ANALYZING FEASIBILITY CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract. Political philosophers have increasingly turned their attention to methodological questions regarding the extent to which feasibility considerations properly constrain normative theorizing. But before we can answer these methodological questions, we require a clear sense of the logic of feasibility. Philosophers have had little to say on this issue, at least partly for want of a suitably rigorous analysis of the concept of feasibility. I aim to address this shortfall. I argue, contrary to the skepticism of some theorists, that feasibility is well understood as a type of restricted possibility. Given my analysis, I show that we can straightforwardly model feasibility judgments using possible worlds. Hence, a familiar approach to analyzing the logic of possibility more generally can be fruitfully employed for analyzing the logic of feasibility. I conclude by comparing my view with the most compelling alternative found in the literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conventional wisdom suggests that, to be action-guiding, a moral or political theory must prescribe feasible states of affairs.[1] Of special importance is the role feasibility allegedly plays in delimiting our moral duties. A prescription is often said to be excluded from practical consideration if it fails to meet the feasibility condition.[2] Feasibility has received increased attention among political philosophers of late, as they have increasingly turned their attention to methodological questions regarding the proper place of feasibility considerations in normative political theorizing. Most of this debate takes place under the rubric of "ideal vs. nonideal theory."[3] To what extent should feasibility considerations constrain normative theorizing? Can moral and political ideals be action-guiding despite

1   Cf. Goodin and Pettit (1995, 1).

2   For example, Thomas Pogge claims that justice demands that we reform the global institutional order only if there are feasible institutional reforms available; see Pogge (2005), 42–43, 45.

3   See, among others, Cohen (2003); Estlund (2011); Farrelly (2007); Goodin (1995); Sen (2009); Simmons (2010); Valentini (2009); Wiens (2012).

their apparent infeasibility? Should fundamental normative principles be specified with an eye to feasibility concerns? These are important methodological issues, on which much remains to be said. But we can't answer these questions until we have a clear sense of the logic of feasibility. On this issue, philosophers have had much less to say. What's lacking is a transparent and rigorous analysis of the concept of feasibility.[4] We need an account of what feasibility amounts to in terms that are more readily understood.

I aim to address this shortfall. I argue that the concept of feasibility is well understood as a type of restricted possibility. I analyze the relevant restrictions in terms of all-purpose resource availability. Roughly, realizing a state of affairs is *feasible* if it can be realized given the (financial, technological, motivational, institutional, etc.) resources we have at our disposal for realizing alternate states of affairs; it is *infeasible* otherwise. Realizing one state is relatively *more feasible* than realizing another just in case the former puts fewer strains on our resources than the latter. I elaborate these analyses in section 3. I then show (in section 4) that my account permits us to straightforwardly model feasibility judgments using possible worlds. Hence, a familiar approach to analyzing the logic of possibility more generally can be fruitfully employed for analyzing the logic of feasibility.

At a glance, modeling feasibility claims as a type of restricted possibility might seem uncontroversial. Yet, numerous theorists have suggested that a prescribed state of affairs is feasible only if it meets some other conditions in addition to being possible.[5] In section 5, I contrast my view with the most compelling of these alternatives. This is the view that feasibility should be analyzed in terms of a conditional probability — namely, the probability that the prescribed state will be realized conditional upon the relevant agents undertaking the required course of action.[6] Although this analysis has considerable appeal, I show that it has an inherent flaw. On this view, feasibility assessments assume that the relevant agents try to realize the prescribed state. This assumption prevents the conditional probability analysis from capturing a large class of ordinary feasibility judgments, namely, those that are sensitive to the obstacles that prevent the relevant agents from trying in the first place. Since my analysis is sensitive to barriers to trying as well as those that are not, it serves as a better basis from which to analyze the logic of feasibility claims in general.

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4 Important exceptions are Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (forthcoming); Lawford-Smith (forthcoming). Additional papers have made suggestions in this direction; see Brennan and Pettit (2005); Brennan and Southwood (2007); Cowen (2007); Jensen (2009); Räikkä (1998).

5 See the references in footnote 4, as well as those in section 5.

6 Brennan and Southwood (2007); Lawford-Smith (forthcoming).

2.   PRELIMINARY INTUITIONS

Some notion of possibility is central to our intuitive notion of feasibility. Realizing a state of affairs is feasible only if it is possible to do so. Yet in what sense must states be possible to count as feasible? Surely the logical or metaphysical senses of possibility are too broad to yield familiar feasibility judgments. Moreover, we often declare states of affairs infeasible if we lack the money or political will required to realize them, even while a world at which the necessary conditions are satisfied is in some sense possible. For example, one might propose as a solution to global poverty that we evacuate billions of impoverished persons from corrupt authoritarian countries. While carrying this out is possible in some sense, in light of the staunch resistance such a prescription would face, we intuitively declare realization of the required states of affairs infeasible as a solution to global poverty. Hence, not all possibilities matter for evaluating a particular state's feasibility.

Which possibilities are salient? How, in general, do we define the feasible set, the set of possibilities that comprises all and only feasible states of affairs? When they do attend to feasibility constraints, theorists typically focus on motivational or technological possibilities. A prescribed state is said to be feasible only if the required technology is or could be made available and the relevant agents are or could be motivated to bring about the prescribed state.[7] This is for good reason. Our capacity to realize alternate states of affairs is restricted by the technological means we could find at our disposal and the ways in which agents like us could be motivated. But this way of putting the point indicates the limits of theorists' attention to feasibility constraints. Our capacity to realize alternate states of affairs is also constrained by the availability of necessary material resources, or by environmental factors such as climate and topography, or by institutional factors such as the structure of collective decision making procedures, and on and on. All this suggests the need for a more general definition of the feasible set.

