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

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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 (e.g. global poverty, racial justice, animal rights, climate change) 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

1 Perhaps most prominently, there has been much criticism of “ideal theory” in political philosophy. See, for example, Mills (2005); Sen (2009); Gaus (2016).
be rejected, even if it is otherwise normatively appealing, if enacting the policy or bringing about the outcome is, in the relevant sense, infeasible.

Feasibility constraints can be more or less constraining, depending on the conditions that are taken to determine the relevant sense of feasibility. On some accounts, the feasible set will be quite large, and the departures from traditional modes of normative theorizing required by the associated feasibility constraints will be correspondingly modest. On other accounts, however, the feasible set will be more limited, and the departures from traditional modes of theorizing required will be significantly greater.

In recent discussions of climate justice, some theorists have suggested that we should accept fairly substantial feasibility constraints on our theorizing (e.g. Posner and Weisbach 2010; Brandstedt and Bergman 2013; Gajevic Sayegh 2019). My central aim in this chapter 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. There are, I will claim, a number of valuable practical roles that philosophical theorizing that is not done within the limits of such constraints (henceforth “ambitious theorizing”) can play, even in urgent circumstances like those that we currently face with respect to climate change.

I will proceed in the remainder of the chapter as follows. First, I will briefly highlight some central features of the current climate crisis. In light of these features, I will describe a plausible initial argument for radical requirements of climate justice. And I will note several policies that might be advocated as potential means of satisfying (or at least increasing the satisfaction of) those requirements. Next, I will note several grounds on which some may raise feasibility-based objections to the argument for radical requirements of climate justice, and I will
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 will then describe in greater detail some of the central features of the debate about the place of feasibility constraints in political philosophy. I will 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 will respond to this claim by describing the valuable roles that I believe ambitious philosophical work can play in the struggle against climate change.

My aims can plausibly be viewed as fairly modest. The success of my argument requires only that I identify sufficiently valuable roles that some ambitious theorizing about climate justice can play in the struggle to limit dangerous climate change. Nonetheless, I believe that this is an important and worthwhile task to take on, in light of the increased skepticism about the value of such work that has been expressed in recent years, as well as the importance of doing everything that we can to advance the cause of climate justice.

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2 Ambitious theorizing about climate justice might also be defended by appeal to the claim that knowledge about important matters is valuable, even if possessing it will serve no further practical purpose (Estlund 2011a; 2014, 132-34; see also Räikkä 1998, 30; Cohen 2008, 268). Although I find this claim plausible, in this chapter I will rely only on practical roles that ambitious theorizing can, in my view, play.

3 It should go without saying that my defense of the view that there are valuable roles for ambitious theorizing in the struggle against climate change is consistent with recognizing the important contributions that can be made by normative philosophical work that focuses on what can be done to improve things in terms of climate justice given constraints such as the motivations and behavioral tendencies of those who will not do what ambitious theories might imply that they ought to do. For just a few recent examples of valuable contributions of this kind, see Moellendorf (2015; 2016); Caney (2016); Roser (2016). It is worth noting that all three of these theorists have also contributed to what I have called ambitious theorizing about climate justice (see, e.g. Caney (2005; 2010; 2012); Moellendorf (2014); Meyer and Roser (2006; 2010)).
The Climate Crisis

In the 30 years since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its first comprehensive assessment report (IPCC 1990), shockingly little has been accomplished in terms lowering greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions trajectories. It is widely agreed among scientific experts that we now face a situation in which large net emissions reductions are required in a relatively short period of time if we are to give ourselves a reasonable chance of limiting the global mean temperature increase to no more than the generally accepted target of 2°C above pre-industrial levels (Working Groups I, II, and III 2015). If we are to aim for the more ambitious target of limiting warming to no more than 1.5°C, which many have suggested we have strong reasons to do (IPCC 2018; Alliance of Small Island States 2019), then even more dramatic reductions are required in an even shorter period of time.

If, on the other hand, we continue to avoid increased mitigation efforts, it is estimated that the global mean temperature increase will likely reach between 3.7° and 4.8°C by 2100, although it could be as high as 7.8°C (Working Groups I, II, and III 2015, 20). These levels of warming would all have catastrophic consequences, with the expected consequences getting worse as the amount of warming increases. Among the familiar predicted and potential consequences of warming that reaches well above 2°C are widespread famine, severe and deadly heatwaves, the destruction of coastal lands due to sea level rise, mass migration, and global resource wars (United States Department of Defense 2015; Wallace-Wells 2019).

