into the domestic servitude of

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² For the purposes of this paper, we shall assume that by “can” Pogge simply means “is feasible.”

³ See also: Gilabert 2012, p. 241 and Ypi 2011, p. 152; cf.

men; and a few hundred years to find black people kept by white people as slaves. At either of these historical junctures, someone might have asked: 'is emancipation feasible?' 'Is gender equality feasible?' We know that the answer to both questions is 'yes', because we have borne witness to the relevant social changes. Slavery has been abolished, and equal rights for women have been won. In the present, we find we find industry engaged in factory farming on a massive scale, resulting in the torture of a great number of animals; we find many nations with nuclear weapons, resulting in the constant possibility of nuclear warfare; we find sea levels rising rapidly due to climate change, with the result that low-lying nations are at threat of being completely submerged. We might ask: 'is abolishing factory farming feasible?' 'Is universal nuclear disarmament feasible?' 'Is a radical reduction in the global concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere feasible?' We do not know the answers to these questions, but we can make more or less educated guesses (Lawford-Smith 2013, p. 243).

Nor is the Appeal to History confined to the hidden crevices of the academy. Speaking at a G8 Meeting in London in April 2013, the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, had this to say about the apparent infeasibility of eradicating sexual violence against women in war:

Ending the 17th and 18th Century slave trade was deemed impossible⁴ and it was eradicated. ... Only two weeks ago we secured an international arms trade treaty, one that many people thought could never be adopted. And today we know the facts about sexual violence in conflict. [...] [W]e must not look away or rest until the world faces up to its responsibilities to eradicate this violence. (quoted in Nolan 2013)

Here is what we take to be the gist of the argument underlying the Appeal to History:

- (1) Some states of affairs that seemed obviously infeasible in the past, such as the eradication of the slave trade, were actually realized.
- (2) If a state of affairs was actually realized then its realization was feasible given circumstances prior to its actual realization.

Therefore,

⁴ Again, we shall assume that by "possible" Hague simply means "feasible" (rather than, say, "logically, metaphysically, or nomologically possible").

- (3) The eradication of the slave trade was, in fact, feasible given circumstances prior to its actual realization.
- (4) If momentous historical changes such as the eradication of the slave trade were, in fact, feasible given circumstances prior to their actual realization, then it may well be feasible given our present circumstances that we (i) overhaul unfair international trade practices, (ii) eradicate sexual violence against women in war, (iii) drastically reduce carbon omissions, and so on.⁵

Therefore,

- (5) It may well be feasible given our present circumstances that we (i) overhaul unfair international trade practices, (ii) eradicate sexual violence against women in war, (iii) drastically reduce carbon omissions, and so on.⁶

This argument is appealing. Yet we shall argue that it fails at the point where it seems most secure, namely premise (2). Premise (2) might seem trivially true or truistic. As Juha Räikkä put it, “[w]e can never know what really was feasible in history, *except in the trivial sense that whatever actually happened must have fallen within the feasible set*” (Räikkä 1998, p. 40, italics added; see also Goodin 1982, p. 126). On the contrary, we shall argue that (2) is false: it does not follow from the fact that a state of affairs was actually realized that it was feasible given circumstances prior to its realization; states of affairs that were infeasible given circumstances prior to their realization are sometimes actually realized. “Actual” does not imply “feasible,” as we shall put it. The fact that slavery was actually abolished does not imply that it was feasible that slavery was abolished. The fact that women were actually granted the vote does not imply that it was feasible that women were granted the vote. We are not saying that these things *weren’t* feasible. The point is just that their being feasible does not follow from the fact that they were actually realized. Nor are we saying that contemporary debates about the feasibility of political proposals should avoid drawing insights from historical cases altogether. Rather, as we shall see, our argument implies that the lessons appropriately drawn from history are more sophisticated and nuanced than the purported insight of the Appeal to History.

⁵ Stronger and weaker versions of (4) (and hence of (5)) are also possible. For example, Pogge seems to be saying not merely that it *may* be feasible but that it *is* feasible to overhaul unfair trade practices. But (4) might also be weakened so that it merely amounts to the negative claim that a presumption of infeasibility is *defeated*. Given that we will target premise (2), these complications do not matter for our purposes.

⁶ An anonymous referee has suggested an alternative rendering of the Appeal to History. We address this alternative in the final section of the paper.

Against (2), we advance what we shall call the *Flukiness Objection*. The argument is this:

- (6) The realization of a state of affairs is feasible given circumstances *C* only if: given *C*, it is not the case that the realization of the state of affairs is counterfactually fluky.
- (7) Some states of affairs that are actually realized are such that, given circumstances prior to their actual realization, their realization was counterfactually fluky.

Therefore,

- (8) It is not the case that if a state of affairs was actually realized then its realization was feasible given circumstances prior to its actual realization.

Claim (8) is just the negation of (2).

While something like the Flukiness Objection is sometimes hinted at in the context of the related literature on abilities (see e.g. Maier 2014; Vihvelin 2013, p. 182; Estlund 2011, pp. 212-13), it has not been developed in any detail. Moreover, both premises are inadequately motivated. Premise (6) typically rests on some controversial account of feasibility (or ability), or on a questionable appeal to linguistic usage. Premise (7) is impossible to evaluate without a better understanding of the relevant notion of counterfactual flukiness. We aim to develop a novel articulation of the Flukiness Objection that is both more precise and better motivated.

The paper is structured as follows. Section II clarifies the key concepts. Sections III and IV argue for the two premises of the Flukiness Objection, premise (6) and premise (7). Section V discusses the upshot.

II. Preliminaries

Our first task is to say something about two notions that will play a central role in what follows: the notion of *feasibility*; and the notion of *counterfactual flukiness*. Let us consider each in turn.

II.A. Feasibility

Premise (6) requires us to say *something* about what it means for the realization of a state of affairs to be “feasible” or “infeasible.”⁷ One approach would be to present a positive account of

⁷ Two preliminary remarks about the notion of feasibility. First, we shall assume that the notion of feasibility only applies to the “realization” of states of affairs in the sense in which the states of affairs are or could be realized by *agents intentionally acting* to bring about the states of affairs. Thus, for example, we are not interested in the “realization” of states of affairs by way of the occurrence of certain “natural

feasibility from which (6) can be shown to follow.⁸ This is a tall order, given that philosophers diverge sharply over how to analyze the notion of feasibility.⁹ We can hardly hope to resolve this disagreement here. A second approach would be to argue for (6) on the basis of linguistic intuitions and ordinary usage of the term “feasible.”¹⁰ We are not especially optimistic about the prospects for this approach. The linguistic case for (6) is hardly conclusive.¹¹ Our “feasibility” talk is notoriously promiscuous.¹² And even if there is some folk notion of feasibility for which ordinary usage is indeed a reliable guide, it doesn’t follow that this is the *relevant* notion, which may instead be one that, despite its incongruence with ordinary usage, plays a significant theoretical role.

events,” such as the rising of the sun in the east. That’s because it makes no sense to ask whether the rising of the sun in the east is “feasible” or “infeasible.” The notion of feasibility simply isn’t *applicable* to the occurrence of such natural events. For further discussion, see below, section IV. Second, we are only interested here in the *binary* sense of “feasible” – that is, the sense in which we may describe the realization of a state of affairs as either “feasible” or “infeasible.” There is also, arguably, a *scalar* sense of “feasible” that is being deployed, for example, when we describe the realization of one state of affairs as “more feasible” than the realization of another state of affairs. (For discussion, see Lawford-Smith 2013 and Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012.) While the scalar sense of “feasible” is potentially important, it is clearly the binary notion of feasibility that is at play in the Appeal to History.

