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Feasibility Arguments, Their Nature, and Weakness

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1. Introduction

The demand that political philosophy should be practice-oriented has been common in recent years. The arguments in defense of the "pragmatic turn" come in many guises but the basic idea is quite simple. The normative and action-guiding implications of political theories and isms should be both desirable and feasible. However, the most desirable options are unlikely to be feasible in the near future while the most feasible options are unlikely to be particularly desirable. Traditionally, philosophers such as Kant have been willing to compromise feasibility and argue for high principles even when their feasibility has been unsure. Today, the defenders of the "pragmatic turn" say that it should be other way round. The normative suggestions that are based on political theories should be feasible, if not immediately then very soon, even if this may mean that the suggestions are quite far from our true political ideals. Political philosophy is not sufficiently *useful* if its implications are not applicable in the world as it is. Political philosophy is made for us – people who live here and now – rather than for ideal persons of the ideal world.

There is much to say about the "pragmatic turn" but here I will say only very little about it. I will concentrate on what have been called *feasibility arguments* and on the discussion they have raised. Usual feasibility arguments are claims against some political proposal on the grounds that the proposal is not feasible at all or that it is insufficiently feasible – that aiming to realize the proposal is too difficult or risky. Feasibility

arguments are made in the spirit of the "pragmatic turn." An example of a feasibility argument is the claim that the government-funded employer should not freeze the wages of the nurses of public hospitals since the decision may cause mass emigration of nurses to nearby countries. The option that the wages are frozen and the nurses will stay is not sufficiently feasible. G.A. Cohen argued that feasibility arguments are problematic when they are uttered by people who are themselves responsible for making relevant arrangements insufficiently feasible. Cohen (1992: 1995) wrote about "talented" and "rich" people but in my book, *Social Justice in Practice* (2014), I tried to show that the problem of feasibility arguments is much more general and serious than is commonly thought. My argument evoked some objections, and I am here to show that the objections fail.

2. The Argument

Let me start by summarizing the argument for the claim that feasibility arguments are problematic. In "Incentives, Inequality, and Community" (1992) and elsewhere, Cohen argued against what he called the Pareto Argument for Inequality. According to the Pareto Argument, we should allow social and economic inequalities, as inequalities serve as incentives for the "talented" people who are willing to use their talents and work hard when they know that they will gain something from using their talents. The result is that there are a lot of goods to be distributed, and this helps those who are worse off. The option that the talented people would use their talents without special rewards is not feasible. In Cohen's (1992: 262-329) view, the problem of the Pareto Argument is that here inequality is necessary only because the talented rich people *make it necessary*, by refusing to work without rewards. Of course, an outsider could now say that the option in which inequalities are not allowed and talented people use their full productive capacity is not feasible but talented people *themselves* cannot rely on such an argument since the option is not feasible because of *their choice* (Cohen 1995: 184). As Cohen (1992: 301) puts it, the talented rich "cannot treat their own choices as objective data;" they should *justify* their choices. Talk about insufficient feasibility cannot do the job.

   In the book I pointed out that, actually, Cohen's observation about the limits of feasibility argument in equality debate concerns all feasibility arguments in all debates. Take the case of nurses. It seems that the proposal suggesting "Do not freeze the nurses' wages, as they might leave if you do" is a serious argument only if it is *not* presented by the nurses themselves. For if they present it, they talk about their own behavior as if they had no control over it. If nurses state the argument, it is natural to read

the proposal as a form of a *threat*: "Do not freeze our wages, for if you do, we might leave." Of course, uncivilized threats may work in politics, but often they are counter-productive and risky as public opinion may turn against those who make threats, and other parties may react aggressively. More importantly, threatening the government by declaring that if their wages are not raised they will move, does not *justify* their claim for higher salaries. If the nurses want to provide a moral reason for their demands, their representative should not point to feasibility issues. Rather, she should state why the nurses deserve higher salaries. She needs *principled reasons* such as equality, justice, desert, and fairness. (Cf. Cohen's discussion about the British academics in his 1992: 284.)