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4 For an influential account of why it has been so difficult to make progress in addressing the threat of climate change, despite the great moral importance of doing so, see Gardiner (2011).
5 A recent IPCC Special Report estimates that limiting warming to below 2°C would require GHG emissions reductions of 25% from 2010 levels by 2030, and net zero emissions by 2070 (IPCC 2018, 12). Achieving the more ambitious 1.5°C limit is estimated to require a 45% reduction in emissions from 2010 levels by 2030, and net zero emissions by 2050 (IPCC 2018, 12).
An Initial Case for Radical Requirements of Climate Justice

It is clear that the consequences of continued inaction in response to the climate crises would be disastrous. Because of this, we must recognize and take seriously that radical changes are required in order to meet the targets endorsed by scientific experts. The domains in which such changes are required plausibly include energy and economic policy, land use, corporate decision-making, and behavior and individual lifestyle choices. Failure to make the necessary changes would almost certainly have disastrous consequences for future generations of the kinds noted above.

Given these facts, it would seem that even rather modest and widely accepted claims about the nature and grounds of justice between generations imply that radical changes are required of us as a matter of justice. If, in addition, we accept even rather modest and widely accepted claims about the justice-relevant considerations that bear on how the burdens of required mitigation efforts ought to be distributed, then we appear to be committed to accepting that justice requires the well off to accept potentially very large sacrifices, whether directly or as a result of required policy changes (or, perhaps most plausibly, a combination thereof). 6

Consider, for example, the implications of the claim that mitigation costs should not be imposed on the global poor if this would undermine or delay their prospects for escaping poverty, at least so long as the relevant costs could instead be taken on by better off people (Moellendorf 2014, chap. 1).

A strong case, then, can be made for thinking that some very radical policy and associated behavioral changes are required, as a matter of justice, in wealthy and high-emitting

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6 For discussion of the demandingness of our climate change-related obligations, see Fruh and Hedahl (2013); Berkey (2014); Fragnière (2018).
countries like the United States. While I will not attempt to defend any view about exactly which policies we ought to endorse as required by justice or aim to promote in our political activities, it will be helpful to have some examples in mind for illustrative purposes. Consider, then, the following policies:

(1) A carbon tax on businesses, set at the high end of current estimates of the social cost of carbon, with the revenue generated used to (perhaps among other things) offset any increase in the cost of essential goods for the poor. (For more on this topic, see Meyer, K. in this volume.)

(2) A ban on new exploration for fossil fuel deposits, in combination with strict and increasing restrictions over time on the extraction of known sources of fossil fuels.

(3) Massive public investment, funded by large tax increases on wealthy citizens and/or corporations, in renewable energy research, development, and infrastructure, including aid to poor countries aimed at facilitating the adoption of renewable technologies rather than fossil fuels.

(4) Official efforts to promote, and clear willingness to ratify, a global climate treaty that includes binding and enforceable commitments to reduce emissions by an amount

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7 A recent study with a conclusion toward the higher end of current estimates suggests that the global social cost of carbon is roughly $417 per ton of CO₂, while also providing estimates of the differential costs at the country level (Ricke et. al. 2018). By contrast, William Nordhaus (2017) estimates that the social cost of carbon is roughly $31 per ton.

8 The International Energy Agency has concluded that “no more than one-third of proven reserves of fossil fuels can be consumed prior to 2050 if the world is to achieve the 2°C goal” (IEA 2012; see also McGlade and Ekins 2015).

9 This could be done in a variety of ways, for example via any combination of: (1) a significantly increased marginal income tax rate on earnings over a certain rather high amount; (2) an increase in the estate tax; (3) an increase in the capital gains tax rate; (4) a wealth tax on individuals whose net worth exceeds a certain rather high amount; (5) an increase in the corporate tax rate.
that plausibly reflects each country’s fair share of the burdens of meeting the required global emissions reduction targets, within the time frame necessary to do so.

It seems likely that if these policies, or any subset of them, were adopted and complied with, then emissions would be reduced, perhaps substantially. At the very least, this would be the case if the policies were combined with certain patterns of behavior among individuals and corporations within the policy constraints. Compliance with these or similar policies, in combination with other behavioral changes, would almost certainly contribute to advancing climate justice by making it more likely that warming is limited to less than 2°C (or 1.5°C), or at least minimizing any warming beyond those targets.