⁸ This suggestion is sometimes made in the context of the related literature on abilities. For example, David Estlund (2011) offers a version of the “conditional” analysis of ability according to which “A person is able to (can) do something if and only if, were she to try and not give up, she would tend to succeed” and then immediately notes that it follows straightforwardly from this analysis that “The mere fact that it is possible that I do something doesn’t establish that I am able. It is possible that I draw a jack of hearts from a shuffled deck in a single draw, but I don’t have the ability to do so. Actuality proves possibility, but not ability” (Estlund 2011, p. 212).

⁹ There is now a substantial literature addressing the question of how to understand the notion of feasibility and its relation to notions such as probability, possibility, ability, volitional capacity, demandingness and human nature. See e.g. Raikka 1998; Brennan and Southwood 2007; Southwood 2015b; 2016; ms; Gilabert 2011; 2012; Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012; Lawford-Smith 2012; 2013; Estlund 2011; Miller 2013; Gheaus 2013; Wiens 2015; forthcoming.

¹⁰ This suggestion is also sometimes made in the context of the literature on abilities. For example, John Maier notes that there is “a sense in which fluky success ... is not sufficient for ability” (Maier 2014; see also Vihvelin 2014, p. 182).

¹¹ Austin famously presented the case of a golfer who sinks a challenging putt and of whom it seems correct to say that “it follows merely from the premise that he does it, that he has the ability to do it, according to ordinary English” (Austin 1956, 218). Similarly, someone might argue that, *a fortiori*, “it follows merely from the premise that he does it, that it is *feasible* that he does it, according to ordinary English.”

¹² As is “ability” talk for that matter. Perhaps the most frequent occurrence of the term “able” in ordinary English occurs when we describe as things that we are “unable” to do things that we are simply reluctant to do because they are somewhat inconvenient, thereby conveying our reluctance to our interlocutors in a somewhat disguised and hence more palatable form. Yet it’s not clear that we are being exactly insincere, since there is a sense in which we intend (and it is common knowledge that we intend) our interlocutors to understand what is really going on.

Here instead is the approach that we shall take. First, in lieu of a positive account of feasibility, we shall present two *necessary conditions* on a plausible account of feasibility. Many accounts arguably satisfy these two conditions; we won't take a stand here on the question of which is the correct one.¹³ Second, our approach is tailored to the *particular dialectical context* within which the Appeal to History is offered. Rather than seeking to defend the two necessary conditions as independently plausible – say, in terms of their according well with linguistic intuitions about the term “feasible” – we claim simply that our interlocutor, the proponent of the Appeal to History, cannot coherently deny these conditions while also advancing the Appeal to History.

The first condition is that the relevant notion of feasibility must be such that it is plausible to attribute the belief that realizing certain states of affairs (say, abolishing slavery) was infeasible to a substantial portion of the population at relevant points in history. Obviously, a proponent of the Appeal to History cannot coherently deny this. To get off the ground, the Appeal to History requires a stock of historical cases involving states of affairs that were actually realized despite their realization being generally believed to be infeasible at relevant points in history. If the notion of feasibility is understood in such a way that it is not plausible to attribute to a sizeable chunk of the population at the relevant point in time the belief that, say, abolishing slavery was infeasible, then the proponent of the Appeal to History simply does not have the requisite stock of historical cases to appeal to.

The second condition is that the relevant notion of feasibility must be fit to play a potentially significant role in negating normative claims within the relevant class via some kind of feasibility requirement. The so-called “*Ought*” *Implies* “*Feasible*” (OF) proviso that we have offered elsewhere is an example of the kind of feasibility requirement we have in mind:

¹³ Among the accounts that satisfy the two conditions (at least given certain plausible further assumptions) are: The *Undue Costliness Account*, which says that it is feasible for an agent *A* to realize a state of affairs *s* given circumstances *C* iff: given *C*, *A* is able to realize *s* without undue cost (Räikkä 1998, pp. 33-38; cf. Gilibert 2011, pp. 59-63; Miller 2013, ch. 1); the *Conditional Account*, which says that it is feasible for an agent *A* to realize a state of affairs *s* given circumstances *C* iff: given *C*, *A* has a “reasonable probability of success [of realizing *s*] conditional on trying” to realize *s* (Brennan and Southwood 2007, pp. 9-10; see also Lawford-Smith 2012; Gilibert and Lawford-Smith 2012); and the *Restricted Possibility Account*, which says that it is feasible for an agent *A* to realize a state of affairs *s* given circumstances *C* only if: given *C*, there is an attainable stock of all-purpose resources that enables *A* to realize *s* (Wiens 2015).

(OF) An agent *A* ought or has an obligation to realize a state of affairs given circumstances *C* only if it is feasible that *A* realizes the state of affairs given *C*. (Brennan and Southwood 2007; Southwood ms).

The relevant class of normative claims consists of the ambitious normative claims that tend to elicit charges of infeasibility—those involving, say, the elimination of global poverty, the reversal of climate change, and the creation a world state. A particular notion of feasibility is capable of playing a potentially significant role in negating such ambitious normative claims just insofar as (a) the feasibility requirement in which it is embedded is true (or valid); and (b) it is at least sometimes and to some extent an open question, given what we know, whether the targeted normative claims make infeasible demands.

This second condition is not meant to be uncontroversial. It is a matter of dispute whether normative political theories are subject to any feasibility requirement at all (Cohen 2008), or at least any feasibility requirement beyond some ultra-minimal requirement that normative claims not make demands that are impossible in some thin sense (Estlund 2014; Gheaus 2013); in the latter case, it will rarely be an open question whether the relevant kinds of normative claims make infeasible demands.¹⁴ What matters for our purposes is that denying the second condition is not a coherent possibility for a proponent of the Appeal to History. Consider the dialectical context within which the Appeal to History is advanced. Some ambitious normative claim has been challenged on grounds of infeasibility. The Appeal to History is then offered as a way of (at least partially) addressing the challenge: either by helping to establish that realizing the relevant state of affairs is (probably) feasible, or by undermining a reason to think that realizing the relevant state of affairs is infeasible. Of course, there are *other* ways to respond to the challenge. One might reject the challenge as illegitimate: “I never said that radically reforming unfair trade practices was feasible. I don’t know (or care) about that. I just said that this is what we *ought* to do” (cf. Estlund 2014). Such a response amounts, in effect, to denying that normative prescriptions are subject to a relevant feasibility requirement. Alternatively, one might dismiss the challenge as not warranting a response: “Don’t be silly. It’s obviously perfectly feasible to achieve global democracy.” This amounts, in effect, to denying that it is an open question, given what we know, whether the normative claims in question make infeasible

¹⁴ Estlund (2011) concedes for the sake of argument a stronger version of the feasibility requirement according to which “ought to *X*” implies “has the ability to *X*.”

demands and hence that something like “Ought” Implies “Feasible” will have meaningful normative application. But the proponent of the Appeal to History does not respond in these ways. She seeks to address, not to reject or dismiss, the challenge. Such a response is only intelligible insofar as she accepts that normative prescriptions are subject to a feasibility requirement and that this requirement potentially negates the kinds of ambitious normative claims that are at issue – and, hence, that it is at least sometimes and to some extent an open question, given what we know, whether such claims make infeasible demands.