To draw out some preliminary intuitions, note that ordinary feasibility assessments appeal to a wide variety of constraints.[8] We appeal to technical and physical challenges, as when engineer Ralph Watts concludes that a bridge from Vancouver Island to mainland British Columbia is "just not feasible" because "deep foundations, long spans and likely

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7   Consider the following representative examples: Gillian Brock's discussion of global taxation schemes (Brock, 2009, 132–134); Thomas Pogge and Lisa Fuller's exchange on the former's Global Resources Dividend proposal (Pogge 2002, 211–213; Fuller 2005, 289–290); Leif Wenar's discussion of his "trust-and-tariff" mechanism for addressing the resource curse (Wenar, 2008, 29); or John Rawls's discussion of the feasibility of "justice as fairness" as a conception of justice (Rawls, 1999, 398, 497, 508).

8   Each of the following quotes are taken from news stories found on Google News on 6 February 2012 using the search term "feasible".

some challenging foundation conditions would all drive up the costs."[9] We appeal to motivational and institutional obstacles, as when economist Marianne Hill declares that "it would be more politically feasible to close all these tax loopholes" in the US tax code than to raise taxes on millionaires.[10] We appeal to financial constraints, as when Toronto mayor Rob Ford declares his plan to build a subway "'financially feasible' — if toll roads, parking fees and the sale of air rights are put into place."[11] Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan has stated that "2017 is not feasible for the take-off of the Continental Free Trade regime in Africa as the environment in the continent would not be conducive for its smooth operation."[12] And former Indian civil servant Prodipto Ghosh has argued that "it is not feasible [for India] to do anything [about climate change] at this stage [beyond voluntary reductions of greehouse gases]. With the present state of technology development, we are likely to encounter severe constraints to our growth."[13]

These multifarious uses of "feasible" share certain intuitive features. In each case, realizing the targeted state of affairs is judged feasible or not in light of the strain that the required actions would place on our capacity to realize that state. Building a bridge across the Strait of Georgia or implementing the Continental Free Trade regime by 2017 are declared infeasible because they are "too expensive". Generally, we deem states of affairs infeasible because their realization unduly taxes our motivational capacity, or demands too much from our institutional or infrastructural apparatus. Their realization demands greater financial or human resources than we have on hand, or requires making greater tradeoffs than we are prepared to make, forcing us to forego the achievement of some other goal. Perhaps realizing infeasible states of affairs demands greater effort than we can sustain. Or perhaps realizing infeasible states demands an unduly precise sequence of actions or involves too many "knife-edge" scenarios, where all our efforts must get it exactly right or we risk disaster. As a first pass, then, we can say that we judge a state of affairs (relatively) infeasible because its realization requires a greater stock of (financial, technological, motivational, institutional) resources than we could acquire.

3.   FEASIBILITY AND THE ALL-PURPOSE BUDGET CONSTRAINT

Let's consider a toy case to elucidate what I mean by a state of affairs being "too expensive" to realize. Suppose you have $100 to spend and there are three goods available for

9   Watts (2012).
10   Pettus (2012).
11   Stall (2012).
12   Usigbe (2012).
13   Ghosh (2012).

purchase—*A* costs \$5 per unit; *B* costs \$10 per unit; and *C* costs \$15 per unit. The set of feasible consumption baskets comprises any combination of goods that can be purchased with \$100. Given your budget, it is feasible to buy 3 units of *A*, 4 units of *B*, and 3 units of *C*; or you could buy 20 units of *A* if you wish. It is infeasible to buy 5 units of *A*, 5 units of *B*, and 5 units of *C*—this particular consumption basket is beyond your budgetary means. That is, realizing your possession of this consumption basket is too demanding given your resources.

This simple notion of a budget constraint cannot fully elucidate the more general notion of feasibility; the latter must account for more than just financial constraints. But we can extend the simple case to talk of an all-purpose budget constraint. Before I do this, let me make the following discussion more determinate by saying something brief about the general types of constraints any sensible feasibility assessment must consider.[14] In general, feasibility assessments must attend to any fact that constrains our ability to realize alternate states of affairs. To simplify our analysis, we can sensibly group the relevant facts into general categories. Some straightforwardly rigid constraints are *logical consistency*, the *laws of nature*, and *human biology*. But we should also attend to less rigid, more malleable constraints.[15] An exhaustive list of these less rigid constraints could get quite long, but it must at least include the following. *Environmental constraints*, which include facts about climate, natural resource profile, and topography; *technological constraints*, which include facts about the tools, techniques, and organizational schemes available for bringing about new states of affairs; *cognitive constraints*, which comprise facts about our cognitive capacity, including cognitive biases and computational limitations; *motivational constraints*, which include not only facts about the intrinsic features of human agents that affect motivation (including affective biases, prejudices, and fears), but also facts about the extrinsic features of an agent's environment that interface with her intrinsic motivational capacities (including social norms and incentives); *economic con-*

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14   See Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (forthcoming); Lawford-Smith (forthcoming) for similar discussion. I hesitate to define a precise list, as this unnecessarily commits me to a particular conception of feasibility. I also agree with Lawford-Smith (forthcoming) that our definition of the feasible set should permit some flexibility insofar as the questions we ask might lead us to be more or less interested in particular types of constraints. In any case, I am here only interested in identifying the general features of the feasibility concept as a basis for analyzing the logic of feasibility judgments. All I need is for the reader to acknowledge that there are several different types of constraints that determine our capacity to realize alternate states of affairs and that some function of these different types defines the total means available for realizing alternate states of affairs. The reader can make my discussion as determinate as he or she likes by defining a more or less exhaustive list of specific feasibility constraints.

15   Cf. the distinction between "hard" and "soft" constraints in Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (forthcoming); Lawford-Smith (forthcoming). On malleable constraints, compare Reddy (2005, 120).

straints, which — if taken broadly — comprise facts about potential allocations of money, labor power, and time; *institutional constraints*, which include facts about institutional structure and capacity (for example, the number and distribution of veto points in a collective decision procedure and the ways in which political officials are selected[16]); and, finally, *social constraints*, which comprise facts about the features of society or social relationships that affect ability (not motivation) to undertake actions required to bring about alternate states of affairs, including the extent to which individuals are united in their pursuit of a common goal, the extent to which their personal goals are harmonized, and the depth of civil conflict. These broad categories group together broadly related facts about the means at our disposal for realizing alternate states of affairs. Hence, they identify the limits of our capacity to bring about alternate possibilities.

