

## Feasibility as deliberation-worthiness<sup>1</sup>

Nicholas Southwood (ANU)

### I. Introduction

Questions of feasibility are pervasive, divisive, and often normatively consequential, especially in politics. Take any important matter of public policy or institutional design: the introduction of a basic income; the achievement of a global emissions trading scheme; the relaxation of restrictions on immigration; the overhaul of corporate taxation; the legalisation of recreational drugs; or whatever. In each case, claims about what is feasible and infeasible tend to loom large, generate significant differences of opinion, and to be treated as having an important bearing on what ought to be done. But how should we understand such claims? What is it that we claim when we claim that it is feasible or infeasible for a particular agent to achieve a particular outcome? And what does it take for such claims to be true?

Until relatively recently, political philosophers had devoted little or no sustained attention to this issue. But the last few years have witnessed an explosion of interest in the idea of feasibility within political philosophy and the emergence of a number of different theoretical accounts of it. These include various *cost-based* accounts, which hold that feasibility is a matter of what is achievable without undue costs;<sup>2</sup> *possibility-based* accounts, which hold that it is a matter of what is possible in some special sense or in light of certain special considerations;<sup>3</sup> *probability-based* accounts, which hold that it is a matter of what we are likely to achieve,<sup>4</sup> or would be likely to achieve insofar as we try;<sup>5</sup> and *disposition-based accounts*, which hold that it is a matter of our dispositions to try and to succeed.<sup>6</sup> The different accounts differ, not only with regard to the kind of *modal property* they take feasibility to be, but also with regard to its *formal structure* (e.g. whether it is (primarily) a

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<sup>2</sup> Räikkä 1998; Buchanan 2004; Miller 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Wiens 2015.

<sup>4</sup> de Wispelaere and Noguera 2012; Carens 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012; cf. Estlund 2011

<sup>6</sup> Stemplowska 2016; 2021; Southwood 2016a.

binary or scalar notion<sup>7</sup>); *precise contours* (e.g. whether it entails volitional capacity<sup>8</sup> or is compatible with volitional incapacity;<sup>9</sup> *application conditions* (e.g. whether it applies exclusively to subjects that meet the conditions for individual or group agency<sup>10</sup> or also to certain non-agentive groups<sup>11</sup>); and *modal logic* (e.g. whether it is implied by actuality<sup>12</sup>).

This naturally raises the question: How should we go about evaluating and adjudicating between the different accounts of feasibility? One familiar approach is to look to whether or not they deliver substantive verdicts that line up with certain *linguistic data* – in particular, data concerning the substance or content of our linguistic dispositions to ascribe the terms “feasible” and “infeasible” to particular actions and/or our linguistic intuitions involving the appropriateness of such ascriptions. But while this kind of linguistic approach figures prominently within much existing theorising about feasibility (including, I hasten to add, my own), it is far from satisfactory. To be sure, there is arguably a limited role for our linguistic dispositions and intuitions in helping to fix the *subject-matter* of claims about feasibility by providing a minimal “conceptual core,” as it were, that any account of feasibility must accommodate in order to avoid being guilty of simply changing the subject.<sup>13</sup> But the idea that we could hope to settle serious substantive disagreements about feasibility in this way strikes me as fanciful. Our linguistic dispositions and intuitions regarding feasibility are too promiscuous for that. It would hardly count as an abuse of language to use the term “feasible” in either a volition-inclusive or a volition-exclusive fashion; in either a value-laden or a value-free way; and so on. Competent speakers can and do disagree on this score. Moreover, even if we could somehow identify conclusive linguistic evidence for or against some claim about feasibility’s modal status or formal structure or whatever, this would hardly amount to settling the disagreement in a principled way. At most, it would tell us something about lexicography.<sup>14</sup>

What might a more satisfactory approach look like? There are various possibilities.<sup>15</sup> But the most promising alternative, to my mind, is to adopt what I shall call a *functionalist*

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<sup>7</sup> Gilabert and Lawford Smith 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Wiens 2016 and Southwood 2016a.

<sup>9</sup> Estlund 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Lawford-Smith 2013; Collins 2013; 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Stemplowska 2016; Estlund 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Southwood and Wiens 2016; cf. Lawford-Smith 2013.

<sup>13</sup> See Pettit 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Moore 1988, ch. 1, sect 6.

<sup>15</sup> For example, we might adopt an *ameliorative* approach that would involve evaluating accounts of feasibility by considering how the concept *ought to be* (Haslanger 2000; see also Cappelen and Plunkett 2019); or a *general theoretical* approach whereby we start with what we take to be the best existing theory of modality or “can” in general

*approach*.<sup>16</sup> A functionalist approach of the kind I have in mind starts from the observation that the idea of feasibility can be understood as playing a certain *functional role* within our talk and thought about what is feasibility – a functional role that can be gauged by attending to the most central ways in which we are disposed to use, and to treat it as appropriate to use, claims about feasibility – whatever their substance or content. It then holds that we should evaluate accounts of feasibility by considering whether or not they deliver an interpretation of our talk and thought about feasibility that can do justice to this functional role.

A functionalist approach is appealing because it appears to offer some hope of settling otherwise intractable disagreements about feasibility in a principled and plausible way. Like the linguistic approach, it purports to evaluate accounts of feasibility by attending to certain social practices within which claims about feasibility are at play. But, unlike the linguistic approach, it involves attending to our practices of using claims about feasibility, whatever their content, to do things (what we might call our practices of *practical deployment*) – as opposed to our practices of using language to attribute feasibility to things that we might do (what I shall call our practices of *linguistic attribution*). This means that we are not held hostage to facts about our linguistic dispositions and intuitions, and the existence of radical linguistic disagreement need be no impediment to resolving fundamental disagreements about feasibility.

The challenge, of course, is to provide a characterisation of feasibility's functional role that allows us to deliver on this promise. Such a characterisation must satisfy two requirements. First, it must be plausible in its own right. By this I mean that it must be sufficiently faithful to, and constitute an accurate interpretation of, our practices of making and using feasibility claims. Call this the *plausibility requirement*. Second, it must be the right kind of characterisation for our purposes. That is, it must provide us with the basis for an effective and workable functionalist approach to theorising about feasibility – one that will help us to carry out the difficult job of evaluating and adjudicating between different accounts of feasibility in the face of otherwise potentially intractable disagreements. Call this the *effectiveness requirement*. Identifying a characterisation of feasibility's functional role that can satisfy both requirements is not a trivial matter. While a number of philosophers

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(e.g. Kratzer 1977) and then simply extend it to feasibility. While I have some reservations about both approaches, I won't say anything more about them here.

<sup>16</sup> See also Erman and Moller 2020.

have expressed sympathy for, and made gestures in the direction of, a functionalist approach, no one has succeeded in providing such a characterisation hitherto.<sup>17</sup>

My aim in this paper is to try to meet this challenge: first, to propose a particular characterisation of feasibility's functional role that can deliver on the promise of a functionalist approach; and, second, to begin to put it to work by considering what it implies for the key question of how to understand the nature of our talk and thought involving the concept of feasibility. The characterisation that I propose holds that feasibility's functional role is to determine which actions count as *deliberation-worthy* – by which I mean that they are fitting objects for the exercise of practical reason or deliberation about what to do. I will argue that this *deliberative view*, as I shall call it, is well placed to satisfy both the plausibility requirement and the effectiveness requirement. Moreover, I will argue that it has significant implications for the question of how to understand the nature of our talk and thought about what is feasible. First, I suggest that it means that the main existing accounts of feasibility are unsatisfactory and should be rejected. That is because, as we shall see, each of these accounts fails to deliver an interpretation of our talk and thought about what is feasible that can do justice to feasibility's deliberation-worthiness-determining functional role. Second, and more tentatively, I will suggest that we have at least some reason to embrace, not only a functionalist approach to theorising about feasibility, but also a novel functionalist *account* of feasibility according to which feasibility is to be identified with the functional property of determining the domain of the deliberation-worthy (as opposed to some modal property that we merely pick out by attending to feasibility's deliberation-worthiness-determining functional role).

## II. Against the ought-constraining view

We are looking for a way of characterising feasibility's functional role that can provide us with a credible functionalist approach to theorising about feasibility. Perhaps the most natural first thought is to point to the role that claims about feasibility are supposed to play in constraining the truth of claims about what ought to be done. This can be encapsulated by a version of the principle that "ought" implies "can" – what I shall call the principle that "ought" implies "feasible" (or (OF)) – according to which

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<sup>17</sup> The best-developed articulation of a functionalist approach to date is due to Eva Erman and Nikolas Moller (2020). This is an important step in the right direction. However, as Erman and Moller freely acknowledge, their account remains programmatic and promissory. It is also radically pluralistic in ways that make it ill-equipped for our particular purposes.

(OF) For any agent A, action X and time t, A ought to X at t only if it is feasible for A to X at t.

Given (OF), determining whether or not the performance of an action by an agent is feasible puts us in a position to determine whether or not it is a candidate for what ought to be done. If performing the act is infeasible, then we can conclude on that basis, via (OF), that it is not the case that it ought to be done. If it is feasible, then we cannot conclude on that basis, via (OF), either that it ought to be done or that it is not the case that it ought to be done, but we can conclude that it is at least a candidate for what ought to be done.

The *ought-constraining view*, as I shall call it, might seem to be exactly the kind of view we are looking for. First, it seems plausible in its own right and, hence, to satisfy the plausibility requirement. We surely do, as a matter of fact, treat feasibility as playing an ought-constraining role. This can be seen most clearly from our propensity to make inferences from claims about infeasibility to the negation of corresponding claims about what ought to be done. (For example, we might infer that it is not the case that we ought or are required to eliminate poverty altogether from the fact (as it seems to us) that it is infeasible to eliminate poverty (given the significant structural impediments to doing so).) Second, the ought-constraining view might also seem to be well placed to satisfy the effectiveness requirement by providing us with a functionalist approach to theorising about feasibility that can successfully navigate ongoing disagreements about feasibility. Consider, for example, the so-called *simple probability-based account* of feasibility (SPA) according to which

(SPA) For any agent A, action X and time t, it is feasible for A to X at t if and only if and because A is sufficiently likely to X at t.<sup>18</sup>

Interpreting (OF) in light of the (SPA) gives us

(OF<sub>SP</sub>) For any agent A, action X and time t, A ought to X at t only if A is sufficiently likely to X at t.