**Feasibility Objections**

Despite the normative appeal of the claim that a country like the United States is required, as a matter of justice, to adopt policies such as (1) – (4), or similarly ambitious policies, some would object that this cannot be the case because their adoption is, in some relevant sense, infeasible. They might, for example, insist that enacting these policies is not feasible due to the fact that many of those who would face costs if they were adopted possess disproportionate political influence, and will surely oppose them. Or, they might claim that the policies could not feasibly generate the emissions reductions and other climate justice-promoting effects that their proponents intend, due to the ways that individuals and corporations would in fact behave if they were enacted.\(^{10}\) Some who hold that considerations of feasibility constrain what can be required

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\(^{10}\) This could be either because they would not comply with the explicit requirements of the policies, or because they would behave in ways that are permitted under the policies, but that would nonetheless make it the case that the goals that the policies were intended to promote
as a matter of justice might even think that these responses constitute sufficient grounds for concluding that adopting the policies (or any subset of them) is not required by justice.

Accepting this, however, would commit us to accepting some rather troubling implications, and even most philosophical proponents of feasibility constraints on requirements of justice would not accept them.\(^\text{11}\) This is because the mere unwillingness of some people to behave in ways that are required in order for a purported requirement of justice to be met cannot, in and of itself, provide grounds for concluding that it is not a requirement of justice after all (Räikkä 1998, 29; Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 813; Lawford-Smith 2013, 256; Roser 2016, 84; Gilabert 2017, 105). With respect to climate justice, accepting that policies like (1) - (4) are not required for feasibility-based reasons would also seem to commit us to thinking either that limiting warming to less than 2°C (let alone 1.5°C) cannot be required as a matter of justice, or that it is consistent with justice to, for example, impose significant costs of mitigation on the global poor of current and/or future generations in order to limit warming. After all, the very same motivations and behavioral dispositions that would be taken to explain why enacting the policies and/or using them to generate large emissions reductions is infeasible would also presumably make it infeasible to sufficiently reduce emissions by any other means that does not involve compensating well-off high emitters for reducing their emissions.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{11}\) As Juha Räikkä points out (1998, 28-31), it is widely accepted that any feasibility condition in political theory (that is, any feasibility condition on requirements of justice) cannot rule out as infeasible any policy that cannot be implemented quickly due to the opposition of powerful political groups (even if those groups oppose the policy on moral grounds rather than for self-interested reasons). Such policies might be “politically infeasible,” but they do not, just in virtue of that fact, fail whatever feasibility condition might constrain the content of requirements of justice.

\(^{12}\) The conclusion that the best feasible mitigation policies would involve compensation to well-off high emitters, paid either by the governments of nations most vulnerable to climate change,
I assume (but will not argue in this chapter) that any account of the fundamental requirements of climate justice that does not imply that we must (without avoidably imposing costs on the global poor) meet either the 2°C or 1.5°C target, or that one of these targets, in combination with the best scientific evidence, determines the extent of the emissions reductions that are required by justice, is unacceptable. However unlikely it is that we will in fact meet either the warming limitation targets or the emissions reduction targets, meeting them is not infeasible in any sense that could plausibly make it the case that we are not required as a matter of justice to do so.

Those who think that considerations of feasibility ought to inform philosophical theorizing about justice might accept this as a matter of principle. They might, nonetheless, insist that, at least in our current urgent circumstances, there is no (sufficiently) valuable role for philosophical theorizing about climate justice that does not aim to recommend actions, policies, and goals that might actually be adopted or achieved. The urgency of making whatever progress

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13 Studies that aim to estimate the emissions reductions that are necessary in order to keep warming below a particular limit typically state their conclusions in terms of what will provide either a 50% or a 66% probability of sufficiently limiting warming. For analyses using the 2°C target, see; Friedlingstein et. al. (2014); Raupach et. al. (2014); McGlade and Ekins (2015); Heede and Oreskes (2016); Rekker et. al. (2018). For analyses using the 1.5°C target, see Millar et. al. (2017); Matthews et. al. (2017); Goodwin et. al. (2018); Kriegler et. al. (2018); Leach et. al. (2018); Rogelj et. al. (2018); Tokarska and Gillett (2018).

14 In making this assumption, I am also assuming that at least a subset of the requirements of climate justice are outcome-focused, at least in a broad sense, since satisfying the requirements consists in ensuring that a certain state of affairs is brought about (e.g. one in which warming is limited to less than 2°C (or 1.5°C), or one in which emissions are limited to less than a particular amount). This is consistent with the way that at least most philosophers working on climate justice seem to conceive of these requirements, including those who think that other components of climate justice, such as the appropriate distribution of mitigation burdens, can plausibly be understood as matters of pure procedural justice (e.g. Brandstedt and Brulde 2019, 796).
we can on mitigation (see e.g. Moellendorf 2016, 105-7), in combination with the dismal record that we have amassed over the past three decades, they might argue, should lead us to think that much theoretical work on climate justice has little, if anything, of value to offer in the struggle to prevent, or at least limit, dangerous climate change. Claims of roughly this kind are often appealed to in the growing body of work criticizing “ideal theory” in political philosophy more generally, and also seem to underlie some recent work on climate justice and policy (e.g. Posner and Weisbach 2010; Brandstedt and Bergman 2013; Gajevic Sayegh 2019).