We can use this list of general types of constraints to illuminate the notion of an all-purpose budget constraint. In the simple case, money is the only constraint and the specified dollar amount defines the total means available for realizing alternate consumption baskets. In the general case, our present technological, motivational, institutional, financial (and so on) resources define a multidimensional budget constraint, which determines the total means available for realizing alternate states of affairs.[17] Our current total stock of all-purpose resources is composed of the technological, institutional, motivational (and so on) means we have on hand. Additionally, we acknowledge that these different types of resources can be more or less fungible; for example, we can convert some portion of our existing technological and institutional resources into a greater stock of motivational resources by using technological and institutional means to incentivize desirable behavior. But we should acknowledge that using these technological and institutional resources in any particular way has opportunity costs — they cannot be expended elsewhere to realize competing ends. Given the limited fungibility of these different types of resources, we can change the composition of our total resource stock through a (limited) series of conversions. We can even grow our current stock of resources by "investing" some portion of it; for example, we might presently invest some of our current motivational and institutional "capital" to reform our current institutions in ways that improve their capacity to help us overcome future collective action problems. So we need not treat the size of our total stock of resources as fixed over time. But we should acknowledge that the size of our *current* stock and the possible compositions of that stock are fixed by the specific quantity and configuration of resource types available to us *at*

16 See Tsebelis (2002); Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson and Morrow (2003).

17 Institutions, culture, and the like might also be valuable for other reasons, but they are surely instrumentally valuable as means to realizing alternate states of affairs.

present and the types of conversions and investments they permit.

Note that our means for realizing alternate states of affairs are finite — which is to say that we do not have unlimited capacity for realizing alternate states of affairs. Moreover, each type of resource has a limited number of uses. Money or technology alone does not suffice to realize target states of affairs; we must also be motivated to use the available money or technology effectively. (Nor, it should be said, is motivation enough; we also require certain financial or institutional means to get the job done.) There are also limits on the ways in which we can convert one type of resource into another. For example, we can't exchange all of our technological assets for improved institutional capacity, but we can use some combination of technology, political will, and cultural resources to reform our institutions. Finally, the opportunity costs associated with using our resources in any particular way sets limits on the allocations that are possible. All these limitations on our allocation of the resources at our disposal restricts the states of affairs we can realize.

The foregoing illuminates two senses in which the feasible set is defined by constraints on all-purpose resource availability. The world sets the resource requirements for realizing our objectives (e.g., how much steel and concrete we need to build a stable bridge under various conditions). This constrains the possible resource allocations that can effectively realize our objectives. Further, the world — in particular, the composition of our current resource stock and the permitted conversions — also constrains which possible resource allocations can be attained (e.g., how much steel and concrete we can acquire). In both these ways, the world places limits on our ability to bring about alternate possibilities.

Importantly, this notion of an all-purpose budget constraint highlights the fact that our definition of the feasible set must attend to the relevant constraints *together*. We cannot sensibly attend to limits on each distinct type of resource in isolation. We are, after all, limited to realizing those states of affairs whose requirements can be *jointly* satisfied. Consider the toy example again. The feasible consumption baskets are those whose demands on your money can be satisfied when taken together. It's true that, with $100, you can buy 20 units of A; alternatively, you can buy 10 units of B. But you cannot buy both 20 units of A *and* 10 units of B; that basket places requirements on your resources that can't be jointly satisfied. Similarly, suppose realizing a prescribed state requires that we have 12 units of institutional capacity, 20 units of motivational capacity, 5 units of technological assets, 10 units of cultural assets, and $15 million.[18] Suppose further that we can fulfill each of these requirements separately given our current stock of resource. That is, we can transform our current stock into one that includes the required institutional

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18 I use the absurd idealization of quantifiable institutional, motivational, etc., capacity solely for ease of exposition.

capacity, or into one that includes the required motivational capacity, and so on. None of this implies that we can *jointly* satisfy these demands. The limits on the ways in which we can convert one type of resource into another and the opportunity costs associated with any particular allocation might prevent us from doing so. The significance of this point is heightened once we realize that our attempts to realize distinct moral values (e.g., freedom and equality) can place competing requirements on our capacity to realize the prescribed states of affairs. Put simply, the feasible set includes only those states of affairs whose requirements can be *jointly* satisfied given our current stock of resources.

We are now in a position to specify more precisely what it means to say that a state of affairs is "too expensive" to be realized. Start with this: realizing a state of affairs is *too expensive* just in case we do not possess the resources required to realize it — that is, realizing the target state is beyond our all-purpose budgetary means. This is not quite precise enough. Our definition should make explicit the fact that the size and composition of our total resource stock can change and grow. Let's define an *attainable resource stock* as a configuration of (institutional, cultural, financial) resources that could emerge from a transformation of our current resource stock by a series of conversions or investments that is available to us. Now we should say the following: realizing a target state is too expensive just in case there is no attainable resource stock that enables us to realize it. If realizing a state is infeasible just in case realizing it is too expensive (see section 2), then

> *Feasibility (dichotomous).* Realizing a state of affairs is *infeasible* just in case there is no attainable resource stock that enables us to realize it; realizing that state is otherwise *feasible*.[19]

While I think it is correct as it stands, we should be careful to acknowledge the ways in which our normative judgments about the relative desirability of alternate states of affairs can influence our sense of the attainable resource stocks available to us. To illustrate the point, return to the simple budget constraint for a moment. Suppose I have already spent $50 on 5 units of B. Insofar as I can always sell my stock of B for $50, $100 remains an attainable resource stock for me, as is any combination of goods and money that can be realized with $100 (for simplicity, I'm ignoring the possibility of increasing my $100). But suppose that I am committed to retaining 5 units of B (for whatever reason). When I consider the attainable resource stocks available to me, I am likely to restrict my attention to those that include 5 units of B, which is a subset of all the attainable resource stocks, strictly speaking.

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19 I deal with the remaining modals — *attainable* and *enable* — below in section 4.