(OF<sub>SP</sub>) might seem to be obviously mistaken since it mistakenly implies that it cannot be true that we ought to do what we are sufficiently unlikely to do.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we can conclude that (SPA) is mistaken – not because it runs counter to certain linguistic data, but because it fails

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<sup>18</sup> See de Wispelaere and Noguera 2012; Carens 2013.

<sup>19</sup> See Estlund 2020, pp. 26-9.

to vindicate feasibility's ought-constraining role. (It would, in effect, falsify (OF), whereas (OF) is, by assumption, true.)

But this is too quick. In fact, the ought-constraining view fails to satisfy either requirement, properly understood. It fails to satisfy the plausibility requirement since there are certain important features of our practices of making and using feasibility claims that it cannot explain. Consider, in particular, the fact that that we are disposed to regard *deliberating* – and, hence, making any *decision* – about whether (or when or how) to do something that we take to be infeasible as *inappropriate* in an important sense. For example, we would regard it as inappropriate to deliberate about whether to bring about open borders, or when to eliminate poverty altogether, or how to achieve absolute equality of opportunity – insofar as we take it to be infeasible (for us or others) to do these things. Yet the ought-constraining view cannot explain this. If we accept (OF), then we are going to be disposed to infer from the fact (as it seems to us) that it is infeasible for us to do something that it is not the case that we ought to do it. But clearly we cannot infer from the fact that it is not the case that we ought to do something that it is inappropriate to deliberate about whether (or when or how) to do it. To say that it is not the case that we ought to do something does not, of course, entail that we *ought not* to do it, i.e. that it is *impermissible*. On the contrary, it is perfectly consistent with saying that it is not the case that we ought to do something that it is *permissible* to do it; and there are plenty of things that it is permissible but not obligatory for us to do that are such that it would not be inappropriate for us to deliberate about whether to do them. (Think of deliberating about whether to give all one's money to Oxfam.)

It might seem that we can solve this problem by embracing a variant of the ought-constraining view according to which the role of feasibility is to limit, not merely claims about what we ought to do but also claims about what we are *permitted* to do. Call this the *permission-constraining view*. The permission-constraining view might seem to do better since, unlike the ought-constraining view, it can potentially explain why it is always inappropriate to decide to do what is infeasible. That is because it is at least plausible that it is always impermissible (and, in that sense, inappropriate) to decide to do what is impermissible. Nonetheless, the permission-constraining account fails as well. First, even if it is impermissible for us to *do* something, it does not obviously follow that it is inappropriate to *deliberate* about whether to do it. There can be significant value in deliberating about whether to do impermissible things. (For example, deliberating about whether to help a guilty child to escape the force of the law may be the only way to fully express one's love.)

Second, if it is indeed true that it is always inappropriate to decide to do what is impermissible (which is what is needed to explain why it is always inappropriate to decide to do what is infeasible), then it must surely also be true that it is always appropriate to decide not to do what is impermissible. If so, then the permission-constraining view implies that it is always appropriate to decide not to do what is *infeasible*. But this seems plainly inappropriate. If it is infeasible for us to do something then it would seem to be inappropriate to make *any decision at all* about whether (or when or how) to do it. For example, if it is infeasible for us to eliminate poverty, then it would seem inappropriate, not merely to decide to eliminate poverty, but also to decide *not* to eliminate poverty.

The ought-constraining view also fails to satisfy the effectiveness requirement. We are looking for a characterisation of feasibility's functional role that can provide us with a functionalist approach to theorising about feasibility in the face of potentially intractable disagreements about feasibility. However, as we have seen, using the ought-constraining view to settle questions about feasibility both (a) presupposes a certain thesis regarding the nature of the normative (i.e. (OF)) and (b) requires consulting our substantive judgements about what we ought to do. Both are highly disputed. Regarding (OF): many philosophers deny this on the grounds that it is vulnerable to counterexamples: counterexamples involving intentionally or negligently making it infeasible for us to do what we ought;<sup>20</sup> bad character in virtue of which it is infeasible for us to do what we ought;<sup>21</sup> normative dilemmas;<sup>22</sup> certain substantive normative views such as the divine command theory;<sup>23</sup> and so on. Regarding our substantive judgements about what we ought to do: these are, if anything, subject to even greater disagreement than our judgements about feasibility. In sum, in spite of its *prima facie* appeal, the ought-constraining view is not the view we are looking for. A different view is required.

### III. The deliberative view

This brings us to my own preferred view: the *deliberative view*. According to the deliberative view, the functional role of our talk and thought about what is feasible is instead to determine which actions count as *deliberation-worthy*, or fitting objects of the agent's exercise of *practical reason* or *deliberation*. Some actions are deliberation-worthy. Others are non-deliberation-worthy. We have a need for some way of establishing which actions

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<sup>20</sup> Stocker 1971.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Tessman 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Forrester 1989, pp. 19-22.

belong in the deliberation-worthy category and which actions belong in the non-deliberation-worthy category. The deliberative view holds that the functional role of our talk and thought about what is feasible is, in effect, to fulfil that need. Our first task is to provide a more detailed characterisation of this special deliberation-worthiness-determining role.

Let me begin by saying something about what I mean by *practical deliberation*. In the most general terms, I will take practical deliberation to be the activity of *reflective decision-making*.<sup>24</sup> It therefore involves two core elements. First, it involves (individual or collective) *decision-making*. By this I mean that it involves *undertaking* to make a decision, though not necessarily succeeding in doing so. Thus, it is not enough that we are engaged in the activity of *forming beliefs*: either beliefs regarding some descriptive question (say, about what we will do); or beliefs regarding some normative question (say, about what we or others ought to do) – insofar as we are not also thereby undertaking to make a decision about what to do. Moreover, practical deliberation typically only has application to our own current or future conduct. That is because we typically do not engage in decision-making regarding the past (what to have done, as it were); or regarding others' conduct (what others are to do, as it were); or our own mental states (what to believe or intend or feel). Of course, we often deliberate about what we ought to have done; and what others ought to do; and what we ought to believe or intend or feel. But, as I have noted, such deliberation only counts as practical deliberation in the specific sense I have in mind insofar as we are engaged in the activity of decision-making. Second, practical deliberation involves *reflective* decision-making: interrogating, weighing, and bringing to bear relevant considerations on the question of what to do. It is not enough to make a decision (say, for two romantic partners to make a decision about whether to get married) by tossing a coin or consulting an oracle. While the activity of making the higher-order decision to employ these questionable means of decision-making may itself count as genuine practical deliberation, the activity of making the first-order decision (to get married or not to get married) doesn't.

Next, claims about feasibility are supposed to determine whether actions are *worthy* (or *fitting objects*) of practical deliberation – understood as the activity of reflective decision-making. Part of what this means, I suggest, is that they are supposed to play what I shall call an *option-fixing* role: to determine whether particular actions are to be included among the set of options that are candidates for consideration within practical deliberation. In this respect, claims about feasibility are quite different from, say, claims involving the *reasons* we

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<sup>24</sup> See Southwood 2016b; 2019a; cf. Wallace 2014.

take ourselves to have to perform and refrain from performing certain actions. Such claims play what I shall call an *option-adjudicating* role. By this I mean that their role is to help us to select between options within deliberation. Suppose that I am recovering from a nasty surfing accident and that my recovery has advanced to the point where I am deliberating about whether to take up surfing again. In doing so, I will very likely consult and bring to bear various claims about the reasons I take myself to have for and against taking up surfing again, and it would seem to be perfectly appropriate for me to do so. For example, it would seem appropriate to adduce the claim that I enjoy surfing in support of taking up surfing again. And it would seem appropriate to adduce the claim that surfing is pretty dangerous in support of not taking up surfing again. By contrast, claims about feasibility do *not* seem to play an option-adjudicating role. It would not seem appropriate to adduce the claim that it is feasible for me to take up surfing again in support of taking up surfing again.<sup>25</sup> (The feasibility of my taking up surfing again is a consideration that bears on whether there is a decision to make regarding whether (or when or how) to take up surfing again, not on what the decision should be.) Similarly, it would not seem appropriate to adduce the claim that it is *infeasible* for me to take up surfing again in support of not taking up surfing again. (If this claim is correct, then it would seem that I would have gone wrong in engaging in any deliberation whatsoever – in even purporting to make a decision about whether to take up surfing again.<sup>26</sup> *A fortiori*, I would have gone wrong in treating the claim that it is infeasible for me to take up surfing again as bearing on the question of whether to do so.)

Nonetheless, the fact that claims about feasibility play an option-fixing role, rather than an option-adjudicating role, is not the whole story. Claims about feasibility are hardly unique in playing an option-fixing role. Certain *normative* claims seem to do likewise. Consider claims about what would be *morally heinous*, such as the claim that it would be morally heinous for me to leave my toddler behind in the supermarket when he is throwing a particularly awful tantrum. I take it that such claims are of the right kind to play an option-fixing role, rather than (merely) an option-adjudicating role. It would seem perfectly appropriate to rule out deliberating about whether to leave my toddler behind on that basis (and inappropriate to deliberate about whether to do so). This is presumably because (at least typically) we *ought not to deliberate* about whether to do things that would be morally heinous. Normative claims of this kind act as deliberative option-fixers by (at least typically) issuing in corresponding claims about how we ought to deliberate. Likewise, some of our

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012.

<sup>26</sup> See Southwood 2019b, pp. 608-9.

*attitudes* also appear to play an option-fixing role. For example, it sometimes seems to be appropriate to rule out deliberative options on the basis of our *past decisions*, as when we rule out renting a holiday house in Tuscany on the grounds that we have already decided to spend our holiday in France (rather than Italy). This is presumably because we are rationally required not to intend to do what, given our beliefs, would be incompatible with achieving our current intentions and rationally required not to give up on an intention for no reason.<sup>27</sup>

Claims about what is feasible must, therefore, be understood to be playing a *special* kind of option-fixing role. How so? My suggestion is that claims about what is feasible fix our deliberative options by setting the limits of what I shall call our domain of *deliberative jurisdiction*. We are, of course, familiar with the idea that certain political entities, such as states, have a domain of *legal* jurisdiction: a domain within which they have jurisdiction to make and enforce laws. Some things lie within a state's domain of legal jurisdiction such as Australia's passing a law requiring anyone driving a moped in Australia to have a license. Others lie outside it, such as Australia's passing a law requiring anyone riding a skateboard in New Zealand to wear a helmet. To say that something lies within a state's domain of legal jurisdiction is to say that it is candidate for legally valid law-making and/or law-enforcement. If the state purports to make and/or enforce law with regard to it, then the action is *legally valid* (whether or not it is normatively valid in other ways). By contrast, if something lies outside a state's domain of legal jurisdiction, then it is not even a candidate for legally valid law-making and/or law-enforcement. Insofar as the state purports to make and/or enforce law with regard to it, then the action is necessarily legally invalid (whether or not it is normatively invalid in other ways).