In the book I offered many similar examples (Räikkä 2014: 4-8). In all cases, feasibility arguments are problematic for the same reason. The parties (such as nurses) who would most clearly benefit from feasibility arguments are not in a position to use them. There are no groups who could defend *their own rights* by referring to feasibility arguments. The reason is simple: when arguments include claims about which policy options are feasible and which are not, they are not available for the parties who are themselves responsible for making certain policy options insufficiently feasible. Feasibility arguments are, of course, available for *others*. In the case of nurses, their representative cannot defend their rights by feasibility arguments but if someone else is willing to help them, then she can do so, for instance, by using a feasibility argument. If traditional philosophical (principled) arguments are put aside in the name of the importance of feasibility considerations, then all social groups are in the hands of others and their (possible) good will. Pilots can defend nurses' rights, nurses can defend Adventists' rights, Adventists' can defend bulldog owners' rights, bulldog owners can defend radio amateurs' rights, radio amateurs can defend migraine patients' rights, migraine patients can defend homosexuals' rights, homosexuals can defend a local primary school's parents' association's members' rights, and so on.

The lesson is that we should not put the traditional philosophical arguments aside and that the addition of feasibility arguments may decrease rather increase the practical relevance of political philosophy. Feasibility arguments are bound to lack full practical relevance when that relevance is evaluated in terms of the usefulness of those arguments in public discussion – as potential arguments in defense of one's own case. As far as political philosophy should provide justified and correct arguments that can actually be used in the public debates by the participants of those debates, the "pragmatic turn" seems harmful. That is, given that one of the key functions of political philosophy is to contribute to the democratic processes by developing reliable principled arguments that the parties who participate in the political discussion can actually use

in defending their demands, feasibility-oriented theorists have chosen a wrong path.

There is no doubt that when political philosophers want to work as policy advisors and tell politicians what kinds of decisions they should make here and now, the advice should be empirically informed. That is self-evident, I assume. But it is equally self-evident that political philosophers' central social role cannot be that of policy advisor. As Cohen (2003: 242) argued, "political philosophy is a branch of philosophy," and the philosophers' goal is to find truth and thereby guide the thoughts of mankind in the right direction (Räikkä 1998: 30). Principled and well-founded arguments may show that nurses are right in their demands, or that they are wrong. If the nurses are right, they may want to rely on those arguments instead of blackmailing and hope that people will get their message because it is true. If they are wrong, their opponents may inform them about their mistake and hope that some day they will change their minds and see the facts. Of course, for feasibility-oriented theorists, concentrating on truth is waste of time, as the nurses' wages cannot be frozen in any case. But I fail to find such attitude *philosophical* in any serious sense of the word.

In the book I wrote that when chances of succeeding are very low, many people tend to think that the action "is not feasible at all" (p. 3). This means that those who reject highly desirable policy options just because they are "not feasible" may reject actions that could actually be carried out, for low chances do not indicate impossibility. Although it is certainly risky to try to realize proposals that are imperfectly feasible, one should keep in mind that it is also risky to *reject* proposals that are "not feasible."

3. Objections and Replies

Let us now turn to the objections. I am grateful for all the reviewers who have read and evaluated my book. The reviews have given much for me to think about, but here I will concentrate only on the issue of feasibility arguments and to the objections I consider problematic. I will also clarify some misunderstandings and take the full responsibility for those misunderstandings (as philosophers should be able to write so clearly that they are not misunderstood).

Francesca Pasquali (2014: 668) interprets my claim (p. 10) that one of the key functions of political philosophy is to provide "arguments that the parties (and not merely observers) who do participate in the political discussion can actually employ in defending their claims" as a thesis that "political philosophers' task is mainly to craft strategic arguments apt to win a debate." She finds this thesis implausible, as it separates philosophy from *truth* and makes it a tool of those who want to *win* political quarrels,

by hook or by crook. I strongly agree with Pasquali that the thesis is weird and mistaken, but obviously I did not support such thesis in the book. When I said (p. 11) that political philosophy should be able to offer arguments, principles, and theories that can be used in *justification* of various demands, I had in mind arguments that are *justified* (or "true" if you like), not merely arguments that may be convincing and hence effective in practice. (It is difficult to justify anything with an unjustified argument.)