Similarly, suppose that a society has mobilized some of its institutional and technological capacity and its citizens' labour, financial, and motivational resources to realize a generous public welfare scheme for its citizens. Suppose further that some of the resources put toward realizing this end are "dedicated" in the sense that they cannot be used to pursue some other end without compromising the welfare scheme.[20] If the members of that society are committed to retaining at least the current level of public provision, then their sense of the attainable resource stocks available to them for realizing other valuable ends might be restricted to those that include the current level of public provision, which is a subset of all attainable resource stocks.[21]

My point here trades on my earlier point about opportunity costs. Generally, allocating some portion of our total resource stock toward a particular end can rule out the realization of other ends. If we are committed to realizing certain states of affairs and some portion of our total resource stock is dedicated to realizing those states of affairs, then our normative judgments can limit our sense of which attainable resource stocks remain available. If this is so, then these normative commitments will limit our sense of which political possibilities are feasible. Further, this seems to be a feature of our ordinary feasibility judgments. Recall Ghosh's claim that "it is not feasible" for India to do much more about climate change because doing so would constrain India's opportunities for economic growth. This verdict seems underwritten by a restricted sense of the attainable resource stocks available to address climate change, one that attends to those stocks that are consistent with retaining India's current commitment to economic growth.

So our intuitive feasibility judgments might often be restricted by our normative judgments because the latter can restrict our sense of the attainable resource stocks available to us. Yet, it is a mistake to think that feasibility is a normative concept. A state is feasible just in case it can be realized by an attainable resource stock. To avoid this complication — and clarify just where it is that normative judgments are doing their work — we could be more careful to set aside our normative judgments when doing our feasibility assessments. First, we determine which states of affairs can be realized by the full set of attainable resource stocks, and *then* bring our normative judgments to bear comparing the relative normative desirability of the feasible states of affairs.

To recap: intuitively, realizing a prescribed state is infeasible just in case realizing it is too expensive. Given this, we should say that realizing a state is *infeasible* just in case

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20   Perhaps the institutional arrangements are designed too specifically to be simultaneously used toward other ends, or perhaps citizens' good will can't be simultaneously directed toward multiple states of affairs requiring their generosity.

21   Given that the resources used to realize the public welfare scheme can be converted and put to other uses through some series of conversions, however complex or costly.

there is no attainable resource stock that enables us to realize it; realizing that state is *feasible* otherwise.

The preceding analysis yields a dichotomous sense of feasibility; realizing a state of affairs is feasible or not. Some have suggested that feasibility also comes in degrees, that realizing one state can be more or less feasible than other states.[22] Can we analyze feasibility in this continuous sense by appeal to an all-purpose resource availability? Suppose some particular set of institutions and technological assets and motivational capacity (among other things) is required to realize one state, while another set of institutions, technological assets, and motivational capacity is required to realize another. That is, some attainable resource stock R is required to realize the former state, S, and a different attainable resource stock R' is required to realize the latter, S'. Moreover, R and R' differ from our actual current resource stock, so R and R' can be obtained only through a series of conversions and investments. It is plausible to think that some conversions of, say, financial and motivational resources into technological assets or institutional capacity puts greater strain on our resources than others. That is, converting our current resource stock to R might demand more of our current resources than converting it to R' — compared to acquiring R', acquiring R might require us to devote greater institutional resources to that end, or it might require more intense collective effort, or it might require us to commit greater technological assets to the task. More generally, then, acquiring different attainable resource stocks — and, in turn, realizing different political possibilities — might be differentially straining.

If this is correct, then realizing S is more (less) expensive than realizing S' to the extent that transforming our current resource stock to R is more (less) strenuous than transforming it to R'. Everything I've said thus far suggests that realizing S is less (more) feasible than realizing S' just in case realizing S is more (less) expensive than realizing S'. Thus, we should say that realizing S is less (more) feasible than realizing S' to the extent transforming our current resource stock to R is more (less) strenuous than transforming it to R'.[23] More generally,

> *Feasibility (continuous).* Realizing one state is *less (more) feasible* than realizing another to the extent that the resource requirements for realizing the former place more (less) strain on our current resource stock than do the requirements for realizing the latter.

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22 Cowen (2007); Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (forthcoming).

23 But what if any resource stock in $\{R'_1, R'_2, R'_3, R'_4\}$ is sufficient to realize S'? The analysis still holds. We simply compare the strains involved in transforming our current stock to R with the strains involved transforming it to the least demanding R'_i.

I end this section by showing how this analysis of feasibility squares with our intuitive notion. Recall the ordinary judgments I quoted in section 2. Does my analysis provide an intuitively sensible translation of those judgments? I think so. I recapitulate just three examples to illustrate. What does Ralph Watts convey when he declares that building a bridge from Vancouver Island to mainland British Columbia is "just not feasible" because "deep foundations, long spans and likely some challenging foundation conditions would all drive up the costs"? His thought seems naturally captured by saying that there is no way that we could reconfigure our current resource stock to enable us to overcome the environmental and technical challenges posed by the task, that addressing those challenges is beyond our all-purpose budgetary means.[24] Or what about Toronto mayor Ford's claim that his plan to build a subway is "financially feasible" provided certain revenue-raising mechanisms are implemented? Again, it seems we can translate this to the judgment that there is some series of conversions by which we can transform certain of our current (institutional, technological) resources into greater financial resources, with which we could subsequently build a new subway system. Put simply, there is an attainable resource stock that realizes a new subway system. Finally, consider President Jonathan's claim that it is "not feasible" to implement a Continental Free Trade regime in Africa by 2017. Intuitively, Jonathan is saying that there is no series of conversions (or, perhaps, only a series of conversions that places excessive strain on our current resources) that could transform our current resource stock into another stock that includes the (institutional, motivational, cultural) resources required to implement an African free trade regime by 2017. Setting aside the question of whether Watts's, Ford's, or Jonathan's judgments are correct, my analysis offers natural translations of these ordinary judgments. This supports my claim that we should analyze feasibility in the more readily understood terms of all-purpose resource availability.

4. MODELING FEASIBILITY JUDGMENTS

Given this analysis, how should we analyze the logic of feasibility claims? On the standard approach to modeling possibility claims, possibility expresses existential quantification over a contextually restricted set of possible worlds. In this section, I show that analyzing feasibility in terms of all-purpose resource availability permits us to straightforwardly model feasibility as a kind of restricted possibility.