Similarly, I suggest that we have a domain of *deliberative* jurisdiction – that is, a domain of jurisdiction qua practical deliberators – and that it should be understood along the same lines. Here, too, to say that something lies within a subject's domain of deliberative jurisdiction is to say that it is a candidate for valid practical deliberation: that insofar as the subject purports to deliberate about it, their doing so is perfectly *deliberatively valid*; in doing so, they do not violate relevant deliberative norm. By contrast, to say that something lies outside a subject's domain of deliberative jurisdiction is to say that it is not even a candidate for valid practical deliberation and, hence, that insofar as the subject purports to deliberate about it, their doing so is deliberatively invalid, that is, contrary to relevant deliberative norms.

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<sup>27</sup> See Broome 2013, p. 178.

It is important to emphasise several features of these deliberative jurisdiction-constituting deliberative norms. First, they are *constitutive* norms of deliberation. That is to say that they articulate standards that are internal to the activity of deliberation in the sense that they describe what is needed in order to fulfil deliberation's *constitutive aim* and, hence, what constitutes *correct and incorrect deliberation*, or what it takes to count as appropriate or inappropriate *qua deliberation*.<sup>28</sup> As such, they are quite different from norms that determine whether we *ought* and have *reason* to deliberate in certain ways (norms that are sometimes called *robustly normative*). Thus, for example, deliberating about whether to do something may accord with constitutive deliberative norms – and, hence, doing it may lie within our domain of deliberative jurisdiction – even if we ought not to deliberate about whether to do it.

Second, they are what I shall call norms of *deliberative admission*. But this I mean that they pertain to *whether* one deliberates about whether to do something at all. As such, they are quite different from other important constitutive deliberative norms – those that pertain to *how* one deliberates once one is already deliberating (what I shall call norms of *deliberative transition*). Thus, for example, deliberating about whether to do something may be contrary to norms of deliberative admission – and, hence, doing it may lie beyond our domain of deliberative jurisdiction – even if, once we are deliberating about it, we do so in a way that accords perfectly with valid constitutive norms of deliberative transition.

Third, they are *fittingness* norms – norms that determine whether it is *fitting* to deliberate about whether (or when or how) to do something. As such, they are quite different from other important constitutive norms of deliberative admission such as certain norms of *rationality*. Norms of rationality are, of course, *subjective* or *attitude-sensitive* rather than objective or fact-sensitive in the sense that whether or not a particular action or attitude is rational depends on our *attitudes* or our *evidence*, rather than the facts. For example, a desire to drink the liquid in a glass may be perfectly rational – and in that respect a perfectly correct desire – even if the liquid turns out, as a matter of fact, to be petrol, so long as we believe, or reasonably believe, it to be water. Norms of fittingness, by contrast, are widely recognised to be *objective* or *fact-sensitive*; whether or not a particular action or attitude is fitting depends on the facts, rather than our attitudes or evidence about the

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<sup>28</sup> See Korsgaard 1996.

facts.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for example, a desire to drink liquid that is, in fact, petrol, while it may be rational, is not a fitting desire. While both kinds of norms (rationality norms and fittingness norms) are crucial in determining what constitutes correct and incorrect deliberation, it is only fittingness norms that are relevant to whether a particular action lies within or beyond one's domain of deliberation jurisdiction and counts as a fitting object of practical deliberation.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that the idea that there are such objective deliberative norms appears to run counter to a familiar and appealing view according to which what counts as proper or correct deliberation is determined solely by our (reasonable) *beliefs* about the actions in question.<sup>30</sup> Suppose that we are deliberating about how to save 10 miners who we reasonably believe to be alive and stuck in a mine-shaft, whereas, as it happens, the mine-shaft has caved in and none remains alive. It might seem that such deliberation is perfectly correct, that there is nothing wrong with it qua deliberation.

Nonetheless, I think we have good reason to reject this view. It might be *rational* to deliberate about how to save the miners in such a case, but it would not be *correct deliberation*. As I suggested above, the correctness of deliberating about whether (or when or how) to perform an action is determined by whether the action has whatever features are required to achieve deliberation's constitutive aim. Moreover, I shall assume that deliberation's constitutive aim encompasses *the performance of actions*, which is something in the world.<sup>31</sup> Aristotle might have been wrong to suppose that practical deliberation *culminates* in actions (that the performance of such actions is literally *part* of practical deliberation), but he was surely right that practical deliberation is *oriented* at the performance of actions. In deliberating, our aim is, in part, to determine whether (or when or how) we will perform certain actions. But if this is right, then it would seem that what is required to achieve deliberation's constitutive aim cannot depend purely on our (reasonable) beliefs about whether the actions we are deliberating about have certain features. Rather, the actions must *in fact have those features*. For example, if an action such as saving the miners is in fact metaphysically or nomologically impossible, then there is simply no way for

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<sup>29</sup> The objective character of fittingness norms appears to be universally taken for granted among proponents and critics of the tradition of *fitting-attitudes* accounts of value tracing back to Ewing (1948); and also the more recent and ambitious *fittingness first* program in meta-ethics (see e.g. McHugh and Way 2016). I am grateful to Garrett Cullity and Chris Howard for helpful discussion of the objectivity of fittingness norms.

<sup>30</sup> I am very grateful to an Associate Editor for pressing this important objection.

<sup>31</sup> In particular, I shall suggest below that the constitutive aim of practical deliberation involves *practical self-determination*: determining whether we will perform certain actions by deciding whether to perform those actions.

our deliberation about how to save the miners to achieve the aim of determining that we will perform the action of saving the miners in this way or that. It follows that deliberating about how to save the miners when we reasonably but mistakenly believe them to be alive is not correct deliberation.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, understanding the *nature* of the norms that constitute our domain of deliberative jurisdiction along these lines can also help us with the important task of beginning to provide an account of what explains their *substance* or *content* – the kinds of actions they permit and forbid.<sup>33</sup> Given that they are constitutive norms – norms that describe what is needed to achieve deliberation’s constitutive aim – the key, of course, is to identify the content of this constitutive aim. We have just seen that the aim of practical deliberation is *practical* in the sense that it involves determining whether or when or how to perform certain actions. But this is only part of the story. I have argued elsewhere that, in particular, deliberation’s constitutive aim involves manifesting a kind of *practical self-determination* or *self-authorship*. In deliberating, we aim *to determine how we will act by deciding how to act*.<sup>34</sup> This yields the following substantive explanation of the content of deliberative jurisdiction-constituting norms: We are permitted to deliberate about whether (or when or how) to perform actions only when and because they possess whatever objective (non-epistemic) features are needed in order for us to manifest the relevant form of practical self-determination vis-à-vis the performance of the actions. I shall say much more about what exactly this implies substantively below. But it is worth observing briefly here that it rules out three kinds of actions: first, actions where there is some insurmountable impediment to our bringing about the performance of the actions at all; second, actions where there is some insurmountable impediment to our deciding to perform the actions;

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<sup>32</sup> How about the converse: that is, deliberating about how to save the miners when we reasonably but mistakenly believe them to be *dead* (i.e. as it happens, they are still alive)? Such deliberation might seem to be obviously *incorrect*. I agree. Such deliberation would be *irrational*, and recall that I accept that norms of rationality also help to determine the correctness of correct deliberation. To be sure, I am committed to saying that saving the miners might nonetheless be a perfectly *fitting* object of practical deliberation in such a case. Is that a problem? I don’t think so. Imagine that we are deliberating about how to save the miners. (Perhaps we have just woken up and have not yet remembered the fact (as it seems to us) that the miners are dead (cf. Broome 2013, ch. 13).) Here is a way that such deliberation might go: we might conclude our deliberation by deciding to call up the emergency services and asking them to initiate a rescue operation, and the emergency services might successfully carry out the operation, resulting in the miners being saved. This would appear to amount to achieving deliberation’s constitutive aim. Or, at least, it is not obvious that the action of saving the miners lacks any objective feature that is required for deliberation about how to save the miners to achieve deliberation’s constitutive aim.

<sup>33</sup> I am very grateful to an Associate Editor for encouraging me to say something more general about what explains the content of the deliberative jurisdiction-constituting norms, rather than relying unduly on our intuitive judgements about their content, as I had done in a previous version.

<sup>34</sup> See Southwood 2016a, pp. 31-3.

third, actions where there is some insurmountable impediment to our decisions determining that we succeed in performing the actions.

We are now in a position to state the deliberative view more precisely. It holds that the functional role of our talk and thought about feasibility is to determine whether actions count as deliberation-worthy or deliberation-unworthy, where this involves fixing an agent's set of deliberative options by dividing the agent's potential options into those that lie within the agent's domain of deliberative jurisdiction and those that lie outside it, i.e. to divide the potential options into those that it would be deliberatively correct for the agent to deliberate about whether to do (i.e. in accordance with constitutive, fittingness norms of deliberative admission whose content is determined by whatever objective (non-epistemic) features are needed in order for us to manifest a certain kind of practical self-determination) and those that it would be deliberatively incorrect for the agent to deliberate about whether to do (i.e. in violation of the aforementioned norms).

#### IV. The plausibility and effectiveness of the deliberative view

So much for what the deliberative view involves. Can it satisfy the two requirements on a satisfactory characterisation of feasibility that we enumerated above: the plausibility requirement and the effectiveness requirement?

##### A. Plausibility

Let us start with the plausibility requirement. We saw that the ought-constraining view cannot fully satisfy this requirement. Can the deliberative view do better?