II.B. Counterfactual flukiness

We now turn to the notion of *counterfactual flukiness*. Consider the following:

1. *The Game of Darts*: It’s a cold evening in July and a group of philosophers has taken over the dartboard in the Dingo’s Jaws, their favorite pub. Each of the philosophers is a hopeless player, totally uncoordinated, extremely shortsighted, and rather tipsy.
2. *Back-of-Bourke College*: You are a Professor at Back-of-Bourke College. All of your current PhD students are perceptibly mediocre, obnoxious and socially dysfunctional. Their written work is palpably poor. Their teaching records are disastrous. And their references are ruinous. You tell them that there is no point in any of them applying for permanent Philosophy jobs in the top departments in the world.
3. *Impending Financial Doom*: As a result of falling commodity prices and an unfavorable exchange rate, Quokka Mining, a major mining company, is teetering on the precipice of bankruptcy. To have any hopes of avoiding bankruptcy, the company needs \$US10 billion by early next week. Having exhausted all other options, the CEO (facetiously?) suggests that the members of the board buy a ticket in Saturday night’s Jackpot Lottery.

Now consider the realization of the following states of affairs in light of the circumstances described in the aforementioned scenarios:

- i. The realization of the state of affairs involving one of the philosophers hitting the bulls-eye given the circumstances described by the Game of Darts.
- ii. The realization of the state of affairs involving one of your current students getting a permanent job in a top Philosophy department given the circumstances described by Back-of-Bourke College.

- iii. The realization of the state of affairs involving Quokka Mining avoiding bankruptcy given the circumstances described by Impending Financial Doom.

Each of these states of affairs is such that, given the relevant circumstances, the realization of the state of affairs is *counterfactually fluky* in the sense we have in mind. By this we simply mean the following: given the relevant circumstances, it would be a fluke if the state of affairs were actually realized.

We propose the following:

- (CF) The realization of a state of affairs is *counterfactually fluky* given circumstances *C* if and only if: given *C*, the realization of the state of affairs is sufficiently modally fragile.¹⁵

To say that the realization of a state of affairs is *sufficiently modally fragile* given *C* is to say that the state of affairs is *not realized* in a sufficiently high proportion of the worlds where circumstances *C* obtain (see Lyon 2011, sec. 4; Southwood 2015a, p. 519, n. 220). Consider the state of affairs involving a philosopher hitting the bulls-eye in view of the circumstances described by the Game of Darts. This would surely be a fluke if it were actually realized. We suggest that it would be a fluke just because no philosopher hits the bulls-eye in a suitably high proportion of the worlds in which the circumstances described by the Game of Darts obtain. Or consider the realization of the state of affairs in which one of your current students gets a permanent job in a top Philosophy department given the circumstances described by Back-of-Bourke College. This is counterfactually fluky because, given the specified circumstances, one of your current students succeeds in landing a permanent job in a top Philosophy department in a sufficiently low proportion of worlds at which the circumstances described by Back-of-Bourke College obtain.

¹⁵ One might wonder why we don't give a *probabilistic* characterization of the notion of a fluke. The quick answer is that none of the standard interpretations of probability – the subjective or the objective interpretations – will do. The standard subjective interpretations make the occurrence of flukes depend on facts about agents' mental states. The standard objective interpretations have difficulty handling rare events; and some flukes are surely rare events. Also, if determinism is true, the objective interpretations imply that there are no flukes but only the appearance of flukes. Aidan Lyon's (2011) notion of "counterfactual probability" can facilitate a probabilistic characterization. Notice, though, that Lyon presents counterfactual probability as measure of modal robustness, which is the dual of our notion of modal fragility.

Several remarks about the notion of counterfactual flukiness are in order. First, it is a *counterfactual* notion and, as such, importantly different from the notion of (*actual*) *flukiness*. Obviously, the realization¹⁶ of a state of affairs may be counterfactually fluky without being fluky – if, say, the state of affairs is not actually realized, though not vice versa. The realization of a state of affairs is (*actually*) *fluky* if and only if (i) it is counterfactually fluky and (ii) it is actually realized.

Second, the notion of counterfactual flukiness is a *circumstance-relative* notion. The realization of a state of affairs only counts as counterfactually fluky (or not) *given certain circumstances*. So the realization of the state of affairs involving a philosopher hitting the bulls-eye counts as counterfactually fluky given the circumstances described by the Game of Darts, but it may not count as counterfactually fluky given other circumstances: say, those in which one of the philosophers has 20/20 vision, has been drinking water all night, and has secretly been receiving personalized training from Luis “the Flamethrower” Barberan. This circumstance-relativity helps to explain certain changes in counterfactual flukiness over time. For example, suppose that, at some time prior to the situation depicted in *Impending Financial Doom*, the Quokka Mining board members had several reasonable options for avoiding bankruptcy. Yet, for whatever reason, bankruptcy was not avoided and Quokka is now on the brink. Plausibly, had Quokka Mining actually avoided bankruptcy given those earlier circumstances, it would not have been a fluke, whereas given their current circumstances, actually avoiding bankruptcy would be a fluke.¹⁷

Third, the instantiation of counterfactual flukiness is *compatible with a deterministic world*; the realization of a state of affairs can be counterfactually (and indeed actually) fluky even if the state of affairs was determined to occur by the relevant laws, given a maximally

¹⁶ Notice here and throughout the paper that when we talk of the “realization” of a state of affairs – e.g. the realization of a state of affairs being “feasible” or “not feasible”, “counterfactually fluky” or “not counterfactually fluky” – this should not be taken to imply that the state of affairs is realized at the actual world. We are careful to specify “actual realization” when we mean to convey the latter.