Feasibility Constraints on the Content of Justice and Feasibility Constraints on Theorizing in Urgent Circumstances

While the practical concerns that I have noted, and that are my central focus in this chapter, clearly lie behind some of the recent criticism of ambitious theorizing, much of the recent debate in political philosophy about whether we ought to accept feasibility constraints on the content of requirements of justice focuses on somewhat more abstract issues. In these discussions, the range of possibilities that are thought of as feasible is generally limited only by the principle that “ought implies can.” One central point of contention in these debates is, for example, whether the concept of justice should be thought of as constrained by the “ought implies can” principle at all (Gheaus 2013; Wiens 2014), so that outcomes that, in the relevant sense, we could not bring about cannot be required as a matter of justice. Another is precisely how the “ought implies can” principle should be interpreted, assuming that it does constrain the content of requirements of justice (Estlund 2011b, 2016; Wiens 2016; Chahboun 2017).

There are, however, some who have suggested that there are reasons to endorse significantly stricter feasibility constraints on theorizing (Brennan and Pettit 2007; Brennan
Most commonly, the stricter constraints are thought to be grounded in the findings of social scientific research, and in particular economics. Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit claim, for example, that political philosophers ought to take what they call “compliance constraints” into account in their theorizing (2007, 260), in order to ensure that their recommendations are “incentive compatible” (ibid., 264). Compliance constraints limit how effectively various policies can be expected to advance the justice-based goals that might initially be thought to justify their adoption. A policy that faces serious compliance constraints might be such that, although it would be the best possible policy in conditions in which people fully comply with both its letter and broader expectations, it would do much less to advance justice in the actual world than alternatives, since compliance levels will in fact be far from optimal (ibid., 260). Failure to take compliance constraints, and the associated requirement of incentive compatibility, sufficiently seriously, Brennan and Pettit claim, “is capable in principle of undermining an entire normative enterprise” (ibid., 260).

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15 Geoffrey Brennan is explicit that, in his view, the “ought implies can” principle is a “bad point of departure for discussion of feasibility considerations” (2013, 322). He argues that the conception of feasibility that political philosophers work with should be expanded “in ways that would be hospitable to the incorporation of ‘economic and political’ considerations (ibid., 315).

16 Brennan endorses the common complaint made by economists that philosophers do not take these kinds of feasibility considerations sufficiently seriously (2013, 328). For criticism of the claim that work in political philosophy should, as a general matter, be pursued within constraints set by current social scientific findings, see McTernan (2019). For criticism of the view that political philosophy should be pursued within constraints set by assumptions about human motivation commonly accepted by economists, see Herzog (2015).

17 If the normative enterprise in question is determining what policies should be adopted in the actual world, then this claim seems right. But philosophers who reject the view that compliance constraints and incentive compatibility should be regarded as constraints on the content of requirements of justice do not take this as the central aim of their theorizing. It is unclear, then, exactly who Brennan and Pettit think make the mistake of recommending the adoption of policies in the actual world that would predictably fail to advance justice as much as alternative policies (or are committed by their theorizing to making such recommendations).
In the debate about climate justice, a number of theorists suggest that rather strict feasibility constraints should limit our theorizing. For example, Eric Brandstedt and Anna-Karin Bergman claim that one of the two basic desiderata for an account of climate rights is “its ability to generate political measures” (2013, 396), and they later describe this condition as requiring that accounts be judged in part on their “likelihood of motivating political action” (ibid., 404). Alexandre Gajevic Sayegh claims that “political traction” (2019, 121) is one of the criteria that theorists should consider when determining which use of the revenue generated by market-based instruments for emissions reduction they ought to endorse. What he seems to have in mind by this criterion is, at least roughly, how likely it is that a proposal will be taken seriously by policymakers and those in a position to influence policy.\(^{18}\)