First, unlike the ought-constraining view, the deliberative view can easily explain the fact that we are disposed to regard deliberating about what is infeasible (either on our own part or on the part of others) as necessarily inappropriate (irrespective of the desirability of the outcomes in question and even if we take there to be compelling reasons for engaging in such deliberation). Part of what it means for an action to be deliberation-worthy is for it to be appropriate to deliberate about whether to perform it. Thus, clearly, in order for claims about feasibility to be capable of playing a deliberation-worthiness-determining role, it must be the case that we are disposed to treat claims to the effect that it is *infeasible* for us to do things as entailing that it is inappropriate to deliberate about whether to do those things. This is the only way to rule out the possibility that an action could be infeasible and yet perfectly deliberation-worthy.

Next, the deliberative view also appears to do a good job of explaining what *unifies* our talk and thought about what is feasible by identifying a feature that such talk and thought appears to share in common. This is noteworthy because our feasibility claims are highly disparate and heterogeneous, and there is significant disagreement about their content, grounds, and even nature.

Is it really true that the deliberative view can accommodate our practices of making and using feasibility claims in their entirety? This might seem a stretch. For it might seem that there are at least some feasibility claims that cannot plausibly be interpreted as playing a deliberation-worthiness-determining role. Challenging cases of this sort include: feasibility claims involving the obtaining of *states of affairs*; feasibility claims about the *past*; feasibility claims that have a *theoretical* rather than a practical aim (such as claims involving what is sometimes called “technical feasibility” of the sort that engineers are in the business of making); and feasibility claims that are operating in the register of *advice* or *criticism*. In each case, it might seem that the point of making the relevant claims is not to determine what is deliberation-worthy. If so, then there are important examples of feasibility claims that simply cannot be captured by the deliberative view.

But this is a mistake. None of these claims poses a challenge to the deliberative view, properly understood. For one, the deliberative view holds that the role of feasibility claims is to determine deliberation-*worthiness*. This means that claims about feasibility must always be *fit to be used* to determine what our deliberative options are supposed to be. It does *not* mean that claims about feasibility are always and only ever *in fact used* in this way. Clearly, we can and do make and use feasibility claims in all sorts of non-deliberation-worthiness-determining ways and indeed in all sorts of non-deliberative contexts. The deliberative view can readily accommodate such claims so long as it remains the case that they are supposed to be *fit* to be used in a deliberation-worthiness-determining way. This is true of feasibility claims that have a purely theoretical aim and feasibility claims that are operating in the register of advice or criticism.

For another, the deliberative view purports, at least primarily and in the first instance, to be an account of the functional role of our practices of making claims about what it is feasible and infeasible for us *to do*. Such claims are *practical* rather than *ontic* (i.e. they are claims about we do, as opposed to what is the case) and *prospective* rather than *retrospective* (i.e. they are claims about what we do now or in the future, as opposed to what we did or didn't do in the past). Strictly speaking, feasibility claims about the obtaining of states of affairs and feasibility claims about the past simply lie beyond the scope of the

deliberative view. This does not, of course, mean that we cannot make sense of such claims by reference to it. Clearly we can. We can make sense of ontic feasibility claims so long as they can be *translated* into practical feasibility claims. (For example, we might translate the ontic claim that it is feasible (or infeasible) that absolute equality of opportunity exists between men and women into the practical claim that it is feasible (or infeasible) for us to bring about (or bring about and maintain) absolute equality of opportunity between men and women.) We can make sense of retrospective feasibility claims by reference to what was deliberation-worthy at the time. In sum, it would seem that there are no compelling examples of feasibility claims that the deliberative view purports to accommodate and cannot do so. Either they can be accommodated, or they lie beyond the scope of the deliberative view.

Third, the deliberative view can also explain what is functionally *distinctive* about the idea of feasibility. Claims about feasibility would appear to be unique in playing the role of fixing our deliberative options by setting the domain of our deliberative jurisdiction. Take claims about what is morally heinous, such as the claim that it would be morally heinous for me to leave my toddler behind in the supermarket when he is throwing a particularly impressive tantrum. Leaving my toddler behind in the supermarket lies squarely within my domain of deliberative jurisdiction. While it would be wrong for me to deliberate about whether to do so, it is perfectly compatible with achieving the aim of determining how we will act by deciding how to act. Or take our attitudes such as our past decision to go on holiday to France rather than Italy. It may be *irrational*, given this decision, to deliberate about whether to rent a holiday house in Tuscany, but doing so is not unfitting qua deliberation. Renting a holiday house in Tuscany is not beyond our domain of deliberative jurisdiction.

Finally, the deliberative view can also explain the fact that we are disposed to treat claims about what is feasible as especially significant or *important* (and indeed *distinctively* important). Determining our domain of deliberative jurisdiction involves a way of fixing our deliberative options that can potentially circumvent difficult normative questions about what we ought and have reason to do and various questions about matters of value. In order to settle the question of whether a potential option lies within or beyond a subject's domain of deliberative jurisdiction, it is enough that we are in a position to settle the question of whether purporting to deliberate about whether to go for it is in accordance with or in violation of certain objective constitutive norms of deliberative initiation. This requires an (implicit) understanding of the nature of practical deliberation and the norms that are

constitutive of it. But it does not require settling questions about the normative or evaluative credentials of the potential option in question. Thus, at least in principle, claims about what is feasible may continue to play an option-fixing role in circumstances where there are certain kinds of significant obstacles to settling relevant normative questions. I have in mind, for example, circumstances in which we are unavoidably *uncertain* about relevant matters of value; or where there is intractable *disagreement*; or where we are especially vulnerable to certain kinds of normative *errors*; or where there are principled reasons to remain *neutral* about certain matters of value (say, to avoid perfectionism or paternalism). None of these obstacles, in principle, need be an insurmountable impediment to our talk and thought about feasibility fulfilling its core deliberative role.<sup>35</sup>

### B. Effectiveness

Can the deliberative view also satisfy the effectiveness requirement? Here too we have reason to be optimistic. First, unlike the linguistic approach, a functionalist approach based on the deliberative view provides us with a way of theorising about feasibility in the face of otherwise seemingly intractable disagreements about *feasibility*. Considering what is required in order for claims about feasibility to play the role of determining what is deliberation-worthy is something that we can agree on, at least in principle, even if we disagree vehemently and otherwise intractably about what is feasible and infeasible and indeed what feasibility is.

A simple example might help to see how. Consider the question of whether the modal logic that regulates our feasibility ascriptions includes the principle that “actual” implies “feasible,” i.e. whether it is legitimate to infer from the fact that something actually happens that it was feasible that it happen. This is an important issue on which theorists disagree. Yet trying to adjudicate disagreements about agentive modal notions such as feasibility by consulting our linguistic intuitions is no help whatsoever; the evidence is mixed and equivocal, and linguistic intuitions differ.<sup>36</sup> But now suppose instead that we try to do so by deploying a functionalist approach based on the deliberative view. Doing so does not require consulting our linguistic intuitions or dispositions regarding the extension of the term

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, using claims about feasibility can also be distinctively *problematic*. Indeed, here too, understanding such claims as playing a deliberation-worthiness-determining role is helpful in illuminating the distinctive dangers. For example, when we mistakenly judge that it is infeasible for us to do things, we are mistakenly regarding this as literally beyond the reach of practical reason, which means that such errors are shielded from deliberative scrutiny and, hence, especially likely to persist.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Austin (1956, p. 218) versus Estlund (2011, p. 212) on the related question of whether “actual” implies “able.”

“feasible.” Rather, what is needed is to ascertain whether the principle that “actual” implies “feasible” is compatible or incompatible with feasibility’s deliberation-worthy-determining role. Here is an argument for thinking that they are incompatible: First, in order for claims about feasibility to be capable of determining an action’s deliberation-worthiness, it must be the case that “feasible” implies “not counterfactually fluky:” that our doing something only counts as feasible insofar as it would not be a fluke if we were to do it. Consider hitting the bullseye of a dartboard 100 times in a row while wearing a blindfold. This is not deliberation-worthy. That is because deliberating about whether to hit the bullseye of a dartboard 100 times in a row while wearing a blindfold is at odds with the aim of manifesting the relevant form of practical self-determination with regard to the action in question. Even if we were miraculously to bring about the outcome of hitting the bulls-eye 100 times in a row while wearing a blindfold, this would not count as an instance of a decision of ours *determining* in the relevant sense how we will act. The kind of determination (of our actions by our decisions) that is required for us to manifest self-authorship involves a sufficient degree of *modal robustness*; it must be the case that we succeed in performing the action in a sufficiently high proportion of the worlds in which we make the decision to perform the action. By contrast, the outcome whereby we succeed in hitting the bulls-eye 100 times in a row while wearing a blindfold, even if it is *causally downstream of* our having (irrationally) made a decision to hit the bulls-eye 100 times in a row, is not *determined* in the relevant sense by our decision since the outcome is excessively modally *fragile*; it results in too low a proportion of the worlds in which we make the decision to perform the action. Thus, if we were to allow that hitting the bulls-eye 100 times could count as feasible in spite of its counterfactual flukiness, the idea of feasibility would be plainly incapable of playing the role of determining deliberation-worthiness. The only way to guarantee that it can do so is to interpret feasible in a way that rules out the possibility of counterfactual flukiness. Second, we sometimes actually do things that are counterfactually fluky: jump out of planes and survive; win lotteries; survive multiple displaced cervical fractures; and so on. “Actual” does not imply “not counterfactually fluky.” Thus, the principle that “actual” implies “feasible” is incompatible with feasibility’s deliberation-worthy-determining role and, hence, false. Notice that we were able to establish this significant conclusion without having to consult our (divergent) intuitions about feasibility.