¹⁷ In saying this, we stress that our objection does not license just *any* description of the relevant circumstances. In determining whether a state of affairs *s* that has been actually realized was counterfactually fluky prior to its actual realization, we defer to historians’ attempts to converge on something like a “canonical” description of the relevant circumstances and ask whether the actual realization of *s* was fluky relative to this canonical description at some salient time prior to its realization. In determining whether a state of affairs *s*’ that has yet to be actually realized is a counterfactual fluke, we defer to the relevant scientists’ attempts to converge on a canonical description of status quo and ask whether the actual realization of *s*’ would be fluky given this canonical description. In short, our argument requires that the realization of the state of affairs in question qualifies as counterfactually fluky relative to some salient description of the case, where “salience” is settled by the relevant sciences.

detailed specification of the initial micro-conditions. The key concept of modal fragility is meant to indicate that the realization of a state of affairs is highly sensitive to variations in initial micro-conditions. If a specification of the relevant circumstances is consistent with wide variation in initial micro-conditions, and if the realization of the state of affairs is highly sensitive to variation in initial micro-conditions, then the realization of the state of affairs is modally fragile and, hence, counterfactually fluky (cf. Lyon 2011, sec. 4). To illustrate, consider the state of affairs where Quokka Mining avoids bankruptcy given the circumstances specified by Impending Financial Doom. Suppose the actual world is such that, given the relevant laws and the initial micro-conditions at some time t_0 (e.g., each relevant person's neural states, the micro-states of the device that assigns lottery numbers, the micro-states of the device that draws winning lottery numbers, and so on), a member of the Quokka Mining board is determined to win the Saturday Jackpot and use the money to save the company from bankruptcy. Thus, in the world as described, it is certain that Quokka Mining will avoid bankruptcy. Nevertheless, realizing that state of affairs is counterfactually (and actually) fluky because its realization is extremely sensitive to variations in the relevant initial micro-conditions. For most specifications of the initial micro-conditions – even those that are very slightly different – Quokka Mining would not have avoided bankruptcy. Quokka Mining was “lucky” that the actual world was one at which the initial micro-conditions were just so; given the circumstances described by Impending Financial Doom, it would have fallen into bankruptcy had the initial micro-conditions turned out (nearly) any other way.

Fourth, to say that the realization of a state of affairs is counterfactually fluky relative to some specification of the relevant circumstances does not imply that the state of affairs *couldn't* be realized without being a fluke given those circumstances. To illustrate the point, consider again the state of affairs in which a philosopher hits the bulls-eye given the circumstances specified by the Game of Darts. Realizing this state of affairs is counterfactually fluky given those circumstances since a philosopher hits the bulls-eye in a sufficiently low proportion of the worlds at which the circumstances of the Game of Darts obtain. This is consistent with there being *some* worlds at which the circumstances described by the Game of Darts obtain at which hitting the bulls-eye is not a fluke. For example, consider those worlds at which some prankster creeps into the Dingo's Jaws while no one is watching and replaces the darts with special darts that are fitted with a special homing device such that, no matter how they are thrown, they hit the bulls-eye. That set of worlds is arguably consistent with our specification of the Game of

Darts. So, while a paradigm case of counterfactual flukiness, it seems plausible that the state of affairs in which a philosopher hits the bulls-eye *could* be realized in a non-fluky way given (some refinement of) the circumstances described by the Game of Darts.

Finally, in making judgments involving counterfactual flukiness we must be very careful to specify the *states of affairs* that are at issue. Consider a modification to the scenario described by Back-of-Bourke-College in which all *but one* of your students are perceptibly mediocre, obnoxious and socially dysfunctional. The exception is Brilliant Brunhilde, who is sufficiently brilliant that it would not be a fluke if she were to get a permanent job in a top Philosophy department. But suppose that another of your students, Abysmal Anton, actually gets a top philosophy job. Is it counterfactually fluky that one of your students gets a permanent job at a top philosophy department given the circumstances? *Anton* getting a permanent job in a top Philosophy department is surely counterfactually fluky given the relevant circumstances since it is highly modally fragile: by hypothesis, the state of affairs in which Anton gets such a job is not realized at a sufficiently high proportion of relevant worlds. By contrast, the state of affairs in which *one* of your current students gets a permanent job in a top Philosophy department needn't be counterfactually fluky given the relevant circumstances, since it might not be sufficiently modally fragile. Since Brunhilde is also one of your current students, and since she lands a job at a sufficiently high proportion of the relevant worlds, the state of affairs in which *one* of your current students gets such a job might be realized at too many relevant worlds for it to be counterfactually fluky.

Having done something to clarify these key concepts, we now turn to the task of defending each of the premises of the Flukiness Objection.

III. "Feasible" implies "not counterfactually fluky"

The first premise of the Flukiness Objection holds that

- (6) The realization of a state of affairs is feasible given circumstances *C* only if: given *C*, it is not the case that the realization of the state of affairs is counterfactually fluky.

Our argument for (6) is simple. There is no account of feasibility compatible with the denial of (6) that is also compatible with the two necessary conditions for a plausible account of feasibility that we enumerated above. These conditions are such that a proponent of the Appeal to History

cannot coherently deny them. Any account of feasibility that is compatible with the denial of (6) violates either or both of these conditions and, hence, is not an account that a proponent of the Appeal to History can coherently accept.

What might an account of feasibility that is compatible with the denial of (6) look like? Such an account would have to identify some condition that is supposed to be sufficient for the realization of a state of affairs to be feasible that is compatible with the realization of the state of affairs being counterfactually fluky, i.e. such that its realization is sufficiently modally fragile to count as a fluke if it were to be actually realized. What kind of account of feasibility might fit the bill?

The simplest option is to hold that feasibility is simply a matter of what is possible in some ultra-thin sense: say, what is logically, metaphysically, or nomologically possible. Clearly the realization of a state of affairs could be logically, metaphysically, and nomologically possible and yet sufficiently modally fragile to count as counterfactually fluky. This is true of each of the three fictional examples that we discussed in the previous section. Yet these are paradigm cases of states of affairs whose realization is counterfactually fluky. If feasibility is ultra-thin possibility, then (6) is false.

To the best of our knowledge, no one has explicitly defended this feasibility-as-ultra-thin-possibility account. But Holly Lawford-Smith (2013) comes close. According to Lawford-Smith, the realization of a state-of-affairs is “feasible iff there exists an agent with an action in her (its) option set that has a positive probability of bringing it about”; that is, “an action (A) such that the probability of [actually realizing] the [state of affairs] given that action is greater than zero” (Lawford-Smith 2013, pp. 248, 251). Moreover, Lawford-Smith holds that “[a]n agent has an action in her (its) option set iff her performing that action is not ruled out by any hard constraint... Hard constraints include facts about what is logically, conceptually, metaphysically, and nomologically impossible ...” (Lawford-Smith 2013, p. 252). So, according to Lawford-Smith, realizing a state of affairs is feasible given circumstances *C* iff given *C* there exists a relevant agent with an action such that (i) it is not logically, conceptually, metaphysically, or nomologically impossible that the agent performs the action and (ii) the probability of the agent’s realizing the state of affairs, given the action, is greater than zero.