What Eric Posner and David Weisbach call “International Paretianism” (2010, 6) is probably the most well-known feasibility constraint that has been suggested as a constraint on our thinking about climate justice and policy. According to this constraint, any feasible climate treaty must be such that “all states believe themselves better off by their lights as a result of the climate treaty” (ibid., 6). Posner and Weisbach claim that because of this constraint, “feasibility rules out the vast redistributions of wealth that many believe are morally required” (ibid., 6). Instead, a feasible climate treaty would likely require side payments “from states that have a stronger interest in a climate treaty to states that have a weaker interest in a climate treaty” (ibid., 84). And since many states with an especially strong interest in a climate treaty are poor, and

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\(^{18}\) Gajevic Sayegh also describes his methodological approach to thinking about climate justice as requiring that “imperatives and recommendations from other disciplines” (including, uncontroversially in my view, climate science, but also economics) “constrain the philosophical analysis” (2019, 114). For a critical discussion of Gajevic Sayegh’s view, see Berkey (2019).
some with weaker interests are rich, “these side payments may go from poor to rich, at least in part” (ibid., 85).

It is worth noting an important difference between, on the one hand, the “incentive compatibility” constraint, and, on the other, the type of constraint represented by International Paretianism or more general concerns about political possibility. Brennan and Pettit’s central claim seems to be that policymakers who are concerned to advance justice need to take into account how the people who will be subject to whatever policies are adopted will in fact behave under different candidate policies. Because of this, theorists aiming to defend claims about what policies should be adopted, and who can be understood as (perhaps among other things) offering policy recommendations to legislators, must consider this as well. The way that considerations of feasibility constrain theorizing, then, is that claims that offer recommendations to policymakers must take into account facts about the likely effects of selecting any particular policy from among the available options. These effects are, importantly, largely outside of the control of the policymakers themselves. Because of this, even policymakers who are motivated by nothing other than the aim of advancing justice must take the facts about likely effects into account when responsibly deciding which policies to try to enact. The “incentive compatibility” constraint on the advice that theorists ought to offer to policymakers, then, seems quite reasonable. The aim is simply to recommend the policies that would in fact be ethically optimal for legislators to enact, given what the effects of different candidate policies would actually be. There is nothing in the structure of this kind of constraint that requires the theorist to engage with those to whom
normative recommendations are, in effect, being offered on any assumption other than that they are (or at least might be) as ethically motivated and committed to advancing justice as possible.\textsuperscript{19}

International Paretianism and concerns about what can “generate political measures,” or is “politically tractable,” however, represent a different kind of constraint altogether. Theorists who operate within this kind of constraint cannot assume that those to whom their central normative claims offer recommendations are (or even might be) as ethically motivated as possible. Indeed, the central reason for accepting a constraint of this kind seems precisely that those people will likely not be sufficiently motivated by ethical considerations to do what it would be ethically best for them to do. Theorists who operate within this kind of constraint, then, cannot offer recommendations that constitute the morally best options for those to whom they are directed, in the way that those who operate within Brennan and Pettit’s constraint can. Instead, they must aim, roughly, to offer recommendations that are ethically optimal within the range of options that those to whom they are offered might actually choose. This means that they must avoid recommending to decisionmakers policies that would have ethically optimal effects if adopted, simply because those to whom the recommendations are to be offered will, predictably, not accept the recommendations.\textsuperscript{20} This is a very different and, it seems to me, much more

\textsuperscript{19} In my view, this does not, however, provide any reason to accept that incentive compatibility is a constraint on the content of requirements of justice. This is because while it is reasonable to advise policy makers about what they ought to do in light of the best available evidence about how people subject to the policies will actually behave, we should not allow anyone’s potentially objectionable behavioral tendencies, intentions, and attitudes to constrain the content of justice. Ambitious theorizing, then, need not be limited by the concerns about incentive compatibility highlighted by Brennan and Pettit, even though there are certainly valuable contributions to be made by theorizing that does take incentive compatibility as a constraint.

\textsuperscript{20} This, presumably, is the way that we must understand the claim that policies such as (1) – (4) are infeasible, since it seems likely that, conditional on actually being adopted, their effects would be quite good from an ethical perspective.
troubling constraint on how normative theorists ought to engage with those to whom they aim to offer normative guidance.

To see why this kind of constraint is particularly troubling, consider what it might imply about what a normative theorist ought to say to third parties about what, for example, policy makers ought to do with respect to climate change. It would, on the one hand, seem very strange if the constraint limited what the theorist ought to say, so that, for example, she should insist to her relatives, who are ordinary citizens, that it is not true, as a matter of justice, that legislators in the United States should be willing to ratify a climate treaty that would be costly to Americans overall, and to the well off in particular. Moreover, it would seem objectionably inconsistent if the truth of the claim that justice requires that the United States sign on to an international treaty that would be costly overall somehow varied depending on to whom the claim was being directed.