Second, unlike the ought-constraining view, the deliberative view provides us with a way of resolving important questions about feasibility that does not rely upon our capacity to resolve certain *other* intractable questions. As we saw, the problem with the ought-

constraining view was that using it to resolve questions about feasibility involves presupposing a particular thesis regarding the nature of the normative (the principle that “ought” implies “feasible”) and consulting our substantive judgements about what we ought and have reason to do. Both are highly disputed. By contrast, using the deliberative view to resolve questions about feasibility avoids the need to resolve such contentious matters. It does not presuppose some controversial principle about the nature of the normative such as “ought” implies “feasible.” To be sure, it presupposes a *different* principle: the principle that “deliberation-worthiness” implies “feasible,” as we might put it. But the latter is not controversial in the same way as the former. For one, it does not require us to take a stand on the question of whether “ought” implies “feasible;” this turns on the question of whether “ought” implies “deliberation-worthy” – a question that we do not need to settle for our purposes. For another, classic counterexamples to “ought” implies “feasible” simply do not seem to have any force against the idea that “deliberation-worthiness” implies “feasible.” For example, even if we can intentionally make it the case that it is infeasible for us to do what we ought to do (e.g. by intentionally making it the case that it is infeasible for us to return a prized possession that we have borrowed from a friend by burning it), it is surely not the case that returning the possession is deliberation-worthy, something that it would be fitting for us to deliberate about whether to do. Such deliberation is clearly of the wrong kind for us to achieve thereby the constitutive aim of deliberation – to determine how we will act by deciding how to act.

Moreover, using the deliberative view to resolve questions about feasibility does not require us to consult our normative judgements about what we *ought* and have *reason* to do. Rather, what is required is to consult our judgements about *deliberation-worthiness*, which, as we have seen, are made true by claims about what is needed to fulfil deliberation’s constitutive aim. Again, this is something that we can agree on, at least in principle, even if we disagree vehemently and intractably about what we ought and have reason to do. Consider again the issue of whether “feasible” implies “not counterfactually fluky.” As we saw, we were able to settle this question simply by considering what is needed to achieve the aim of manifesting practical self-determination. We did not need to consult our judgements about whether we sometimes ought or have reason to do things that are counterfactually fluky. As a result, we were able to neatly side-step various vexed normative questions, such as questions about moral luck.

In saying this, I do not, of course, mean to deny that there can and will be disagreements about deliberation-worthiness too. Perhaps most obviously, there clearly can

and will be deep and persistent disagreements about deliberation's *constitutive aim* and, hence, about the substantive grounds of our judgements about deliberation-worthiness. Does this fatally compromise the capacity of the deliberative view to meet the effectiveness requirement? No. For one thing, there is a basis for settling disagreements about deliberation's constitutive aim – one that does not require us to settle difficult normative questions. Understanding deliberation's constitutive aim is fundamentally a descriptive and interpretative exercise. It is a matter of understanding what deliberation *is* (as opposed to how it *ought* to be). And it requires *interpreting* (as opposed to evaluating) our practices of deliberation: considering what kind of aim or practical orientation we must attribute to would-be deliberators to make best interpretative sense of these practices. For another thing, and perhaps more importantly, while philosophical disagreements about deliberation's constitutive aim presumably won't be conclusively settled any time soon, this is not *necessary* in order to settle disagreements about the content of our deliberation-worthiness judgements. Rather, it is enough that we have a tolerable shared implicit understanding of what deliberation involves such that we are in a position to agree that particular actions either do or don't warrant inclusion as candidates for valid practical deliberation. Again, notice that achieving such agreement is compatible with the existence of radically conflicting and indeed potentially irreconcilable opinions about matters of value. Even if a progressive and a conservative disagree intractably about relevant matters of value such that they are terminally unable to agree about whether or not adopting a particular policy (on immigration or reproductive rights or whatever) would be *decision-worthy* as it were (i.e. whether deciding to adopt the policy would be a fitting *outcome* of practical deliberation), this is no impediment to their reaching agreement about whether or not adopting the policy is *deliberation-worthy* and, hence, feasible.

#### V. Putting the deliberative view to work: existing accounts of feasibility and their limits

I have proposed a novel characterisation of feasibility's functional role (the deliberative view) and argued that it is both plausible in its own right and also effective and, hence, the right kind of characterisation for our purposes. I now want to put it to work by considering what it implies for the key question of how to understand the nature of our talk and thought about feasibility.

##### A. Cost-based accounts

Let us start with cost-based accounts of feasibility according to which claims about

feasibility are special evaluative claims: namely, claims about what is *achievable without unacceptable costs*.<sup>37</sup> What does the deliberative view imply regarding the plausibility of cost-based accounts? It implies that it is a serious error to understand feasibility in these terms. That is because such evaluative claims are hopelessly ill suited to play a deliberation-worthiness-determining role. The fact that an outcome or institutional arrangement would count as “intolerable,” or that bringing it about would require transition costs that are “unacceptable” may be relevant to whether we *ought* to deliberate about it. Thus, for example, perhaps we ought not to deliberate about whether to bring about a communist Utopia if bringing it about would require massive human rights violations. Such deliberation may involve a kind of *normative* error: the error of deliberating about whether to do what would require us to do things that are morally heinous. What does not seem remotely plausible is that such deliberation involves the error of violating constitutive norms of deliberative initiation. Even if there is necessarily something wrong with my deliberation, there is nothing wrong with it *qua* deliberation. The fact that realizing an outcome would involve or require unacceptably high costs does not mean that it lies beyond our jurisdiction as deliberative agents. Thus, cost-based accounts of feasibility cannot do justice to the fact that claims about feasibility are supposed to play a deliberation-worthiness-determining role and should be rejected.

#### B. Possibility-based accounts

Next, consider *possibility*-based accounts. These hold that claims about feasibility are claims about what is possible: either claims about what is possible in some special sense (if there are different notions of possibility), or claims about what is possible in light of certain special considerations (if there is just one notion of possibility). Is there some possibility-based account of feasibility that can do justice to the idea that claims about feasibility are supposed to play a deliberation-worthiness-determining role?

The first challenge is to identify a mode of possibility that is sufficiently but not excessively *restrictive*. Some modes of possibility – including logical, metaphysical, and nomological possibility – are clearly *insufficiently* restrictive. For example, it is logically, metaphysically, and nomologically possible for Tuvulu to singlehandedly resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict in spite of the fact that this is clearly not deliberation-worthy.

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<sup>37</sup> See Rääkkä 1998; Buchanan 2004; Miller 2013.

Single-handedly resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict clearly lies outside Tuvulu's domain of deliberative jurisdiction; it would not be correct for Tuvulu to deliberate about whether to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict. Other modes of possibility – such as *deontic* possibility and *political* possibility – are *excessively* restrictive. For example, it may not be deontically or politically possible for a government to turn its back on a key electoral commitment, in spite of the fact that doing so lies is perfectly deliberation-worthy; it lies squarely *within* the government's domain of deliberative jurisdiction.

What might an appropriately restrictive possibility-based account of feasibility look like? The most promising and best-developed possibility-based account to date is due to David Wiens. Wiens understands feasibility in terms of what he calls "circumstantial possibility," where an outcome *O* is circumstantially possibility just in case it is compossible with "our current stock of all-purpose resources".<sup>38</sup> But, as Wiens freely acknowledges, the circumstantial possibility-based account remains incomplete. Circumstantial possibility is supposed to be necessary, but not sufficient, for feasibility.<sup>39</sup>

The other challenge is how we are supposed to rule out the possibility of *counterfactual flukes*. As we noted above, this is crucial in order for feasibility to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness since counterfactually fluky outcomes lie beyond the domain of the deliberation-worthy; it is incorrect to deliberate about whether to bring about such outcomes. But it is not clear how possibility-based accounts are supposed to do so. The problem is that, no matter what the right mode of possibility turns out to be, it would seem that realising certain counterfactually fluky states (such as winning the lottery or hitting the bulls-eye of a dartboard 100 times in a row) is going to count as feasible since "there is at least one world at which the state is realized that is circumstantially accessible from the actual world."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Wiens 2015, p. 455.

<sup>39</sup> Another natural idea would be to develop a *contextualist* account along the lines of Angelika Kratzer's (1977) influential account of "can." Given its flexibility, this may offer a compelling account of our ordinary linguistic practices: how we use the word "feasible." However, it seems hopeless for our purposes. The problem is that its flexibility makes it way too permissive. For example, considerations about *desirability* will often be included in the "modal base." Thus, while, unlike cost-based accounts, it is not true that feasibility is necessarily normative, it is true that feasibility is not necessarily non-normative.

<sup>40</sup> Wiens 2015, p. 458. Again, Wiens' response is simply to concede that his account offers an account of what is necessary but not what is sufficient in order for doing something to be feasible. A quite different response, recently proposed by Wolfgang Schwarz (2020), is to try to rule out counterfactual flukes by attending to the sorts of *responses* to which feasibility applies. While my winning the lottery is possible given "our current stock of all-purpose resources," it does not count as the sort of response to which feasibility applies. Rather, the only sorts of responses to which feasibility arises are those that are not counterfactually fluky. This seems objectionably ad hoc. Moreover, while it allows us to deny the truth of the claim "it is feasible to hit the bulls-eye 100 times in a row," it does not allow us to vindicate the truth of the claim, "it is infeasible to hit the bulls-eye 100 times in a row." By hypothesis, both claims

### C. Probability-based accounts

Next, let us turn to *probability*-based accounts of feasibility. First, consider *simple* probability-based accounts according to which claims about feasibility are claims about what we are sufficiently likely to do.<sup>41</sup> Again, the deliberative view provides us with a compelling reason to reject such accounts. Suppose that it is virtually certain that I will never read the complete works of Alain Robbe-Grillet because I have been told by a reliable friend that I would find the genre of the *nouveau roman* to be insufferably dull. I am virtually certain not to read the complete works of Alain Robbe-Grillet because I am virtually certain not to *decide* to read them or even to deliberate about whether to do so. But suppose that, for whatever reason, I *were* to deliberate about whether to read the complete works of Alain Robbe-Grillet. This might be a *silly* thing to do – a waste of my precious time that would be better spent doing just about anything else. It might even count as *irrational* insofar as I'm purporting to make a decision about whether to do something that I believe (or even know) that I'm virtually certain not to do. But it would hardly count as at odds with deliberation's constitutive aim and, hence, overreaching my domain of deliberative jurisdiction. Claims about whether we are likely to do something, even if true, do not provide an admissible basis for ruling out doing the thing in question as a deliberative option. *A fortiori*, they cannot play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness.

How about *counterfactual* probability-based accounts according to which claims about feasibility are claims about the likelihood that we *would* succeed in doing something insofar as we were to try?<sup>42</sup> On the face of it, such accounts would appear to deliver an interpretation of feasibility that is much better placed to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness. For unlike the simple probability-based account, they suggest that it is feasible for me to read the complete works of Alain Robbe-Grillet. (While I am virtually certain not to read them, it is presumably not true that I would be virtually certain not to read them if I were to try and not give up trying.) This is the right result since, as we have seen, my reading the complete works of Alain Robbe-Grillet counts would seem to be perfectly deliberation-worthy.