Lawford-Smith’s account also entails the denial of (6). For there are obviously states of affairs of which it’s true that (a) there are relevant agents for whom it is not logically, conceptually, metaphysically, or nomologically impossible that they perform certain actions,

such that the probability of the agents' realizing the states of affairs, given those actions, is greater than zero and yet (b) the realization of the states of affairs is counterfactually fluky. This is true of each of the three examples given in the previous section. Take the state of affairs involving Quokka Mining avoiding bankruptcy given the circumstances described by Impending Financial Doom. There is a relevant agent (any member of the board) for whom it is not logically, conceptually, metaphysically, or nomologically impossible that he or she buys a lottery ticket. And there is a non-zero probability, given any member of the board's buying a lottery ticket, that he or she will win the lottery and hence that Quokka mining will avoid bankruptcy. So, Lawford-Smith's account implies that Quokka Mining's avoiding bankruptcy is feasible given the circumstances described by Impending Financial Doom, even though, given these circumstances, it would be sufficiently modally fragile to count as a fluke if Quokka Mining were to avoid bankruptcy. Hence, on Lawford-Smith's account, (6) is false.

Here is the problem. An account of feasibility along these lines plainly violates the two necessary conditions enumerated above; thus, however independently plausible or implausible, it cannot be coherently accepted by a proponent of the Appeal to History. Take the first condition. This holds that an account of feasibility must be such that it is plausible to attribute to a substantial portion of the population, at relevant points in history, the belief that realizing certain states of affairs – the abolition of slavery, the enfranchisement of women, or whatever – was infeasible. If the feasibility-as-ultra-thin-possibility account is right, then people must have believed that abolishing slavery and enfranchising women were logically, metaphysically, or nomologically impossible. If Lawford-Smith's account is right, then people must have believed that any action that had a positive probability of resulting in the abolition of slavery was logically, conceptually, metaphysically, or nomologically impossible for the relevant agents to perform. Both implications are absurd. It is manifestly implausible that people in the 17th and 18th century generally believed that abolishing slavery and enfranchising women were infeasible if "feasible" means what these accounts say it means. So these accounts of feasibility, while compatible with the denial of (6), violate the first condition.

Or take the second condition. This holds that an account of feasibility must be such that the notion of feasibility is capable of negating normative claims of the relevant ambitious kind via a feasibility requirement (such as the principle that "Ought" Implies "Feasible"). Virtually none of the kinds of normative claims that even the most ambitious political theorists advance could turn out to make infeasible demands if these accounts of feasibility are correct. The

resulting feasibility requirement, though valid, will lack meaningful normative application. So these accounts will also violate the second condition.

Consider the sorts of social and political arrangements envisaged by the most extravagant, pie-in-the-sky forms of Marxism. It is clearly logically, metaphysically, and nomologically possible that a Marxist utopia be realized in, say, Australia. Similarly, there are clearly actions that are perfectly logically, metaphysically, and nomologically possible for Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to perform that would realize these kinds of arrangements with non-zero probability. So the feasibility-as-ultra-thin-possibility account and Lawford-Smith's account imply that it is feasible that Australia realize a Marxist utopia. Thus, they imply that we cannot, on the basis of a feasibility requirement like "Ought" Implies "Feasible", infer the negation of the claim that Malcolm Turnbull ought to turn Australia into a Marxist utopia.

If this is so, then clearly there is no point bothering about the feasibility of states of affairs of the kind that are actually a matter of *controversy* among political philosophers, such as whether we ought to drastically reduce global poverty, or reverse climate change, or whatever.¹⁸ For these things will all count as straightforwardly feasible, and there will be no prospect whatsoever of negating corresponding normative claims on the basis of something like "Ought" Implies "Feasible."¹⁹ Thus, there would be no need to address the charge that some ambitious normative claim makes infeasible demands by proffering the Appeal to History or in any other way. The charge can be straightforwardly dismissed.

In sum, we've shown that a proponent of the Appeal to History cannot coherently accept any account of feasibility that is compatible with the denial of (6) since any such account will fail

¹⁸ Lawford-Smith (2013) would presumably be happy to embrace this conclusion since her primary aim is to argue for the claim that most of the interesting action for political philosophy concerns the *scalar* notion of feasibility. However, if this is her view, then her position is dialectically problematic. The Appeal to History is concerned with the binary notion of feasibility, not the scalar notion. If Lawford-Smith accepts that the binary notion of feasibility is normatively unimportant on the grounds that virtually any normative claim will trivially satisfy it, she should respond to the charge that such and such a normative claim makes infeasible demands, not by trying to address the charge (as she seems to do; see 2013, p. 243), but by dismissing it.

¹⁹ The only context in which we will be able to negate some putative normative claim on the basis of the principle that "Ought" Implies "Feasible" is when the normative claim makes *impossible* demands. It's not the case that this will never happen. It might happen, for example, when the normative claim involves certain sub claims that are internally inconsistent of the kind that can be brought out by an impossibility theorem. But such cases are nonetheless extremely rare. We are grateful to Pablo Gilabert for discussion of this point.

to satisfy two conditions on a plausible account of feasibility that are presupposed by the Appeal to History.

IV. "Actual" does not imply "not counterfactually fluky"

Let us now turn to the second premise of the Flukiness Objection. This holds that

- (7) Some states of affairs that are actually realized are such that, given circumstances prior to their actual realization, their realization was counterfactually fluky.

Our argument for (7) is simple. First, (7) is true if there is even a single real-world example of a state of affairs that was actually realized and yet whose realization was counterfactually fluky given circumstances prior to its actual realization. Second, there are a number of real-world examples of states of affairs that were actually realized despite their realization being counterfactually fluky given circumstances prior to their actual realization. Therefore, (7) is true.

Here are a couple of candidate real-world examples:

1. On the night of 24 March 1944, following a bomber raid on Berlin, *DS664*, an Avro Lancaster heavy bomber in No. 115 Squadron of the British Royal Air Force caught fire as a result of being struck by a Luftwaffe Ju 88 and began to spiral towards the ground. Flight Sergeant Nicholas Alkemade was a rear gunner in *DS664*. Alkemade's parachute had been damaged by the fire and was unusable, so he chose to jump from the plane without a parachute. He fell approximately 18,000 feet but survived thanks to his fall being cushioned by pine trees and snow on the ground. His only injury was a sprained leg.
2. In November 2002, Angelo and Maria Gallina, a husband and wife from California, bought two separate tickets for different lottery competitions, the Fantasy Five and SuperLotto Plus. The odds of winning the Fantasy Five were 1 in 576,000 and the odds of winning the SuperLotto Plus were 1 in 41.4 million (the odds of winning both lotteries were 1 in 24 trillion). The two lotteries were drawn on 20 November, 2002. The Gallinas won both lotteries, in the process augmenting their wealth to the tune of US\$17,126,000.

These examples establish the truth of (7) only insofar as the two following claims are true: first, they are examples of states of affairs that were *counterfactually fluky* given circumstances

prior to their actual realization; second, they are examples of states of affairs that were *actually realized* in the relevant sense. Let us take each of these claims in turn.

Are our cases examples of states of affairs that were counterfactually fluky given circumstances prior to their actual realization? Here are two objections. First, one might claim that our cases do not involve the occurrence of genuine flukes but only *apparent* flukes. They appear to us to involve flukes only because we lack full information. But if we had full information, then we would see that they were not flukes at all.