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24   Or, if "not feasible" is shorthand for "very low feasibilty," then his thought seems accurately captured by saying that the environmental and technical requirements of building a bridge across the Strait of Georgia place greater strain on our current resources than do the requirements of implementing other cross-strait transportation options.

We start with a set of possible worlds. We are here interested in the different ways four things in particular might have been or might be: (1) our current total resource stock; (2) the processes for making conversions among different types of resources, including the conversions rates (simply, "conversion processes"); (3) the causal processes by which our different types of resources realize social and political states of affairs (simply, "causal processes"); and (4) social and political states of affairs. Hence, there is a world for every way that (1)–(4) might be or might have been at any particular time. The pertinent questions are, "Which of these worlds are members of the feasible set?" and "How (if at all) are the members of the feasible set ordered?"

Start with the first question. On my analysis, realizing a state of affairs is declared infeasible just in case there is no attainable resource stock that enables us to realize it. To start, then, the feasible set excludes all those worlds at which the target state of affairs is realized by an unattainable resource stock. Recall that a resource stock is considered attainable just in case it could emerge from our current resource stock by a series of conversions. This is a little loose, so let's be more precise now: a resource stock is *attainable* just in case it obtains at a world that is consistent with the total resource stock and the conversion rates and processes that obtain at the actual world at the time of evaluation. This tighter definition excludes from the set of attainable resource stocks all (and only) those stocks that are incompatible with (a) the composition of the actual resource stock at the time of evaluation; or (b) the series of conversions that are permitted by the conversion processes that obtain at the actual world at the time of evaluation. Hence, the feasible set excludes all those worlds that are incompatible with (a) and (b).

This only covers the first part of the analysis, the "no attainable resource stock" part; we must also address the "enables us to realize the target state" part.[25] To do this, notice that a particular resource stock might enable agents to realize different social and political outcomes at different worlds, as the causal processes by which that stock can be used to bring about states of affairs might differ across worlds. Let's call a causal process *accessible* just in case it obtains at a world that is compatible with the total resource stock, the conversion processes, and the causal processes that obtain at the actual world at the time of evaluation. Realizing a state is feasible only if it can be brought about by an accessible causal process. So the feasible set must also exclude all those worlds at which at least one inaccessible causal process obtains.

All this yields the following definition:

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25 This "enabling" part of the analysis is salient only if S is not fully constituted by the resource stock that realizes S. If some particular resource stock just *is* the state of affairs we aim to realize — e.g., our end is to realize alternate institutional arrangements — then this part of the analysis is redundant.

> *Feasible set.* A world w is a member of the *feasible set* just in case:
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> (1) for all resource stocks R that obtain at w, R is attainable; and
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> (2) for all causal processes P by which resource stocks bring about social and political outcomes at w, P is accessible.

My conceptual analysis implies that realizing a state of affairs is feasible just in case there exists an attainable resource stock that can realize it by an accessible causal process. It follows that realizing a state of affairs is feasible just in case there is at least one world in the feasible set at which the target state is realized; realizing the target state is otherwise infeasible.

Put this way, we can readily see that the feasible set is defined by a binary accessibility relation between worlds. On the standard view, a world w' is accessible from w just in case certain specified facts that obtain at w do not rule out w'.[26] The facts that define the set of accessible worlds form the "modal base." My definition of the feasible set implies that w is a member just in case w is compatible with the facts pertaining to the composition of the total resource stock, the conversion processes, and the causal processes that obtain at the actual world at the time of evaluation. The feasible set is thus defined by a *circumstantial* modal base; it includes all and only those possibilities permitted by the salient circumstances at the world of evaluation.[27] Hence, drawing on a familiar apparatus, we can say that w is a member of the feasible set just in case w is circumstantially accessible from the actual world, in view of the facts that constitute the feasibility modal base. It follows that realizing a state is feasible just in case there is at least one world at which the state is realized that is circumstantially accessible from the actual world; realizing the state is otherwise infeasible.

The second question asks us to model the logic of relative feasibility claims. This requires some way to order the members of the feasible set that captures the notion of relative expense used above. Fortunately, there is a way to do this at hand. Kratzer notes that modal propositions are interpreted relative to two parameters. The first is the modal base, which we've already discussed; it defines worlds as accessible "in view of the specified facts." Kratzer calls the second the "ordering source"; it orders accessible worlds "in view of the normal course of events."[28] We are here concerned with the

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26 Kratzer (1981, 1991); cf. Lewis (1973*a,b*); Stalnaker (1968).

27 Kratzer calls circumstantial modality the "modality of rational agents like gardeners, architects and engineers" (1991, 646). The reference to architects and engineers seems particularly apt for the political context, where we are often concerned with the design of institutions.

28 Kratzer (1991, 644).

relative demandingness of jointly satisfying requirements for realizing alternate social and political possibilities. This is settled by the cost (in terms of all-purpose resources) of changing the status quo or, alternatively, the extent to which acquiring the resource stock required to alter the status quo depletes our total resource stock.[29] What counts as normal or typical in these respects is given by the cost (in terms of total stock depletion) required in the actual world to overcome the constraints to changing the status quo in ways that are similar to the prescribed changes. For example, the normal cost of implementing a global carbon tax is set by the level of resource depletion typically required for international cooperation on fairly demanding climate change initiatives or other similarly contentious international initiatives.[30]

This ordering source gives us a partial ordering of feasible worlds in a way that captures differential cost. Now we can say: a world w is closer to the actual world than w' just in case the cost of acquiring the resource stock needed to make the prescribed change at w is closer to the cost of a similar change at the actual world than is the cost of acquiring the resource stock needed to make the prescribed change at w'; w and w' are equally close to the actual world just in case the cost of acquiring the resource stock needed to make the prescribed change is the same at each.