Nonetheless, counterfactual probability-based accounts also fall short in this regard.

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have a false presupposition: that hitting the bulls-eye 100 times in a row is the kind of doing to which feasibility applies.

<sup>41</sup> See de Wispelaere and Noguera 2012; Carens 2013.

<sup>42</sup> See Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012; cf. Estlund 2011.

The problem that I want to focus on concerns cases where there is some insurmountable *volitional* impediment to our doing certain things.<sup>43</sup> Consider Alarice, a world-class concert pianist, who regularly performs the most difficult pieces with consummate ease but who never plays *Chopsticks* because she has a pathological aversion to *it*. (Suppose that it is associated in her mind with some unspeakable incident that happened to her as a child.) Her aversion is such that there is an insurmountable impediment to her trying (or choosing or deciding or intending) to play it. She is robustly disposed not to do so. Nonetheless, if she *were* (somehow, miraculously) to overcome her aversion and try to play it, she would easily succeed. So counterfactual accounts imply that it is feasible for Alarice to play *Chopsticks*. But her playing *Chopsticks* is hardly a fitting object of practical deliberation. Deliberation aims at practical self-determination, whereby our decisions determine how we will act. But, given her psychology, there is simply no prospect of Alarice making a decision to play *Chopsticks*; such a decision is beyond the limits of what she is psychologically capable of. *A fortiori*, there is no prospect of Alarice performing *Chopsticks* by making a decision to do so. So, playing *Chopsticks* is not a fitting object of practical deliberation for Alarice.<sup>44</sup> What this means is that counterfactual probability-based accounts imply that there are actions that are feasible in spite of not being deliberation-worthy. Such accounts are therefore straightforwardly at odds with the idea that claims about feasibility are supposed to determine the domain of the deliberation-worthy.

#### D. Disposition-based accounts

Finally, consider *disposition*-based accounts according to which claims about feasibility are claims about our dispositions to act in certain circumstances that may or may not actually obtain.<sup>45</sup> I shall focus, in particular, on Zofia Stemplowska's promising idea that claims to the effect that it is feasible for us to do things are claims to the effect that we are (a) disposed to

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<sup>43</sup> See Lehrer 1968; Wolf 1990.

<sup>44</sup> An Associate Editor offered the interesting suggestion that perhaps our judgements might be different in cases where, rather than sympathising with the agent, we take their volitional incapacity to reflect badly on them, such as the case of a father who cannot bring himself to care for his children's well-being. In such a case, it might seem that we would be much less inclined to judge that the father's caring for his children's well-being is not a fitting object of practical deliberation. I agree. However, I think this difference is due to the fact that we would also be much less inclined to judge that the father's caring for his children's well-being is genuinely *volitionally inaccessible* to him – that it is beyond the limits of what he is psychologically capable of. Suppose, however, that we *do* judge the latter to be the case: say, because we take him to be a sociopath. (I assume that we do not tend to sympathise with sociopaths.) In that case, I suggest that we must also judge that his caring for his children's well-being is not a fitting object of practical deliberation. Given that he is robustly disposed not to decide to care for his children well-being, it follows that there is no prospect of deliberation about whether to care for his children's well-being achieving the aim of determining how he will act by deciding how to act.

<sup>45</sup> Stemplowska 2016; 2021; Southwood 2016a.

succeed in doing things in circumstances where we try to do those things and (b) disposed to try in circumstances where the stakes are raised: in particular, where we are offered a substantial benefit if we succeed in Xing and/or threatened with a substantial disbenefit or loss if we fail to X.<sup>46</sup> This delivers the right result that I can try to read the complete works of Alain Robbe-Grillet. (While I *won't* try, I presumably *would* try if the stakes were raised – say, if someone threatened to burn down my house if I failed to read them.) It also delivers the right result that Alarice can't try to play Chopsticks. (Given her pathological aversion, her reluctance to try would presumably persist even in the face of heightened stakes.)

We might worry about whether this kind of disposition-based account has the right *content*. Suppose that I am an absolutist deontologist whose unwillingness to tell lies would persist even if the stakes were raised: say, even if telling a lie was the only way to avoid the death of an innocent bystander or perhaps my own death. It is at least not obvious that telling a lie is beyond my domain of deliberative jurisdiction. However, Stemplowska considers and offers a response to this kind of objection. Her response involves interpreting the relevant disposition to try in such a way that our actual normative beliefs are irrelevant. That is, we count as possessing the relevant disposition to try to tell a lie even if we would not try if the stakes were raised (given our actual absolutist deontological belief that this is wrong), so long as *if we did not regard it as wrong* to tell the lie we would try to tell the lie if the stakes were raised.<sup>47</sup>

Or suppose I am (perhaps pathologically) averse to doing things because of external incentives but perfectly open to doing them insofar as I come to regard doing them as *morally obligatory*. Again, it is not obvious that in such cases there would be anything deliberatively untoward about my deliberating about whether (or when or how) to perform the actions in question. However, a possible response is that such cases only appear to be problematic insofar as we are interpreting the idea of “raising the stakes” in an unduly *narrow* fashion; we can accommodate the cases by embracing a *broad* interpretation such that persuading an agent that doing something is morally obligatory counts as a way of “raising the stakes.”<sup>48</sup>

The more serious worry is that, even if an interpretation of the dispositional account along these lines ends up being substantively defensible,<sup>49</sup> it seems highly doubtful that it is

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<sup>46</sup> See Stemplowska 2016; 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Stemplowska 2016, pp. 280-81.

<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to an Associate Editor for suggesting a response along these lines.

<sup>49</sup> I have also certain substantive worries about each of the aforementioned responses as well as the coherence of combining them.

going to give us an account of a property that is *constitutive* of feasibility. For that we would need a specification of the relevant dispositional property that can deliver an interpretation of feasibility, not only with the right content to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness, but that is also *independent* of the role. What is the *basis* for, say, specifying the relevant disposition to try in such a way that our emotional responses are relevant but our normative beliefs aren't? The worry is that there is simply no plausible way of characterising and giving determinate content to the relevant dispositional property without first determining what is deliberation-worthy and then specifying the disposition accordingly.

#### VI. From methodology to metaphysics: towards a (deliberative) functionalist account of feasibility

I have argued that none of the existing accounts of feasibility are satisfactory. Where does this leave us? Perhaps we simply need to keep working to find some better account of the modal property with which feasibility is to be identified – one that, unlike the existing accounts, can do justice to the deliberation-worthiness-determining role of our talk and thought about what is feasible.

But there is another possibility. This is that the existing accounts are mistaken, not merely regarding the *particular* modal property with which feasibility is to be identified, but in embracing a metaphysical picture according to which feasibility is to be identified with *any* modal property (that is supposed to be independent from, and explanatory of, the presence of the relevant functional property). For there is a natural alternative. The alternative is perhaps best introduced by way of analogy with so-called *functionalism* in the philosophy of mind. Functionalists in the philosophy of mind hold that mental states such as beliefs and desires are *functional states* – states that play certain functional roles (the belief role, the desire role, and so on) – that are *realised* by, but not identical with, certain brain states. Similarly, what I shall call a *functionalist account of feasibility* would be the idea that feasibility is a *functional property* – the property of playing a certain functional role – that is realised by, but not identical with, some modal property. Moreover, assuming that I am right that the deliberative view is the correct view of feasibility's functional role, we should embrace a corresponding *deliberative* functionalist account of feasibility according to which feasibility just is the functional property of determining deliberation-worthiness.

Notice that an account of this sort has a clear advantage over the existing accounts. This is that it straightforwardly satisfies the requirement that claims about feasibility, thus construed, must be capable of playing the role of determining deliberation-worthiness.

Claims about feasibility are capable of playing this role because to be feasible *just is* to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness. They play this particular role (as opposed to some other role) because, while claims about feasibility obviously can and do play various other roles, the role of determining deliberation-worthiness is special inasmuch as, unlike the other roles, being capable of playing this role *constitutes* what it is to be feasible.

One thing that this means is that our deliberative functionalist account can deliver the requisite *determinacy* without arbitrariness or ad hocery. Unlike the standard accounts, it does not require us to identify some modal property that is independent of deliberation-worthiness. On the contrary, claims about feasibility are to be understood in terms of *whatever* determines deliberation-worthiness. Thus, it is entirely legitimate – indeed indispensable – to deploy our judgements about deliberation-worthiness in order to provide determinate content to some modal property, whatever it is, that is supposed to realise this role.

Suppose, for example, that we think the modal property that realises the role of determining deliberation-worthiness is some kind of restricted possibility. One challenge is to say what the relevant possibility-restrictions are supposed to be. This is a very difficult – perhaps even in principle insurmountable – challenge if we want to *identify* feasibility with restricted possibility as proponents of possibility-based accounts want to do. But if we accept the deliberative functionalist account, then we have a principled basis for meeting the challenge. The relevant restrictions are just *whichever restrictions* are needed to deliver a class of possibility claims fit to be used for the purpose of determining deliberation-worthiness. The other challenge is to restrict the class of possibility claims to claims about the possibility of our doing things that are not counterfactually fluky. Again, the deliberative functionalist account provides us with a non-ad hoc basis for doing so since the relevant possibility claims are going to be restricted to claims about the possibility of doing things that are fitting objects of practical deliberation; and doing things that are counterfactually fluky are not fitting objects of practical deliberation.

Or suppose that we think the modal property that realises the role of determining deliberation-worthiness is some kind probability: say, the probability of our doing things conditional on trying. One challenge is how we are supposed to identify some plausible and non-arbitrary probability threshold. If we embrace the deliberative functionalist account, there is no in principle problem here. The probability threshold is simply whatever threshold is required to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness. In other words, for any X,

it is feasible for us to X only if the likelihood that we would X if we were to try is above the threshold required in order for X to lie within our domain of deliberative jurisdiction.