In addition, if a feasibility constraint of the kind at issue were treated as constraining the content of requirements of justice, it would allow the mere unwillingness of some to behave in ways that are supported by strong moral reasons to render what would otherwise seem to be requirements of justice not requirements at all. In the case of climate justice, a feasibility constraint of this kind could imply that limiting warming to 2°C is not a requirement of justice. This is because there might be no set of climate policies that satisfies both of the following two conditions: (1) enough legislators could be motivated to support the policies for them to be enacted; and (2) enacting the policies would ensure that warming does not exceed 2°C. To take another example, Posner and Weisbach are explicit that International Paretianism likely provides theorists reason to recommend side payments from poor countries to rich countries as part of an international climate treaty (2010, 85). To the extent that this is true, taking International
Paretoianism as a constraint on the content of justice implies that imposing potentially significant costs of mitigation on poor countries is compatible with justice.

These are, it seems to me, quite implausible implications, if what we are aiming to do is to determine the content of the requirements of climate justice. This suggests that perhaps we should interpret the feasibility constraints in a different way. I suggest that they are best interpreted as proposed constraints on theorizing in urgent circumstances, such as those that we currently face with respect to climate change, rather than as constraints on the content of requirements of justice. Consider, for example, that Posner and Weisbach pursue their analysis of what an international climate treaty should look like within the bounds of International Paretoianism, and endorse it as a constraint on this kind of theorizing, while claiming, first, that it “is not an ethical principle but a pragmatic constraint” (2010, 6), and second, that it is true, as a matter of ethical principle, that rich countries have an obligation to help poor ones (ibid., 74).

Assuming that I am right that the feasibility constraints that they defend cannot plausibly constrain the content of requirements of justice, why might theorists of climate justice nonetheless think that we should theorize within the constraints of what is politically tractable? One way of defending such a constraint on theorizing is to argue that the urgency of putting in place policies that will reduce emissions requires that theorists focus their attention only on potential measures that are feasible, in the sense of being likely enough to actually be adopted. Spending time reflecting on what an ideal of climate justice might require, when the proposals that result from such reflection have no chance of actually being implemented, is, it might be suggested, objectionably indulgent in conditions of such extreme urgency. This kind of philosophical reflection, it might be suggested, simply has nothing valuable to contribute to the necessary efforts to advance mitigation as quickly as possible, and these efforts require that
everyone who is in a good position to contribute (including theorists working on climate justice) do so.

On this view, philosophical theorizing about climate justice that does not operate within the relevant feasibility constraints is simply idle, utopian intellectual activity that offers nothing of value in the fight against climate change. Perhaps this kind of intellectual work has more to offer when, for example, there is more time available to reflect on and debate a range of proposals for addressing injustice, or when failing to act right away will not ensure that later efforts will face much greater challenges, and may not be able to do more than limit the inevitable destruction. It might seem that when the need for immediate action is especially urgent, the role for ambitious philosophical theorizing simply vanishes. (For more on the role that justice theorists might play in policymaking, see McBee, J. and Kowarsch & Lenzi, both in this volume.)

The Role of Ambitious Theorizing in Urgent Circumstances

While the above argument against ambitious theorizing in urgent circumstances can seem appealing, in my view it is mistaken. There are a number of important roles for theorizing that is not limited by the kinds of feasibility constraints that the argument advocates. And these roles can make it reasonable for theorists to engage in ambitious theorizing even if they are concerned that their work have the potential to contribute in a practical way to the fight against climate change. I will briefly highlight three important roles that such theorizing about climate justice can play.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{21}\) The roles that I describe here are not the only ones that I believe ambitious theorizing can play in urgent circumstances. I cannot, however, offer a more comprehensive discussion in this chapter.
The first practical role that ambitious theorizing can play is contributing to making a greater range of policies or outcomes feasible over time. As Pablo Gilabert and Holly-Lawford Smith have emphasized, sometimes a policy or outcome that it is infeasible to bring about now can become feasible in the future, if we act in certain ways that are feasible now (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 821-22; see also Gilabert 2009, 676-78; Gilabert 2011, 60-63; Gilabert 2012, 47-50; Lawford-Smith 2013, 249-50; Gilabert 2017). When this is the case, we may have “dynamic duties” (Gilabert 2009, 676-78) that require that we adopt a “transitional standpoint” (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 821), aiming now to act in ways that will make it possible to satisfy a well-justified requirement at some point in the future. Arguments defending policies that are certain not to be adopted in the near future or requirements that are certain not to be met in virtue of near-term efforts can potentially contribute to making policies or outcomes that are infeasible now feasible in the future by encouraging reflection on ways that we might act now that could make it possible to bring them about later.\(^{22}\) Insofar as there are strong moral reasons that support acting in ways that will make it feasible to bring such policies or outcomes about in the future, ambitious theorizing that generates reflection that makes such action more likely can contribute in a practical way to promoting justice over time.