This response seems to us to be intelligible only insofar as one accepts the claim that there are *no* genuine flukes. But why accept this claim? The claim may seem plausible if we think that (a) the notion of a fluke is to be understood in *objective probabilistic* terms – say, as the realization of a state of affairs that has a sufficiently low physical chance of occurring²⁰; (b) the truth of determinism entails that all events have an objective probability of 0 or 1; and (c) determinism is true. But notice that we deny (a). (We need not deny (b) or (c).) We have suggested that the notion of a fluke is to be understood as a highly *modally fragile* event. It seems clear that our examples involve the realization of states of affairs that were sufficiently modally fragile, given circumstances prior to their realization, to count as flukes. This can be so even if, given the precise initial micro-conditions and the relevant physical laws, the realization of each of the states of affairs had an objective probability of 1. The point in saying that our examples involve flukes is to indicate that they involve states of affairs whose realization is highly non-robust to variation (within a certain salient range) of the relevant micro-conditions.

This reply raises a second objection, namely, that our examples involve flukes under an unduly narrow range of descriptions of the cases. In other words, the verdict that our examples involve flukes is unacceptably description-sensitive. For example, given our reply in the last paragraph, one might maintain that our examples involve apparent flukes as follows: if we could specify the precise initial micro-conditions for each case, the states of affairs in question would be realized at a sufficiently high proportion of worlds at which the relevant circumstances obtain to qualify as non-flukes. In reply, we concede that one could refine the specification of the relevant circumstances in the suggested way and thereby challenge our claim that these cases

²⁰ Lyon (2011) characterizes his notion of counterfactual probability – which is a measure of our notion of modal fragility – as a kind of objective probability. So, here, we are considering an analysis of flukiness in terms of the classical objective probabilities.

involve flukes.²¹ But this maneuver comes at the cost of giving up the possibility of conveying a valuable kind of explanatory information.

Flukiness judgments are meant to convey what Jackson and Pettit (1992) call “modally comparative information” (cf. Lyon 2011, pp. 427-429). According to our proposal, judging the realization of a state of affairs *s* to be counterfactually fluky conveys information about how the worlds at which *s* is realized compare with relevantly similar worlds at which *s* is not realized. In particular, such judgments indicate that the realization of *s* is highly non-robust to variation (within a salient range) of the initial micro-conditions. Such modally comparative information serves a valuable explanatory purpose. In distinguishing flukes from non-flukes, we convey that the actual realization of some state of affairs was highly dependent on certain micro-conditions being just so, while the realization of other states of affairs depended very little on the specification of the relevant micro-conditions. This is valuable information for explaining facts about the actual world. The skeptical maneuver considered above foregoes the possibility of conveying this explanatory information.

One might still try to maintain that our examples are unacceptably description-sensitive without incurring the foregoing cost. Take the case of Nicholas Alkemade. It is possible that Alkemade’s parachute, while damaged, was not too damaged to use but that, not knowing this, he chose nonetheless not to use it. Given these modified circumstances, his surviving the fall from 18000 feet might not have been too modally fragile after all. Plausibly, Alkemade survives the fall in a sufficiently high proportion of the worlds at which the modified circumstances obtain – namely, at most of the worlds at which he deploys the damaged but usable parachute.

Modifying the circumstances in the suggested ways misses the point of our examples. In fact, Alkemade survived his fall *without the aid of a parachute*. In asserting that this involved a fluke, we mean to convey the following information: that, even given the modified circumstances, actually realizing the state of affairs in which Alkemade survived a fall of 18000 feet without a parachute required the relevant micro-conditions to be just so. Notice that, on our proposal, this information implies that the realization of the states of affairs in our examples was counterfactually fluky.

²¹ Although it’s unclear that non-flukiness given this highly precise specification of the circumstances signals great description-sensitivity; there might remain a great many specifications of the relevant circumstances such that our examples continue to involve fluky states of affairs.

We might also handle the objection without refining the description of the state of affairs at issue by holding the line on our specification of the relevant circumstances instead. To our mind, asking whether Alkemade's survival was fluky presupposes a certain salient specification of the relevant circumstances. In particular, without any evidence that Alkemade had a functioning parachute available, our inquiry implicitly presupposes a set of possible worlds that excludes these possibilities. Put differently, our inquiry regarding the flukiness of Alkemade's survival presupposes that we are comparing the actual world to the set of possible worlds at which Alkemade did not have a functioning parachute available. Of course, were we to find out after the fact that Alkemade hid the fact that he deployed a functioning parachute, then we would have to revise our specification of the relevant circumstances. In light of these revisions, we might judge that the actual realization of the state of affairs was not fluky. But we have no reason to think that the states of affairs in our examples were actually realized under these revised circumstances. Hence, we could resist the skeptic's attempt to revise our specification of the relevant circumstances as gratuitous – our consideration of the case implicitly presupposes something like our specification of the relevant circumstances and we have no evidence that might persuade us to revise the case as proposed. In view of the foregoing, we conclude that our examples involve states of affairs that were counterfactually fluky given the relevant circumstances prior to their actual realization.

Next, are the examples that we have given examples of states of affairs being *actually realized* in the relevant sense? An affirmative answer might seem trivially true but, in fact, it's not. It might be objected that, while our examples involve states of affairs being "realized" in some sense, they are not examples of states of affairs being "realized" in the sense that is relevant for the Appeal to History. The relevant sense of "realization" is a *feasibility-applicable* sense. And the notion of feasibility is only applicable to the realization of states of affairs by way of *intentional action* – that is, by way of agents intentionally acting to bring about the state of affairs.²²

We accept the point that the notion of feasibility only applies to the realization of states of affairs by intentional action (see note 7 above). It's clearly not applicable, for example, to the realization of states of affairs in which no agent is playing a role in realizing those states of affairs, such as the occurrence of natural events. Consider the striking example of Ann Hodges, who, in late November 1954 in Sylacauga, Alabama, was hit on the thigh by a softball-sized

²² We are grateful to Bob Goodin for pressing this objection.

meteorite while napping on her couch after it had crashed threw the ceiling of her home and bounced off the radio. There is a sense in which the highly fluky state of affairs involving Ann Hodges being hit by the meteorite was “realized”. But it is clearly not a feasibility-applicable sense of “realization.” To see this, notice that it would be highly infelicitous to describe Ann Hodges being hit by the meteorite as “feasible” or “infeasible,” or indeed to ask the question whether it was feasible or infeasible. The notion of feasibility simply doesn’t apply in such cases.

Nor does the notion of feasibility apply to the realization of states of affairs in which agents contribute causally (perhaps even by their intentional action) but in a wholly unintentional way to the realization of the states of affairs. Consider the case of Randy Johnson, who on 24 March 2001 was pitching during the seventh inning of a Major League Baseball spring training game. During one particular pitch, a dove flew across the line (perpendicular to the line) of the pitch and was struck dead by Johnson’s fastball. We might well say, not merely that the state of affairs involving Randy Johnson hitting the dove was “realized,” but that Johnson himself “realized” (or “helped to realize”) this state of affairs by performing the intentional action of pitching the ball. Still, this doesn’t seem to be a feasibility-applicable sense of “realization.” For, again, it seems infelicitous to describe Johnson’s hitting the dove as “feasible” or “infeasible,” or even to ask the question whether it was feasible or infeasible – Johnson had no intentional state with respect to *hitting the dove*. The notion of feasibility seems inapplicable to such cases.