Or suppose that the modal property that realises the role of determining deliberation-worthiness is some dispositional property: say, the property of being disposed to try and/or to succeed in doing things. The challenge for proponents of disposition-based accounts is to say what the activation conditions for the dispositions are supposed to be. Once again, the deliberative functionalist account gives us a recipe for meeting the challenge. The relevant activation conditions just are whichever activation conditions are such that being disposed to try and/or succeed in doing something in those particular conditions is what is required in order for our doing the thing to be deliberation-worthy: to lie within our domain of deliberative jurisdiction.

Another thing to be said is that the deliberative functionalist account offers a way of understanding feasibility that is perfectly compatible with certain forms of *heterogeneity* and *context-sensitivity* that pose problems for the standard accounts. Take claims about restricted possibility. Of course, it *might* be the case that the restrictions that are required to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness turn out to have a certain context-invariant structural coherence: that there is some unifying feature, or set of unifying features, in virtue of which they help to constitute a certain kind or flavour of possibility; and that the same restrictions apply irrespective of context. Alternatively, it may turn out that they are a heterogeneous hodgepodge, and that nothing unites them beyond the fact that they are the restrictions required in order to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness. In addition or instead, it might turn out that the restrictions that are required to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness in one context are quite different from those that are required to play the role in another context. The latter, while fatal to the prospects of an account that purports to vindicate feasibility's deliberation-worthiness-determining role by *identifying* feasibility with restricted possibility, is no problem at all for the deliberative functionalist account. Or take claims about probability. In order to play the role of determining deliberation-worthiness, it needs to be the case that, for every potential doing, there is some relevant probability threshold. But it needn't be the case that there is some single fixed, context-invariant threshold. On the contrary, the probability of success (conditional on trying) that is required may vary from context to context, depending on (for example) the stakes of what it is that we are deliberating about. Or take claims about our dispositions to try and succeed in doing things. Here, too, it may be the case that the activation conditions for these dispositions vary depending on the nature of the action

and/or the context in question without this compromising the deliberative functionalist account in the slightest.

Finally, the deliberative functionalist account also provides a way of understanding feasibility that does not, strictly speaking, force us to *choose* between these different modal properties that are candidates for realising the role of determining deliberation-worthiness. My own hunch is that some kind of dispositional property is the most promising candidate. But it may be the case that there are *various different* modal properties (possibilistic, probabilistic, dispositional), *each* of which suffices to realise the role of determining deliberation-worthiness. This would obviously be bad news for proponents of the standard accounts since they purport to *identify* feasibility with some particular modal property. But it poses absolutely no problem at all for the deliberative functionalist account since the latter holds that feasibility is a functional property that might well be realised by various different modal properties.

## VII. In defence of the deliberative functionalist account

I have argued that the deliberative functionalist account of feasibility has a number of significant virtues. Nonetheless, it also faces certain objections. I now want to consider what I take to be perhaps the three most important objections.

### A. The emptiness objection

As we have just seen, an important difference between our deliberative functionalist account and the existing accounts of feasibility is that the former leaves open various questions on which the latter have taken – and have presumably thought they needed to take – a stand. While this feature of our account is advantageous in certain respects, it also generates a potential worry. The worry is that, unlike its rivals, the deliberative functionalist account is somewhat unsatisfyingly *empty or devoid of substantive content*.<sup>50</sup>

I accept that this worry contains an important kernel of truth. In particular, any functionalist account of feasibility such as the deliberative functionalist account is going to be “empty” in the sense that, unlike its rivals, it holds that saying what feasibility *is* does not, strictly speaking, require us to settle substantive questions about whatever modal property (or properties) might be thought to realise the relevant functional role.

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<sup>50</sup> I am grateful to an Associate Editor for raising this important concern and for helpful suggestions about how to address it.

But in saying this it is important to emphasise that the deliberative functionalist account is not “empty” in another sense since it nonetheless *entails* answers to such substantive questions. Indeed, we have already said quite a bit about the sorts of substantive features that actions must possess in order to be deliberation-worthy and, hence, feasible. For example, we have seen that they must not be counterfactually fluky. We have seen that they must be such that can bring ourselves to perform them. We have seen that they may be extremely (even excessively) demanding. And so on.

To be sure, there are many *other* important substantive questions that we have not touched upon at all, such as questions about diachronic feasibility or feasibility over time;<sup>51</sup> and questions that we have not addressed explicitly, such as whether feasibility has any epistemic dimension.<sup>52</sup> Addressing such questions is necessary to provide a *full and complete theory* of feasibility. I freely acknowledge that I have not provided such a theory here. Nonetheless, an appealing feature of our account is that, from what I can tell, it appears to be unique in affording us a principled and plausible basis for doing so.

#### B. The apolitical objection

As I noted at the outset, claims about feasibility appear to occupy an especially important place in *politics*. Indeed, political action is sometimes defined, in part, by reference to considerations of feasibility. (Think of Bismark’s memorable quip that politics is “the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best.”) Moreover, political action has certain significant features that any account of feasibility must be capable of accommodating. We might worry that, in tying feasibility to something as generic and apolitical as deliberation-worthiness, our account is poorly placed to do so.<sup>53</sup>

What are these significant and problem-generating features of political action? I shall mention three such features. First, consider the fact that political action typically involves *collective action*. A number of scholars have noted that this has significant, though not straightforward, implications for what counts as feasible in politics.<sup>54</sup> In particular, it would appear to mean that whether a political action counts as feasible will often turn on whether it is feasible to surmount certain kinds of obstacles to collective action. Stemplowska

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<sup>51</sup> See Gilabert 2018.

<sup>52</sup> See Stemplowska 2021.

<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to an Associate Editor for critical comments that were invaluable in helping me to formulate the apolitical objection in a more perspicuous fashion.

<sup>54</sup> See Lawford-Smith 2013; Stemplowska 2016; 2021; Estlund 2020, ch. 12.

observes that many collective actions appear to be infeasible, not because they would be difficult to perform if we were to agree to perform them, but because there appears to be no prospect of our reaching any such agreement.<sup>55</sup> This may be because there is intractable conflict and disagreement among us about what to do that would prevent any such agreement taking place. (Think of the United States and China reaching an agreement regarding access to and use of the South China Sea.) Alternatively, it may be because there is no mechanism in place for us to make a collective decision at all. (Think of “select[ing] the policy of everyone alive, who can, treating each other with kindness ... as a way of securing world peace.”<sup>56</sup> Stemplowska notes that such cases pose a serious problem for counterfactual accounts of feasibility. But they might also be thought to pose a problem for our account since it is not obvious that there would be anything unfitting about deliberation in such cases.<sup>57</sup>

I think that there is a straightforward response available in cases of intractable disagreement and conflict. Deliberation aims at practical self-determination. In the context of collective action, this means determining how we will act collectively by reaching a joint decision (i.e. an agreement) concerning how we are to act. If disagreement among us is genuinely intractable, it follows that there is no prospect of such deliberation achieving its constitutive aim and, hence, that it is not fitting.<sup>58</sup>

How about cases where is no decision-making mechanism in place? Such cases might seem trickier. While we *won't* engage in collective deliberation regarding such actions (given the absence of any decision-making mechanism), it might seem hard to deny that if we *were* to do so, such deliberation would be perfectly fitting. Thus, it might seem to follow that such actions are perfectly deliberation-worthy and, hence, feasible according to the deliberative functionalist account.

But, in fact, this involves a subtle non-sequitor. Whether an action counts as deliberation-worthy is a matter of whether the action is, in fact, a fitting object of deliberation. It is not a matter of whether it *would be* fitting to deliberate about whether (or when or how) to perform it. While these will often go together, they may come apart since

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<sup>55</sup> Stemplowska 2016; 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Stemplowska 2016, p. 277.

<sup>57</sup> An important question that I won't try to address concerns whether the idea of feasibility is *applicable* in the case of collectives that do not constitute collective *agents*. For discussion, see e.g. Lawford-Smith 2012; Collins 2019; Estlund 2020, ch. 12. While I cannot defend it here, my view is that feasibility is indeed applicable in such cases and that our account can explain why, since non-agentive collective deliberation is perfectly coherent. (Think of two bitter enemies deliberating about where to meet for a dual.)

<sup>58</sup> By the same token, many disagreements that are *taken* to be intractable may not be. For discussion of this point in the context of the feasibility of open borders, see [...]

the act of deliberating will sometimes transform the circumstances in which the action is performed in such a way that we would no longer be deliberating about the same thing. Unsurprisingly, deliberating about actions where our circumstances include the absence of any mechanism for making a decision is a case in point. Moreover, such actions are clearly *not* deliberation-worthy because the absence of a mechanism for making a decision means that there is no way for us to make a decision in our actual circumstances; and, hence, no way for deliberation about whether (or when or how) to do so in our actual circumstances to achieve deliberation's constitutive aim.

Second, consider the fact that political action often involves, not only collective action, but *institutional* collective action, or action in the context of certain forms of *social organisation*: states, governments, political parties, trade unions, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, corporations, social movements, and so on. While this has received less attention from political philosophers, it also has potentially significant implications for what counts as feasible and infeasible in politics and is a significant theme among political scientists within the literature on so-called "political feasibility."<sup>59</sup> For one thing, organisations have certain overarching *values and goals* that might appear to constrain what it is feasible for members of the organisations to do.<sup>60</sup> For example, it might seem infeasible for the US Republican Party to adopt a policy of radical gun control simply because to do so would be incompatible with core values around which the party is structured as well as being electorally suicidal and, hence, at odds with the central goal of being elected (or re-elected). For another thing, there are fundamental and non-negotiable *rules and norms* that govern and operate as constraints on the actions of organisations within the relevant institutional context: legislative rules that govern legislatures; charters that govern trade unions; and so on.<sup>61</sup> For example, it might seem infeasible for a democratically elected government to embrace completely open borders simply because to do so would be at odds with democratic norms.<sup>62</sup> Both kinds of considerations would seem to circumscribe significantly the domain of what is feasible in politics. Yet our deliberative functionalist account would appear to suggest otherwise. Whether to adopt a policy of radical gun control is surely a perfectly fitting object of deliberation on the part of the Republican Party (even if such deliberation would be *irrational* given the Republican Party's core values and goals). Similarly, whether to embrace

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Meltsner 1972; Majone 1975.

<sup>60</sup> Meltsner 1972.

<sup>61</sup> Majone 1975.

