Climate Justice, Feasibility Constraints, and the Role of Political Philosophy

Philosophers doing normative work on urgent matters of great moral importance are often motivated to pursue that work at least in part because they believe that it has the potential to contribute to real world progress on the issues about which they are writing. Many outside of philosophy are inclined to think that this is the only type of reason that could justify engaging in such work. While philosophers tend not to have quite so narrow a view about the reasons that count in favor of pursuing philosophical projects, it is not surprising that many who work on issues of great moral importance have as one aim of their efforts making a positive difference with respect to the issues that are their focus.

The idea that normative philosophical work should be capable of positively impacting real-world decision making regarding the issues addressed has contributed in recent years to increased skepticism of some traditional modes of normative theorizing. In particular, certain approaches to thinking about justice have been challenged on the grounds that they tend to imply that policies and outcomes that are (virtually) certain never to be enacted or achieved are required by justice. Skepticism of this general kind has led some philosophers to claim that considerations of feasibility ought to constrain theorizing about justice. Feasibility constraints imply that an argument to the effect that a policy or outcome is a requirement of justice should be rejected, even if it is otherwise normatively appealing, if enacting the policy or bringing about the outcome is, in the relevant sense, infeasible.

In recent discussions of climate justice, some theorists have suggested that we should accept fairly substantial feasibility constraints on our theorizing. My central aim in this paper is to argue that even if we accept that normative work on urgent issues such as climate change ought to be capable of contributing in a practical way to efforts to address those issues, there are strong reasons to reject these feasibility constraints.

I proceed in the paper as follows. First, I briefly highlight some central features of the current climate crisis. In light of these features, I describe a plausible initial argument for radical requirements of climate justice. And I note several policies that might be advocated as potential means of satisfying those requirements. Next, I note several grounds on which some may raise feasibility-based objections to the argument for radical requirements of climate justice, and argue that there are clear limits to what we can plausibly take these objections to support with respect to the content of climate justice. I then describe in greater detail some of the central features of the debate about the place of feasibility constraints in political philosophy. I provide grounds for thinking that some proponents of such constraints, and in particular some contributors to recent discussions of climate justice and policy, endorse the claim that ambitious theorizing has no valuable role to play in urgent circumstances. Finally, I respond to this claim by describing the valuable roles that I believe ambitious philosophical work can play in the struggle against climate change.

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