One might argue, by analogy to the Hodges and Johnson cases, that our examples don’t involve states of affairs being realized in the feasibility-applicable sense. Here’s such an argument. First, our examples involve states of affairs whose realization the relevant agents knew to be counterfactually fluky given circumstances prior to their actual realization. Second, it is conceptually impossible for agents to intend to realize states of affairs that they believe to be counterfactually fluky. So, third, our examples don’t involve agents intending to realize the relevant states of affairs. But, fourth, feasibility is only applicable to the realization of states of affairs by agents acting intentionally to realize them. So, finally, our examples don’t involve states of affairs being realized in the feasibility-applicable sense.

Is it really *conceptually impossible* to intend to realize a state of affairs that we believe to be counterfactually fluky? This seems rather questionable. It seems more natural to argue

that there is a structural requirement of rationality²³ not to intend to realize states of affairs that we believe to be counterfactually fluky. On this alternative view, it would be *irrational* rather than impossible for us to intend to realize states of affairs that we believe to be counterfactually fluky.

But even if it is conceptually impossible rather than merely irrational to intend to realize states of affairs that we believe to be counterfactually fluky, it simply does not follow from the agents in our examples not *intending* to realize the relevant states of affairs that they don't *intentionally act* to realize those states of affairs. For the agents in our examples have *intentional attitudes* of a kind that, even if they fall short of full-blooded intentions, nonetheless suffice for us to ascribe intentional action to them when they succeed. There is a state of affairs that they are *attempting* or *trying* to realize, something that they are *aiming* at, even if they are under no illusions about just what a long-shot it is.²⁴ Thus, Alkemade was making some kind of *attempt* at survival when he jumped out of the plane, even if he wasn't *intending* to survive. The Gallinas were making some kind of *attempt* to enrich themselves when they bought the lottery tickets, even if they weren't *intending* to do so. The fact that in each case, and against the odds, they succeeded means that it is appropriate to say that they "intentionally acted" to realize the relevant state of affairs and, hence, that they actually "realized" the state of affairs in the feasibility-applicable sense.²⁵

V. The upshot

We have argued that "feasible" implies "not counterfactually fluky" and that "actual" does not imply "not counterfactually fluky." So, "actual" does not imply "feasible." More precisely,

²³ Familiar examples of structural requirements of rationality include: the *Modus Ponens Requirement* (that one is required to believe that Q if one believes that P and one believes that if P then Q); the *Instrumental Requirement* (that one is required to Y if one intends to X and believes that one can only X by Y-ing). For discussion of such structural requirements of rationality, see e.g. Broome 2013; Kolodny 2005; Southwood 2008.

²⁴ The idea that there are intentional states that fall short of intentions is a familiar one. For example, there are what Hugh McCann calls "settled objectives" (McCann 1991; see also Bratman 2009).

²⁵ Notice, moreover, that this conclusion is further supported by the following linguistic data. In the examples of Ann Hodges and Randy Johnson, it is clearly infelicitous to ask whether the realization of the relevant state of affairs was feasible given the relevant circumstances. By contrast, in our examples, the question, "Was the realization of the relevant state of affairs feasible given the relevant circumstances?" does not seem infelicitous. The answer to the question, we take it, is that it was not feasible in either case.

- (6) The realization of a state of affairs is feasible given circumstances *C* only if: given *C*, it is not the case that the realization of the state of affairs is counterfactually fluky.
- (7) Some states of affairs that are actually realized are such that, given circumstances prior to their actual realization, their realization was counterfactually fluky.

Therefore,

- (8) It is not the case that if a state of affairs was actually realized then its realization was feasible given circumstances prior to its actual realization.

What is the upshot?

Most immediately, it turns out that an apparent truism is false. As we noted above, the idea that “actual” implies “feasible” can appear truistic. To quote Juha Räikkä once again: “We can never know what really was feasible in history, *except in the trivial sense that whatever actually happened must have fallen within the feasible set*” (Räikkä 1998, p. 40: italics added). Far from being trivially true, this claim is false.

Additionally, a relatively common and *prima facie* plausible reply to the feasibility skeptic – the Appeal to History – is unsound. Claim (8) is simply the negation of

- (2) If a state of affairs is actually realized then its realization was feasible given circumstances prior to its actual realization.

Since (2) is false, the Appeal to History contains a false premise and is unsound. It is simply a mistake to answer the feasibility skeptic’s challenge with the Appeal to History.

Might there be some alternative rendering of the Appeal to History that escapes our Flukiness Objection? One possibility is the following.²⁶ Suppose a pessimist argues that we have no obligation to eradicate global poverty because achieving that goal is infeasible. An optimist might reply as follows: “History is full of desirable moral goals that seemed infeasible, but many of these were realized. The long-run frequency with which apparently infeasible moral goals have been achieved over the course of history gives us reason to be optimistic about the prospects for eradicating global poverty. Without any further evidence regarding the prospects for eradicating global poverty, we should think that the likelihood of its achievement is at least high enough to justify investing resources in an attempt to bring it about.”

²⁶ We owe this suggestion to an anonymous referee.

This alternative rendering of the Appeal to History avoids our objection because it does not rely on premise (2) above. But its reliance on long-run frequencies creates other problems. For example, how are we supposed to sort out the long-run frequency of realizing *morally desirable goals that were thought to be infeasible prior to their realization* (“MDG-I” for convenience)? The fact that a good number of MDG-Is have been realized doesn’t yet say anything about the frequency of their realization, for any claim regarding the frequency of an event must specify a reference class. We might start with: Take the set of all MDG-Is that have been realized over the course of history; MDG-Is that have been realized compose a large proportion of this set. But this is uninformative because it is trivial. It is akin to saying that the set of dogs that barked is largely (indeed, entirely) composed of dogs that barked. To make any claims about the frequency of dogs barking, our analysis must also attend to the dogs that didn’t bark. So perhaps we refine as follows: Take the set of all MDG-Is; a large proportion of these have been realized. This is better because the reference class now includes MDG-Is that were not realized. But how are we to enumerate the items in this reference class so as to make the frequency claim intelligible? In particular, how could we possibly enumerate the MDG-Is that haven’t been realized, the “dogs that didn’t bark” so to speak?

One problem concerns individuation: How are we to identify particular attempts to realize a MDG-I (so that we can count, e.g., every attempt to abolish slavery, some of which were successful, many of which were not)? And how do we identify the relevant goals? Do we identify as moral goals only those things that are taken to be desirable from the standpoint of present day values? Or do we also include those things that are now considered morally dubious but would have been taken as moral goals from the standpoint of some earlier set of evaluative criteria (e.g., the subordination of women or racial minorities)? A second problem concerns retrieval: Given that many unsuccessful attempts to realize an MDG-I have been lost to history, how are we to estimate the number of unrealized MDG-Is (which is required to estimate the frequency of realized MDG-Is)? Without a principled way to give compelling answers to these questions (we can’t see any options), this alternative Appeal to History seems doomed to unintelligibility.