In many cases, it is reasonable to take this as an aim in developing an argument about, for example, what is required as a matter of justice. And since consequential decisions about climate

\(^{22}\) Of course, the extent to which such arguments will tend to encourage reflection that otherwise would not have occurred, and thereby potentially make a difference to the feasibility of policies over time, will depend at least to some extent on to whom the arguments are directed, and on who actually engages with them. It may be that ambitious theorizing aimed at an audience broader than academic philosophers has much more potential to contribute in this way than work aimed purely at professional philosophers. If this is right, then one interesting upshot of my argument may be that it calls for philosophers to engage in more ambitious theorizing aimed at a broad audience.
policy will need to be made not just in the near term, but for at least many decades in the future, there is no reason to think that this cannot be a reasonable aim of ambitious theorizing about climate justice.

A second important role for ambitious theorizing in urgent circumstances is that it can provide us with the intellectual basis necessary for holding accountable those who make it the case that certain policies that would significantly advance justice if adopted are infeasible. In the absence of ambitious theorizing, it might be easier for us, and for the public at large, to lose sight of the fact that there are important ethical questions that should be raised about the motivations, intentions, and behavior of those who make it the case that otherwise desirable policies are infeasible. Ambitious theorizing tends to encourage reflection on whether it is ethically acceptable for legislators, and many of the wealthy and powerful individuals and corporations that support them, to continue to make policies like (1) – (4) infeasible. When powerful agents make otherwise desirable policies infeasible, this in effect forces those who aim to advance climate justice to focus their attention on trying to get significantly less ambitious policies enacted. While this may be the right focus for those concerned about climate justice to adopt in those circumstances, it is important that we not lose sight of the fact that justice is, nonetheless, being undermined by others.

One valuable thing that theorizing that calls for negative judgments of the motivations, intentions, and behavior of those who help to make strong mitigation policies infeasible might do is contribute to motivating efforts among those who are concerned about climate justice and persuaded by the arguments that do not have as their main aim enacting the policies defended as requirements of justice. These efforts could aid mitigation efforts overall, despite not having any effect in terms of getting those policies enacted. (We have to assume that there is no chance that
persuading concerned members of the public could have an effect on policy adoption, since if it could then we would, in effect, be suggesting that the feasible set is larger than we initially imagined – and if this is true then the argument against ambitious theorizing in urgent circumstances would not imply that the relevant arguments ought not be made). For example, an argument that suggests that taxes on the wealthy should be increased substantially in order to fund mitigation efforts might have no chance of making a difference to tax policy, since enough legislators and wealthy and influential citizens will oppose any such tax increase. But it might motivate some corporate leaders to adopt goals for their firms that include substantial emissions reductions and investments in clean energy technology, or motivate some individuals to invest in renewable energy firms rather than fossil fuel companies. In other words, the policies advocated might themselves be infeasible in the sense that proponents of the argument against ambitious theorizing in urgent circumstances have in mind, but making the arguments could nonetheless still contribute to advancing the aims that explain why the policies are plausibly required as a matter of justice.

Where this is true, the value of making such arguments lies primarily in highlighting the values that support adopting the policies, which, at least in many cases, are directly relevant to justice. Because those values can often be promoted, at least to some extent, in ways other than via the policies, the arguments can highlight moral reasons for a range of actions other than those that have as their direct aim promoting the adoption of the policies. More generally, ambitious theorizing about justice can be valuable because a significant part of what it consists in is reflecting on which fundamental values are relevant to assessments of justice, and how those values are to be weighed up against one another and traded off in cases of conflict. This kind of
reflection can aid moral decision-making in a wide variety of contexts apart from decisions about which public policies to support.\textsuperscript{23}

In addition, there is independent value in providing the intellectual basis for holding accountable those who contribute to making otherwise desirable policies infeasible, even if doing this does not significantly affect either policy or how individuals behave in contexts in which justice-relevant values are implicated. Ambitious theorizing can provide grounds for justifiably concluding that those who stand in the way of policies that would promote climate justice are blameworthy, and this can generate justified indignation in those persuaded by the arguments that they might not otherwise have experienced. It might be objected that this kind of effect is not important enough to justify devoting valuable time to ambitious theorizing rather than to defending feasible policy proposals. Perhaps this is correct in cases in which this is the only valuable practical effect that making an ambitious argument might have. But I need not claim that this kind of effect is, by itself, sufficient to justify ambitious theorizing. I claim only that it is among a range of values that ambitious theorizing can serve that can together justify ambitious theorizing.