<sup>62</sup> See Song 2018.

open borders is surely a perfectly fitting object for deliberation on the part of a democratically elected government (even if the government *ought not* to engage in such deliberation given important democratic norms). As a result, our account might appear to be plainly unsatisfactory as an account of feasibility in politics.

But this would be a mistake. We can easily explain why organisations' values and goals and the rules and norms within which they operate may be *relevant* to our judgements about feasibility without holding that they are themselves *constraints* on what is feasible. I suggest that they are relevant to our feasibility assessments insofar as they bear upon our implicit descriptions of the *actions* whose feasibility is in question. Sometimes we will be interested in describing the actions in coarse-grained ways such that they will count as feasible so long as there is *any* feasible way of performing them. But often we will only be interested in *certain ways* of performing the actions: ways of performing the actions that are not at odds with relevant values and goals; and ways of performing the actions that do not require us to violate relevant rules and norms (*intra vires* rather than *ultra vires*). When we claim that it is infeasible for the Republican Party to adopt a policy of radical gun control or infeasible for a democratically elected government to embrace open borders, what is going on, I suggest, is that we are implicitly restricting our focus to ways of this kind. Our account can, of course, readily make sense of such claims in terms of the deliberation-worthiness of the relevant ways of performing the actions (as opposed to the deliberation-worthiness of performing the actions as such, or in any way). We simply need to be careful in describing the actions whose feasibility is in question.

Third, consider the fact that political action often takes place in circumstances that are *non-ideal* in certain respects. Particularly relevant for our purposes are circumstances that are non-ideal in ways that appear to require departures from the norms of deliberation.<sup>63</sup> For example, political action often takes place in circumstances where there is significant time pressure,<sup>64</sup> which can mean that it is only feasible for us to respond effectively by engaging in immediate action; pausing to initiate and engage in deliberation about how to respond might guarantee failure. Political action often – perhaps even necessarily<sup>65</sup> – takes place in circumstances where there is deep disagreement, including disagreement regarding how

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<sup>63</sup> The idea that there are significant features of our actual, non-ideal circumstances that make deliberation infeasible and non-deliberative alternatives unavoidable in those circumstances is, of course, a significant theme within the literature on *deliberative democracy* – most obviously among critics of deliberative democracy (see e.g. Saunders 1997 and Sunstein 2002), but also among proponents of the “systemic” approach to deliberative democracy (see e.g. Mansbridge et al. 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Majone 1975.

<sup>65</sup> Waldron 1999.

best to achieve important outcomes, which can mean that it is only feasible for us to achieve the outcomes by acting unilaterally. Political action typically takes place in circumstances that include at least some untrustworthy deliberative partners, which can mean that it is sometimes only feasible for us to pursue an agenda in secrecy and with some measure of dissimulation. And so on. Such familiar cases might appear to spell doom for our account of feasibility. For they might appear to show that the domain of the feasible will often outstrip the domain of the deliberation-worthy.

Cases of this kind teach us something important: that we must be careful not to confuse a) the question of whether it is feasible to achieve an outcome and b) the question of whether it is feasible to achieve the outcome by engaging in exemplary deliberation. It may be infeasible to achieve the outcome by engaging in exemplary deliberation and yet feasible to achieve the outcome in some other (non-deliberatively exemplary) way. But, of course, this does not mean that the domain of the feasible outstrips the domain of the deliberation-worthy. Rather, it simply means that the domain of the deliberation-worthy will sometimes encompass ways of achieving outcomes that fall short of exemplary deliberation; and that ways of achieving outcomes that involve exemplary deliberation will sometimes lie beyond the domain of the deliberation-worthy.

### C. The monistic objection

The final objection I want to consider is that our account presupposes an implausible form of *monism* about feasibility, whereas we ought instead to be feasibility *pluralists*.<sup>66</sup> Monism about feasibility is the view that there is some *single* privileged concept of feasibility.

Pluralism about feasibility, in contrast, holds that there is a plurality of different concepts of feasibility. Pluralism is appealing in its own right. Moreover, it might seem especially hard to resist if we embrace a function-based account of feasibility. That is because it might seem hard to maintain that there is any single privileged role that feasibility plays. Rather, there is an irreducible *plurality* of roles and, hence, by the lights of the functionalist, an irreducible plurality of different concepts of feasibility.<sup>67</sup> At best, then, a deliberative functionalist account offers an account of one of these notions of feasibility (*deliberative feasibility*, as we might call it). But there are other notions that play different roles.

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<sup>66</sup> Ermann and Moller 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Ermann and Moller 2019, pp. 10-16.

What should we make of this objection? Certainly, there are forms of pluralism that might appear to be true. Consider, for example, the idea that there is a plurality of more *specific* feasibility concepts: economic feasibility; legal feasibility; democratic feasibility; and so on.<sup>68</sup> Such a view might seem hard to resist. Yet it hardly threatens our account. Even if there are multiple more specific feasibility concepts, this is perfectly compatible with the existence of a single overarching feasibility concept that our account is purporting to account for. (By analogy, the idea that there are certain distinct specific oughts (e.g. a moral ought, a legal ought, a prudential ought, and so on) is perfectly compatible with the existence of a single overarching (all-things-considered) ought.) Or consider the idea that, in addition to a concept of feasibility that applies to actions, there is also some feasibility concept that applies directly to states of affairs (rather than to actions involving the states of affairs). Again, this poses no problems for our account since it is perfectly compatible with the existence of a single privileged feasibility concept that is at play within our talk and thought about what it is feasible for us *to do*. (By analogy, the idea that there is a distinct ought at play in our talk and thought about what ought to be the case (say, an evaluative ought) does not threaten the idea that there is a single, privileged practical ought that is at play in our talk and thought about what we ought to do.)

The only forms of feasibility pluralism that would potentially pose a problem for our account, then, are ones that, if true, would succeed in calling into question the idea that there is some single privileged concept of feasibility for which it is appropriate to seek a single correct account. Consider, for example, a form of pluralism about feasibility that is parallel to the kind of practice-based pluralism about *ought* that I have myself defended elsewhere according to which there is an irreducible plurality of oughts that are tied to, and supposed to be operating in the service of, different core practices of deliberation, prescription, and criticism: a deliberative ought, a prescriptive ought, and a hypological ought.<sup>69</sup> The parallel form of practice-based pluralism about feasibility would hold that there is an irreducible plurality of different feasibility concepts that are tied to these different core practices. Thus, in addition to a deliberative concept of feasibility that is supposed to play a deliberative role, there is also a prescriptive concept of feasibility that is supposed to play some prescriptive role and a hypological concept of feasibility that is supposed to play some hypological role.

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<sup>68</sup> This is one way of interpreting what Alan Hamlin has in mind when he differentiates between what he calls “resource feasibility,” “value feasibility,” “human feasibility,” and “institutional feasibility” (Hamlin 2017).

<sup>69</sup> See Southwood 2016a.

If practice-based pluralism about feasibility were true, then clearly our account would be in serious trouble. But it is not true. For it is simply not plausible that we are disposed to treat claims about feasibility as determining the domain of the criticism-worthy or the prescription-worthy. We frequently criticise others for failing to do what we take to have been infeasible for them to do at the time: say, if they intentionally or negligently made it the case that it was not feasible for them to do it; or if they intentionally or negligently failed to make it the case that it was feasible for them to do it; or if it was infeasible for them to do it because of certain criticisable character traits. Similarly, it would seem that we might very well advise (or enjoin or exhort) someone to do something that we take to be infeasible without this striking us as remotely odd or inappropriate – so long as we were to supplement our (unconditional) advice about what to do with *additional conditional* advice: about what to do insofar as they don't follow our (unconditional) advice.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, how about a form of what we might call *eliminativist* pluralism? This holds that when we engage in feasibility talk we are often talking past one another; and that we would do well simply to eliminate the term “feasible” and find other ways of expressing what we mean that are more precise and less liable to result in confusion. When you say “infeasible,” perhaps you mean “the costs are morally unacceptable.” When I say “infeasible” I mean “it's not physically possible.” When a third person says “infeasible”, they really mean “too unlikely to be worth thinking about.” There is no *single* concept of feasibility, just a bunch of very distinct notions, and the term “feasible” is obscuring the fact we are actually invoking these different notions. Better to eliminate the term and use more precise terms that clarify what we really mean.<sup>71</sup>

This is a natural and appealing thought. Yet I think that it is also a mistaken one. Eliminativist pluralism might seem compelling insofar as we are in the grip of a linguistic approach and regard theorising about feasibility as beholden to practices of linguistic attribution.<sup>72</sup> But my assumption has been that the linguistic approach is a non-starter, and that we should instead embrace a functionalist approach that looks to practices of practical deployment. To be sure, eliminativist pluralism is *in principle* compatible with a functionalist approach. It could turn out that we are deploying different concepts when we engage in feasibility talk and thought in virtue of having divergent practices of practical deployment. I have argued, however, that we have good reason to think that this is not the case in fact. For

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<sup>70</sup> Southwood 2021, p. 2414.

<sup>71</sup> I am very grateful to an Associate Editor for suggesting the possibility of this kind of eliminativist pluralism.

<sup>72</sup> Even this is questionable since eliminativist pluralism has a potent competitor for the best systematisation of our linguistic practices in the form of Kratzer-style *contextualism* about feasibility (see Kratzer 1977).

while our practices of linguistic attribution are indeed radically heterogeneous, our practices of practical deployment are strikingly uniform in one key respect: we are disposed to treat claims about feasibility, whatever their content, as determining the domain of the deliberation-worthy.

In sum, from what I can tell, there is no form of pluralism about feasibility that is both true and that, if true, would threaten our account. The only forms of pluralism that are true would not threaten the account. And the only forms of pluralism that would threaten the account are not true.

### VIII. Conclusion

I have proposed a general methodological approach to theorising about feasibility (the functionalist approach); and a particular substantive thesis regarding the character of feasibility's functional role (the deliberative view). Moreover, I have argued that none of the existing accounts of feasibility appear to succeed in identifying a plausible feasibility-constituting modal property that can do justice to this deliberation-worthiness-determining role, whereas we can avoid the problems with the existing accounts by embracing an account of feasibility according to which claims about feasibility are to be understood as claims about whatever plays the role of determining deliberation-worthiness (the deliberative functionalist account). In doing so, I have sought to provide a concrete illustration of a novel and more edifying way of understanding this pervasive, divisive, and normatively consequential idea.

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