With this apparatus on hand, we model relative feasibility as follows. Realizing S is at least as feasible as realizing S' just in case, for all worlds w at which S' is realized, there is a world v at which S is realized and v is at least as close to the actual world as w. Realizing S is more feasible than realizing S' just in case, for all w at which S' is realized, there is a v at which S is realized and v is closer to the actual world than w.[31] More informally, S is more feasible than S' just in case the cost of acquiring the resource stock needed to realize S is more similar to the normal level of cost than is the cost of acquiring the resource stock needed to realize S'.

The upshot of this section is simply this: if we analyze the concept of feasibility in terms of all-purpose resource availability, we can use a familiar framework for modeling possibility claims to straightforwardly model both dichotomous and relative feasibility claims.[32] This yields a transparent, rigorous, and familiar framework with which to further analyze the logic of feasibility claims.

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29   Recall that resource stocks are differentially malleable, since different types of resources are more or less constrained in their conversion or growth potential.

30   I acknowledge that much controversy awaits any proposal for what counts as typical level of cost. But that's a worry that can wait until we actually try to order determinate possibilities.

31   These correspond roughly to Kratzer's definitions of "at least as good a possibility" and "a better possibility"; see Kratzer (1991, 644) for the technical details.

32   This contradicts Cowen's claim that "modal logic is not well suited" for analyzing feasibility (2007, 6).

5. THE CONDITIONAL PROBABILITY ALTERNATIVE

The analysis I've defended says that feasibility is nothing more than a kind of restricted possibility. Perhaps this seems uncontroversial. Yet, numerous theorists have suggested that restricted possibility is not sufficient for feasibility, that a target state must also satisfy other conditions to count as feasible. For example, some have suggested that a target state is feasible only if it can be *stably* realized.[33] Juha Räikkä argues that a target state is feasible only if it can be realized by a transition process that does not unduly violate moral principles.[34] But the most compelling alternative (and the only one developed at any length) is the view that feasibility be analyzed in terms of a conditional probability—namely, the probability of successfully realizing the prescribed state conditional upon the relevant agents making an attempt to do so.[35] In this section, I compare this alternative to my analysis, arguing that it fails to capture important aspects of our intuitive notion of feasibility.

On the conditional probability account, realizing a state of affairs is feasible in the dichotomous sense if it is sufficiently likely given that the relevant agents try to realize it.[36] To motivate this analysis, Brennan and Southwood present the case of a father who is too lazy to attend his daughter's hockey game.[37] There is nothing preventing the father from going, nor is attending the game particularly difficult or costly. He is simply too lazy to go. But his laziness makes it very unlikely that he will go to the game. If merely a high probability of going to the game is necessary to declare feasible the state of affairs where the father attends the hockey game, then we would have to declare his attending the game infeasible. But this seems to be an obvious mistake. Of course it's feasible for him to go; he simply refuses. One reason it seems that attending the game is feasible is that the father is highly likely to succeed in attending the game *if he tries to do so.* That is, the state where the father attends the game is feasible because there is a sufficiently high

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33 Brennan and Pettit (2005); Cohen (2009); Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (forthcoming); Rawls (1999). I should note that Lawford-Smith is not committed to retaining stability as a necessary condition for feasibility; see Lawford-Smith (forthcoming, footnote 20).

34 Räikkä (1998, 36f), original emphasis. Cf. Buchanan's (2004, 61ff) discussion of "moral accessibility."

35 Brennan and Southwood (2007); Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (forthcoming); Lawford-Smith (forthcoming).

36 Brennan and Southwood (2007, 9f). Not so for Lawford-Smith; on her view, the conditional probability enters solely as an analysis of relative feasibility (or "scalar feasibility," as she puts it). For Lawford-Smith, realizing a state of affairs is feasible in the dichotomous sense just in case it is not "logically, conceptually, metaphysically and nomologically impossible" (Lawford-Smith, forthcoming, section 4). On my view, the operative notions of possibility are clearly too expansive to serve as an analysis of feasibility. I leave further discussion aside here.

37 Brennan and Southwood (2007, 9).

probability of him successfully doing realizing it given that he undertakes the required actions.

The conditional probability analysis is perhaps most naturally deployed as an account of relative feasibility. On Lawford-Smith's view, states of affairs are more or less feasible in view of "soft constraints," which include the limits of human ability, resource availability, technological limitations, institutional constraints, and cultural factors. These are "malleable" or "dynamic" limitations; as such, they do not rule out the realization of particular states of affairs, but "make an outcome *less likely to obtain*."[38] In view of the relevant soft constraints, we say that realizing one state of affairs is more feasible than realizing another just in case the former is more likely than the latter to be realized by the relevant agents' actions conditional upon the agents undertaking the required actions.

Why conditionalize on the relevant agents' attempts to realize the prescribed state of affairs? Lawford-Smith adverts to plainly moral theoretic considerations.

> We use a conditional probability... because we don't want to let agents off the moral hook. The fact that a person won't do something isn't enough for us to retract an recommendation that she ought to. It's the same for actions an agent is unlikely to do. A person's preferences over her own actions do not determine the limits of her obligations. What matters is the extent to which the action is likely to produce the outcome.[39]

Put differently, our analysis of relative feasibility assumes that the agents charged with realizing the prescribed state of affairs undertake to do so because our moral recommendations should not be sensitive to agents' laziness or their reluctance to pursue the prescribed state. Hence, states of affairs are not less feasible simply because people are less likely to pursue them, but because people are less likely to realize them if they were to try.

This reasoning puts the cart before the horse; it presupposes that our analysis of feasibility should render it useful for delimiting our moral duties to respond to normatively suboptimal states of affairs. Such a notion of feasibility constrains our duties in the way that the more familiar "ought implies can" principle does: if it is not the case that realizing a prescribed state is feasible, then it is not the case that the specified agent has a duty

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38   Lawford-Smith (forthcoming, 12), original emphasis; cf. Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (forthcoming, 5).
39   Lawford-Smith (forthcoming, 18). Elsewhere, she says that we should analyze feasibility in terms of the specified conditional probability because "feasibility is a concept that treads a fine line between possibility... and likelihood" (14). It's not clear to me, though, why this thought recommends the conditional probability analysis. Indeed, her analysis seems to tread on the latter side of that line.

to realize that state.[40] I am sympathetic with the thought that feasibility might play an exclusionary role like this in our normative theorizing. But our conceptual analysis shouldn't presuppose that feasibility is suited to play this role. First, we must figure out what feasibility is, conceptually speaking; only then can we investigate the normative theoretical roles it is well-suited to fill.