Finally, ambitious theorizing can help us to determine which option from a particular feasible set is best from the perspective of justice. This is not uncontroversial (see, e.g. Wiens 2015, 467-68), but in my view the skepticism that some have expressed is misplaced. I cannot argue for this claim in detail here, but in what follows I will note the central reason why I think

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\textsuperscript{23} It is worth noting that a further feature of ambitious theorizing that we have good reason to value is that it, and its recommendations, are capable of being addressed to all agents who are in a position to promote justice, since it does not require tailoring the content of theoretical claims and policy recommendations to the audience being addressed. When a theorist operates within feasibility constraints of the kind endorsed by proponents of the argument against ambitious theorizing in urgent circumstances, however, what they ought to recommend to different audiences will vary, because what different agents might be willing to do will vary.
that ambitious theorizing can provide valuable normative guidance in circumstances in which fully achieving justice is infeasible.

The most common argument for thinking that an account of what justice requires cannot helpfully guide action in conditions in which fully achieving justice is not feasible derives from the well-known “general theory of second best” (Lipsky and Lancaster 1956). The basic idea is that when we cannot satisfy all of some set of desiderata, it is not necessarily best to attempt to satisfy as many as possible, or, more generally, to approximate the ideal as much as possible. In discussions of justice and policy, this point is generally employed in order to argue that we cannot move from the fact that a set of policies $X$ is required as a matter of justice to the conclusion that when we cannot fully implement $X$, we should make our policy choices look as much like $X$ as possible. In some cases, doing this will be worse in terms of the values that we have reason to care about.

The reason that this point, though undoubtedly correct, does not undermine the claim that ambitious theorizing can help to guide choice in conditions in which fully achieving justice is infeasible is that we need not, and in my view should not, understand the fundamental content of a theory of justice in terms of a set of policies. Instead, we should think that some of what justice requires is that we bring about certain outcomes (such as limiting warming to less than $2°C$), and some of what it requires is that we weigh and trade off justice-relevant values appropriately.

It is obvious that if we take limiting warming to $2°C$ as the content of a requirement of justice, we do not run into the second best problem in cases in which we will not in fact satisfy that requirement and must decide what to do among a range of feasible options. This is because we can choose on the basis of which option is most likely to minimize how far beyond the $2°C$ threshold we go.
Proponents of the argument against ambitious theorizing in urgent circumstances, however, may claim that any ambitious theorizing defending the 2°C requirement does not add anything to what would be recommended by the kind of theorizing that they favor, so that my point here does not support the claim that ambitious theorizing can play a valuable role that their preferred type cannot. This may be right in the case of the 2°C requirement, but, importantly, it is not true in more complex cases in which we must think about how to trade off competing justice-relevant values, such as, for example, emissions reductions and short-term poverty reduction. Ambitious theorizing requires determining, as a matter of principle, how competing values should ideally be weighed against each other. Theorizing within the kinds of feasibility constraints endorsed by proponents of the argument against ambitious theorizing in urgent circumstances, on the other hand, generally does not involve reflecting on fundamental questions of this kind. In addition, only theorizing in the absence of feasibility constraints will involve reflecting on how these trade-offs would ideally be made, when all of the options are considered on the table. Only ambitious theorizing, then, can generate principles that can serve as appropriate guides for making these decisions across all possible cases.

There are, then, a number of important roles that can be played by ambitious philosophical theorizing about climate justice, even in our current urgent circumstances. While it can be tempting to think that work on climate justice ought to be focused more directly on advocating feasible measures to fight climate change, I have argued that this view involves an

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24 This kind of theorizing, of course, will typically involve considering certain kinds of trade-offs. Posner and Weisbach, for example, suggest that emissions reductions should be prioritized over the near-term redistribution of resources to the global poor because they believe that in the long run emissions reductions would have a greater net positive effect on human welfare. This, however, is not a trade-off between competing fundamental values, but instead a question about how to best promote a single value in non-ideal conditions.
unduly narrow conception of the ways that philosophical work can contribute to efforts to promote justice in our admittedly very non-ideal world.25

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