Pasquali (2014: 668) argues that my discussion does not really answer the question which is in her view the crucial one, namely the question of "whether granting political philosophy's practical import actually requires tailoring normative principles to feasibility constraints." However, in the book, I tried to answer the question. I wrote (p. 11) that it "is unproblematic and should not come as a surprise that political philosophers 'as citizens among others' frequently defend theories whose recommendations are not feasible in the sense that they are not guiding politicians here and now." So my answer to "the question at stake in the ongoing debate" is negative. Political philosophers need not tailor normative principles just because their application is problematic because of some factual constraints. Indeed, they *should not* tailor normative principles just because their application looks difficult – unless they work as policy advisors. In that role it is only natural to take into account (some) feasibility constraints but I assume that admitting this is not to say that now philosophers "tailor" their normative principles. Although advice given to politicians should be closely linked to facts (cf. Pasquali 2012), granting political philosophy's practical import does not, in general, require tailoring normative principles to feasibility constraints.

Whether we should grant "political philosophy's practical import" in the first place is, of course, a separate question. In the book (p. 16) I wrote that "[q]uestions of feasibility may even be beside the point, if the idea is to determine our ultimate moral convictions about the content of justice without too much concern about practical issues." Political philosophy without practical goals may sound rather *unpolitical*, but surely we may have purely intellectual reasons to study issues such as state, justice, authority, equality, and legitimacy (Estlund 2014: 131-134). Indeed, on certain respects, moral and political philosophy may have closer relation to mathematics than to political science (Clarke-Doane 2014: 251-252).

Dina Babushkina (2015) describes my argument as a claim that those who would most directly benefit from feasibility arguments "cannot legitimately use them." Vadim Chaly and Igor Gorkov (2014: 72), in turn, write that in the book I challenge "the notion of feasibility of social policies as being stable and measurable." Both descriptions are more or

less correct but in the name of precision I would like emphasize two points.

First, I do not claim that feasibility arguments are illegitimate – morally, legally, or otherwise. I only claim that, in certain circumstances when uttered by certain persons, they can be threats rather than justifications. Although the term "threat" sounds bad, threats can certainly be morally acceptable. For instance, if the nurses are obviously entitled to higher salaries, if raising their salaries does not have any adverse social conseguences, and if there is no way to raise their salaries other than threatening the government, then the   nurses' representative may be justified in saying that "if you do not pay more, the nurses will leave." Perhaps there are such cases in real life as well. It is clear that there *can* be such cases.

Second, I do not claim that feasibility arguments are problematic primarily because it is often hard to say which policy options are sufficiently feasible and which are not. True, I point out (p. 2) that presenting feasibility arguments is often quite difficult as few people have relevant expertise in statistics, institutional design, polls, social psychology, and so on. But my point is not to say that the requirement for formulating feasibility arguments is over-demanding. The point is that whether or not good feasibility arguments can be succesfully formulated, they would not help the parties who would need them to justify their claims (p. 12).

Holly Lawford-Smith (2014: 4) argues that my argument is based on a "serious misunderstanding." My argument is premised on an assumption that in most societies there are many groups that have a representative who is their spokesperson, and that others can often predict how those groups are likely to react in different circumstances. Lawford-Smith denies my empirical assumption and writes that, apart from few exceptions, "[t]here are only uncoordinated aggregates of persons." This makes feasibility arguments unproblematic for it is clear that "uncoordinated aggregates" cannot threaten anyone. However, as far as I can see, Lawford-Smith has not checked the facts. There are legions of voluntary associations, labor unions, organized clubs, trade associations, and so on in all modern societies. They have official representatives and are certainly able and willing to act collectively. Only in Finland (a small country) did we have 135.000 registered associations in 2014. The real number of coordinated associations is much larger, as registered associations form only a subclass of all coordinated associations.