Whatever the prospects for a notion of feasibility to play the desired normative theoretical role, the conditional probability analysis falls foul of many ordinary feasibility judgments. Our ordinary notion of feasibility is sensitive to motivational deficiencies like laziness or self-interested reluctance. Oftentimes, we intuitively declare a prescribed state of affairs infeasible precisely because the relevant agents lack the will to pursue it or, worse, are motivated to oppose its realization. Recall the feasibility judgments quoted in section 2. It is highly plausible that President Jonathan's pessimism about the feasibility of implementing an African free trade regime is sensitive to a lack of political will; this is almost certainly true of Ghosh's verdict on further Indian efforts on climate change or Hill's pessimism about raising taxes on US millionaires. By explicitly assuming away motivational deficiencies, the conditional probability account cannot capture the intuition behind these ordinary feasibility judgments. Put simply, the conditional probability analysis necessarily assumes that we have the required motivational resources at our disposal even when, in fact, we do not. Since many felicitous feasibility judgments are sensitive to a lack of necessary motivational resources, the conditional probability analysis falls foul of ordinary usage.

None of the foregoing shows that my analysis is in the clear. Lawford-Smith presents two potential counterexamples to the claim that feasibility tracks degrees of difficulty — in my terms, the costliness or strenuousness of acquiring the resources required to realize a state of affairs. In the first case, it seems feasible for Brett to perform his wife's favorite opera in an effort to save his marriage, even though it is really difficult for him to do this. In the second case, it seems easy for Holly to go to a casino and put all her money on black in a game of roulette, yet it is relatively infeasible for her to double her money this way.[41]

The first case shows that a high degree of difficulty is consistent with it being feasible *in the dichotomous sense* that Brett realize the state where he performs the opera for his wife.[42] But this does not show that *continuous* feasibility fails to track degrees of difficulty.

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40 Brennan and Southwood (2007); Lawford-Smith (forthcoming).

41 Lawford-Smith (forthcoming, 15f).

42 If the case stipulated that performing his wife's favorite opera is simply beyond Brett's means, things would be different. Then performing the opera would be too expensive and, thereby, infeasible in the dichotomous sense.

Indeed, intuitively, it is relatively infeasible for Brett to realize the state where he performs the opera because acquiring the necessary resources in the required timeframe places excessive strain on his current resources.

In the second case, the outcome is largely determined by a chance process over which Holly has no control.[43] Sure, it's relatively easy for Holly to get herself to the casino and put all her money down on black. But, intuitively, it is also relatively feasible for Holly to do this. What is stipulated to be relatively infeasible is *Holly doubling her money* by going to the casino and putting her money on black. Once we have this in view, a potential problem arises for the counterexample — the conditional probability of realizing the target outcome does not reflect Holly's causal influence on the outcome. To press the point, ask yourself which is more feasible: doubling your money by betting black or tripling your money by betting a dozen? (The probability of winning given a black bet is 0.474 while the probability of winning given a dozen bet is 0.316.) Proponents of the conditional probability analysis say that the former is more feasible. But do we really want to say that feasibility is an issue here? For some (myself included), the question seems inappropriate. Feasibility is ostensibly concerned with the ways in which the world limits our capacity to bring about alternate states of affairs. This presupposes that our actions are causally relevant to the outcome. But there's nothing you can do to affect your chance of winning on any bet. So the case apparently leaves no room for feasibility analysis.

Not everyone will share the intuition that feasibility is not an issue in this case and, so, might persist in arguing that it is more feasible for you to double your money than to triple it. To wit, although the probability of winning any given bet doesn't depend on you, which risk you take depends on the bet you make. Hence, we might say that the relative conditional probability of winning depends on you insofar as it depends on the bet you make. In reply, let's tweak the case a little. Suppose you can make a disjunctive bet: double your money if black comes up, triple your money if one of your dozen hits. Is it more feasible to double your money than to triple your money? Again, the question has a counterintuitive quality; you have no causal influence over which of the two states is realized.

If these replies are convincing, then relative feasibility is not at issue in the casino case and the case is no longer a counterexample to my analysis of feasibility. Despite the problems noted in section 5, a proponent of the conditional probability view might nonetheless bite the bullet and insist that relative feasibility tracks conditional probabilities.[44] If that were so, I suspect that the divergent judgments in this case boil down to a

44   As has happened in conversation and personal correspondence with several proponents of the condi-

clash of intuitions, which we can't resolve here. But if we probe this divergence, we find a deeper disagreement between the two views about why feasibility matters for practical deliberation. This difference explains when and why the two conceptual accounts come apart, which we might use to adjudicate between them.

On my view, feasibility matters because the world sets limits on our capacity to bring about alternate states of affairs and we want our deliberation about what to do to be sensitive to those limits. Feasibility analysis identifies the limits of our current resource stock as well as the limits on future resource availability. These limits set the demands and opportunity costs associated with any particular prescription, which we evaluate by reference to an estimate of the resources required to realize a particular objective. Taken together, this information tells us what we need to give up to make something happen and how difficult it will be given our current resources. This surely matters for action. All things equal, states of affairs that we can bring about with fewer opportunity costs or otherwise place less strain on our resources are preferable to those that are more strenuous.

On the conditional probability view, feasibility matters because the world constrains the likelihood that we will realize a prescribed state if we set out to do so and, surely, we want our deliberation about what to do to be sensitive to these conditional probabilities. Feasibility analysis identifies the factors that impinge on the conditional probability of realizing a target state ("soft constraints") and estimates the relevant conditional probabilities. This surely matters for action. All things equal, states of affairs that are more likely to be realized given our effort are preferable to those that are less likely.