Lest we be misunderstood, let us stress that in rejecting the Appeal to History we are certainly *not* denying that we can learn important lessons from history about the feasibility of realizing ambitious normative proposals in the here and now. Nor do we deny, more specifically, that the kinds of historical cases to which proponents of the Appeal to History appeal, such as

the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of women, are potentially instructive for both proponents and opponents of radical change. The point is that these cases are potentially instructive in virtue of what we can learn from analyzing the particular causal processes by which they were realized, not because they involved states of affairs that were actually realized.²⁷ Particularly important perhaps were the substantial cultural changes – brought about by sustained and concerted effort on the part of certain actors – which took the realization of the relevant states of affairs from unachievable pipedreams to being within reach. Understanding the complex dynamics of the processes that were operative within these dramatic transformations evidently requires intricate and in-depth historical analysis. Hence, appropriate appeals to history must undertake at least the following kinds of analyses: (1) a specification of the causal mechanisms that culminated in the realization of the relevant state of affairs, as well as the conditions that were conducive to the operation of these mechanisms; (2) a specification of the causal mechanisms that could realize some proposed state of affairs, as well as the conditions that must obtain for these mechanisms to operate as expected; and (3) a comparison of the mechanisms and conditions that obtained in the historical case with the set of mechanisms and conditions that could realize the proposed state of affairs in the contemporary setting (cf. Wiens 2013). This is much more involved than the quick-and-dirty sort of historical appeal that figures in the Appeal to History.²⁸

Finally, our argument against the idea that “actual” implies “feasible” has some interesting *normative* implications. Most obviously, certain normative inferences that the Appeal to History is meant to block are *unblocked*. Suppose that someone argues, via the Appeal to History, that realizing some highly desirable state of affairs (say, overhauling unfair trade

²⁷ For an example of a pertinent discussion of the history of the development of the human rights practice, see Beitz 2009; for a critique see Barry and Southwood 2011.

²⁸ Perhaps proponents use the simplistic Appeal to History as shorthand for the more sophisticated kind of analysis we sketch here. This may be so, but it doesn’t avoid our objection. Notice that the simplistic Appeal to History can be construed as arguing by analogy as follows: (a) Consider a historical state of affairs, *s*, that represents radical social change. (b) We know *s* was feasible because it was actually realized. (c) The proposed state of affairs, *s*’, is relevantly similar to *s*. (d) Therefore, by analogy, we cannot rule out the realization of *s*’ on feasibility grounds. Our objection undermines (b). But, as suggested, (b) might be shorthand for (b’): We know *s* was feasible in light of our analysis of the historical conditions in place at the time and the mechanisms by which *s* was realized. Given this, we should read (c) as (c’): The conditions that obtain and mechanisms that are operative at the actual world here and now are relevantly similar to those that we find in the historical case and *s*’ can be realized by these mechanisms given these conditions. From (b’) and (c’), we can infer something like (d). We have no problem with the more sophisticated argument. Our objection denies that (b) presents an appropriate shorthand for (b’) – the fact that some historical state of affairs was actually realized is simply irrelevant for assessing whether its actual realization was feasible.

practices) is feasible. If true, this would suffice to block any ought-negating inference derived from something like an “Ought” Implies “Feasible” principle: that it is not the case that we ought to overhaul unfair trade practices. Since the Appeal to History is unsound, it follows that any such ought-negating inference is unblocked.

Our argument is also potentially normatively significant in a more direct way, namely, by circumscribing the normative claims that are applicable to us in light of the claim that “feasible” implies “not counterfactually fluky.” To negate a normative claim via something like “Ought” Implies “Feasible,” it is sufficient to show that the target state of affairs is counterfactually fluky given present circumstances.

This raises a concern that our argument against the Appeal to History will have objectionably conservative implications for normative political theory. Consider an ambitious egalitarian policy that involves realizing some radically egalitarian state of affairs, such that (i) the benefits would be colossal, were it to be realized, (ii) the costs of trying and failing would be not much greater than the costs of not trying, and (iii) its realization is counterfactually fluky. Under these circumstances, it might seem obvious that we ought to pursue the policy. But the claim that “feasible” implies “not counterfactually fluky” that we used to argue against the claim that “actual” implies “feasible” implies that it is infeasible to realize the proposed radical egalitarianism. Thus, given a feasibility requirement like “Ought” Implies “Feasible,” it follows that it is not the case that we ought to realize the proposed radically egalitarian state of affairs.

One possible response is to deny that normative political theories are subject to a feasibility requirement. Perhaps these cases show that there are states of affairs that are counterfactually fluky, and hence infeasible, but that we nonetheless have an obligation to bring about (see, e.g., Estlund 2014, Gheaus 2013). But we needn’t go down this path. We can capture the idea animating the conservatism worry without giving up any feasibility requirement by drawing a distinction between (i) desirable states of affairs that we have an obligation to realize and (ii) desirable states of affairs that we have an obligation to *try* to realize.

Recall the case of Flight Sergeant Alkemade. The state of affairs in which Alkemade survived was clearly counterfactually fluky and thus, by (6), infeasible. A feasibility requirement like “Ought” Implies “Feasible” implies it was not the case that Alkemade had an obligation to survive. Intuitively, this is the right result. But notice that saying this is perfectly consistent with saying that Alkemade had an obligation to *try* to survive by, say, jumping out of the plane without the parachute. After all, the benefits of surviving were presumably great enough (not

only for himself but also for his loving family and friends) and the costs of jumping out of the plane and dying presumably not much greater than the costs of staying in the plane until it spiraled uncontrollably into the earth and exploded. It is at least arguable that his nearest and dearest would have had a *legitimate complaint* against him if he hadn't tried, even though it is preposterous to suppose that they would have had a legitimate complaint against him if he had tried and failed.

It seems to us that we should say the same thing about the ambitious egalitarian proposal. It is at least arguable that if (i) the benefits of realizing this state of affairs are great enough and (ii) the costs of trying and failing are not going to be much greater than not trying, then we ought to *try to realize* the egalitarian state of affairs. This can be so even though it's not true that we ought to *realize* the egalitarian state of affairs. This, of course, raises an interesting and important question that has received relatively little attention: namely, what are the conditions under which we have obligations to try to realize a desirable state of affairs that is infeasible? Alas, we must leave this issue for another time.²⁹

It is time to conclude. We have argued that "actual" does not imply "feasible." This conclusion is of interest in its own right. And it potentially has important implications for a wide range of normative issues in political philosophy, at least on the (widespread) assumption that questions of feasibility have a bearing on which states of affairs we ought or have an obligation to realize.

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²⁹ Brennan (2013) discusses some of the relevant considerations.

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