In real life, it is difficult to be involved in any part of life without being in touch with groups that have a representative or representatives. You find them in schools, workplaces, kindergartens, sports centers – everywhere. Lawford-Smith is certainly right in the sense that there are *also*

"uncoordinated aggregates" in all societies. An example of such an aggregate group would be one that consists of people of whom have three cousins, brown eyes, a funny hat, and a Citroën 2CV. They do not have an association (to my knowledge). But nor do they have any reason to present arguments in support of their rights, or a reason to prepare to defend their rights. Thus, "uncoordinated aggregates" differ from groups such as pilots, nurses, Adventists, bulldog owners, radio amateurs, migraine patients, homosexuals, members of the local parents' association, and so on. These groups have organizations and representatives as they need to defend their rights, or at least need to prepare to defend them, among other things. (Citroën 2CV owners have many associations, by the way.) Therefore, I conclude that Lawford-Smith's empirical objection is implausible. A civil society without coordinated groups can be found only in distant and exotic islands that we know from philosophical texts, but not otherwise.

Lawford-Smith's (2014: 3-4) second objection is a philosophical rather than an empirical claim. She writes that "[i]n Räikkä's view, the role of political theory is to inform public debate, and this should be done by sending the clear, 'ideal' message." According to Lawford-Smith, this view is problematic, however, for there are many "cases in which we want to know what the good worlds look like *given that* certain wrongs will remain in place, or at least not be completely eradicated." This objection is based on the relatively common assumption that "ideal messages" are useless in non-ideal circumstances. Unfortunately, the assumption is mistaken. As Adam Swift (2008: 365) writes, "as long as philosophers can tell us *why* the ideal would be ideal, and not simply *that* it is, much of what they actually do when they do 'ideal theory' is likely to help with the evaluation of options within the feasible set." Ideals are based on *reasons* (that tell why they are ideals in the first place), and those reasons are likely to be relevant to considerations that concern the proper course of action in the non-ideal world. If the ideals are *ultimate*, then the reasons behind the ideals cannot probably be *further objectives* of those ideals, but they can be *constitutive reasons*, for instance (Räikkä 2014: 46 and 48).

Consider an example. Suppose that our "ideal message" prohibits school bullying, and that in the ideal world no student experiences school bullying. Suppose also that the ideal is based on the view that the non-existence of school bullying is constitutive to well-functioning schools where students do not suffer from psychological or physical distress. In the non-ideal world, where school bullying does exist, this view is still helpful, for it advises us to react to school bullying in ways that are likely to reduce psychological and physical distress. Some means are likely to be more effective than others, and it is advisable to choose effective rather than ineffective means, but the means should also be evaluated morally. Those means that are consistent with the features of well-functioning schools are

morally desirable, but of course there may be other values to consider as well. Even so, the reason underlying the ideal helps us to evaluate not only what is the proper goal of the action in the non-ideal world, but also how to proceed in such a world. In practice, a lot of factual knowledge is also needed, and there philosophers are of little help. After all, many of them are ignorant of basic social facts.

Lawford-Smith's second objection raises important issues concerning "ideal theorizing" in political philosophy but if I am right, she fails to prove that feasibility arguments are unproblematic.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that it is important to avoid a situation where social groups cannot defend their own rights. As I argued in *Social Justice in Practice*, feasibility-oriented political philosophy does not provide arguments that various groups and their representatives who participate in the political discussion can actually employ in justifying their claims, given that they are often themselves responsible of making certain arrangements insufficiently feasible. In that respect, arguments and principles provided by traditional political philosophy are *more* useful than feasibility arguments as the latter are bound to lack full practical relevance – when that relevance is evaluated in terms of the usefulness of those arguments in public discussion.

My worry about feasibility argument has no general implications regarding the question of whether facts and norms are closely related. The thesis that norms provided by political theories are "fact-dependent" in some sense may or may not be true. Perhaps norms are epistemically dependent on facts so that in order to know the norms we need to interpret practices or understandings of those practices. Perhaps norms are ontologically dependent on facts so that they have a grounding relation or an explanatory relation to facts, or that they supervene with facts. Or perhaps norms are fact-dependent because their application field or target makes them dependent on facts. However, whatever one's standpoint on these difficult issues, the choice will not save feasibility arguments.

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