One might think that this is only an apparent difference, one of emphasis rather than a genuine disagreement about the relevance of feasibility analysis. After all, our analysis of resource constraints and demands can deliver conditional probability estimates. Similarly, our attempts to estimate the relevant conditional probabilities must account for resource requirements and opportunity costs. I agree that the two analyses will oftentimes present different faces of the same coin. But we've already seen a case where this won't be so — namely, any case where conditional probabilities do not reflect our causal influence on the outcome, as in the casino case. Where these come apart, the conditional probability analysis measures relative feasibility as a function of the conditional probability of realizing the target state, regardless of whether those factors that settle the relevant probabilities reflect our causal influence on the outcome. In contrast, my analysis measures relative feasibility as a function of the strains places on our current

tional probability view.

resource stock by our attempts to jointly satisfy the resource requirements of the target state, regardless of how those demands affect the relevant conditional probabilities.

This difference suggests a genuine disagreement about the relevance of feasibility considerations for practical political deliberation. Put somewhat simplistically, the conditional probability view says that feasibility analysis is relevant because it produces an estimate of the risk associated with our attempts to realize a prescribed state, while my view says that feasibility analysis is relevant because it produces an estimate of the costs of realizing a prescribed state and the strains of bearing those costs. This difference explains when and why the two analyses come apart — namely, wherever risk and costs diverge. We might use this difference to adjudicate between the two views. Whether we find my view or the conditional probability view to deliver a better analysis of our ordinary notion of feasibility will in part turn on whether we think feasibility is ultimately a matter of risk or of cost.[45]

I don't think there's anything decisive to be said in favor of one view or the other on this score. For what it's worth, I have strong intuitions that feasibility analysis presupposes that we have causal influence over the outcome and, so, is ultimately concerned with identifying the limits of our capacity to bring about alternate states of affairs. The conditional probability analysis, to my mind, has difficulty capturing this intuition in certain cases. But not everyone will share my intuitions. Nevertheless, the difference exposed here is worth noting, if only for diagnostic purposes. At the very least, it highlights a potentially deep disagreement underwriting divergent intuitions about the feasibility of any particular state of affairs.

While there may not be principled grounds for favoring the conditional probability view or my own when it comes to their respective explanations for why feasibility matters, my analysis has advantages on other points that tip the balance in its favor. The first advantage, noted above, is that my analysis does not presuppose that the concept of feasibility must serve any particular normative theoretical role — in particular, that it must be suitable for playing an exclusionary role akin to the "ought implies can" principle. Hence, my analysis does not prejudice our reflections on the normative theoretical salience of feasibility considerations. A second advantage is that my analysis is general

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45 Of course, both risk and cost matter. Any account of practical political deliberation should acknowledge that our deliberation about what to do must attend to both risk and costs, among other things. Yet, we should hesitate to say that feasibility is simply a function of both risk and cost. The two variables matter independently in the sense that we want to be able to make tradeoffs between them. If we pack both costs and risk into a more general feasibility parameter and then seek to identify the best feasibility-weighted outcome, we risk prevent making independent tradeoffs between risk, costs, desirability, and any other variables we might care about (for example, efficiency, stability, or conformity to moral principles).

enough — and, so, flexible enough — to capture the differential sensitivity of ordinary usage to multifarious resource constraints. That is, it yields an analysis of those feasibility judgments that seem deeply sensitive to the motivational deficiencies that prevent the relevant agents from even trying, while also permitting us to model and analyze those judgments that are not sensitive to such deficiencies or are especially sensitive to other constraints. For example, we might want to restrict our analysis to those states of affairs that are economically feasible, or culturally feasible, or technologically feasible. To capture the relevant sense of feasibility, we need only alter the content of the modal base, including only those propositions that specify the relevant economic, cultural, or technological constraints. I take this flexibility — which derives from the generality of the analysis — as a point in favor of my view.

Some might be put off by this flexibility, arguing that the analysis rules in (out) too many possibilities as (in)feasible. But this misunderstands my project. I've not aimed to present a determinate conception of feasibility here — to say which particular constraints count, or just where the boundaries of the feasible set lie, or to settle the ordering among members of the feasible set. My aim is to present a general conceptual analysis that provides theoretical resources that can be used to model any particular definition of the feasible set and analyze its logical implications. My analysis identifies three key components of any particular feasibility judgment: a set of resource constraints taken as salient; limits on the ways in which those resources can be used; and a baseline level of costliness taken as "normal." We can use this analysis to expose and interrogate the presuppositions of any particular feasibility judgment by uncovering the particular way in which the judgment in question fills out these three components. Further, we can investigate the logical implications of a particular judgment by assessing which other possibilities are included or excluded by the definition of the feasible set implied by these presuppositions. It is thus a virtue rather than a vice of my analysis that it yields a model of feasibility judgments that is general enough to analyze the logical implications of any particular conception of feasibility.

6. CONCLUSION

Moral and political philosophers widely acknowledge the salience of feasibility constraints for assessing normative theories; they often praise feasible prescriptions and criticize infeasible ones. But philosophers' feasibility talk is too loose and there has been little discussion of how to tighten our understanding of this key concept. I've aimed to bring some discipline to philosophers' feasibility talk, arguing that our ordinary notion of feasibility is well understood in terms of all-purpose resource availability. Importantly,

this conceptual analysis permits us to model feasibility as a binary accessibility relation between possible worlds. Hence, a familiar approach to analyzing the logic of modal claims can be straightforwardly used to analyze the logic of feasibility claims.

My analysis is surely insufficient for evaluating the truth of any particular feasibility claim. We still need to sort out which resource stocks are required for realizing our objectives and which of those are attainable from our present position. Put simply, we require tools for assessing which particular political possibilities are feasible. Moreover, the analysis raises questions pertaining to the role of feasibility constraints in our deliberations about what to do. For example, we need to ask whether feasibility understood in terms of all-purpose resource availability is well suited to serve an exclusionary role analogous to "ought implies can," as is often thought. Additionally, we must ask whether feasibility is well suited as a weighting parameter in something like an expected value calculation.[46] The analysis presented here only takes a first step in sorting out these questions, among others. But it is a crucial first step. By providing a transparent basis for analyzing the logic of feasibility, my analysis supplies a necessary foundation for answering these further questions.

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