

FEASIBILITY CLAIMS IN THE DEBATE OVER ANARCHY VERSUS THE MINIMAL STATE

BRAD R. TAYLOR*

1. Introduction

Feasibility is a concept often invoked but rarely defined in political argument. We hear claims such as “Your ideas are good in principle, but wouldn’t work in practice” or “Sure, but that’s never going to happen,” but the precise content of such claims is often unclear. Feasibility or practicality is obviously important and must in some sense be a hard constraint on political argument if political argument is meant to serve a practical purpose. It does not matter how good the proposed solution would be; the fact of infeasibility acts as a trump card removing any need for a balancing of feasibility against desirability. We need not entertain impossible ideas, even really good ones.

The idea of feasibility as a constraint on institutions and policy has played an important role in the argument for libertarian institutions. Buchanan’s (1984) characterization of public choice theory as “politics without romance” and Munger’s (2014) gentle mocking of “unicorn governance” have been powerful responses to those putting excessive faith in the willingness and ability of government to solve social problems. It may be possible to imagine an ideal set of policies through which a wise and

*Brad R. Taylor is lecturer in economics and political economy at the University of Southern Queensland.

CITATION INFORMATION FOR THIS ARTICLE:

Brad R. Taylor. 2018. “Feasibility Claims in the Debate over Anarchy versus the Minimal State.” *Libertarian Papers*. 10 (2): 277-293. ONLINE AT: libertarianpapers.org. THIS ARTICLE IS subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (creativecommons.org/licenses).

benevolent dictator can produce a desirable result, but any real-world proposal relying on such assumptions is rightly dismissed as infeasible.

Feasibility arguments have also divided libertarian scholars. Anarchists and minarchists routinely accuse each other of making utopian arguments. I here consider these disagreements in light of the philosophical literature on political feasibility with the aim of both clarifying the points of disagreement in the debate on anarchy versus limited government and interrogating the role of feasibility considerations in political argument. I suggest that anarchists and minarchists often talk past each other because they are adopting different concepts of feasibility without clearly specifying their meaning. The dispute here is not merely a verbal one, but the argument turns on a variety of positive and normative questions that are often masked by loose talk about feasibility. This has lessons for the concept of feasibility more generally. The diversity of feasibility claims we see in political argument is too great to be captured by a single formulation, despite what recent work in political philosophy has attempted. I suggest that the concept of feasibility should be disaggregated using the method of elimination, and I show how this helps structure political argument and reveals sources of disagreement.

2. Feasibility in Political Theory

Political theorists have traditionally drawn a sharp distinction between questions of desirability and feasibility, roughly how good something would be if brought about versus how realistic it is to expect it could be brought about (Raikka 1998). For the most part, what precisely we mean by “feasibility” has been ignored, but a number of analytic political philosophers have recently become interested in the concept and sought to provide some conceptual clarity. Brennan and Southwood (2007, 10) consider a feasible action to be one with a “reasonable probability of success conditional upon trying.” Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (2012, 4) see feasibility as a four-place predicate: “It is feasible for X to φ to bring about O in Z,” with X being some agent, φ being some action, O being some outcome, and Z being some context. Wiens (2015) provides a vision of feasibility as a generalization of the familiar production possibility frontier from economics.¹

Although these accounts differ in detail, they are united by an attempt to construct a general formulation of the concept of feasibility. It is this project I reject. I instead argue that the concept of feasibility should be

¹ See also Brennan (2013), Lawford-Smith (2013b, 2013a), Southwood and Wiens (2016), and Wiens (2013).

disaggregated rather than clarified as a singular concept in political argument. In similar spirit, Hamlin (2017) considers the extant philosophical literature on feasibility and finds four distinct types of feasibility claim not easily reduced to a simple formulation. I am in basic agreement with Hamlin's analysis but take his argument a step further. Whereas Hamlin provides a more nuanced conceptualization of feasibility, I suggest that political argument would proceed more smoothly if we were willing to give up the term "feasibility" (and related terms such as "realistic," "practical," and "utopian") altogether and instead say what we mean using more precise causal or counterfactual language. I lay out this method of elimination in section 6.

Consider the Gilibert and Lawford-Smith (2012) formulation of feasibility outlined above, for example. If this formulation is to capture the variety of feasibility claims we see in political argument, each predicate will be able to take on wildly different sorts of value. As I will show below, some but not all feasibility claims are agent relative, meaning that agent X will sometimes be undefined or at least defined rather vaguely. Actions φ can be made by individuals, but to fit many feasibility claims into this schema we would also need to include policies and policy proposals into this formulation. Outcomes can also be quite different, ranging from political and policy outcomes to social and economic ones. Considering all the dimensions along which feasibility claims can vary, I contend, a general formulation of feasibility that helps rather than hinders political argument is, if not strictly impossible, at least infeasible.

3. Feasibility Claims in the Anarchy vs. Minimal-State Debate

As a case study in feasibility claims made in political argument, I examine the debate between free market anarchists and small-government libertarians. This is a useful case study for two reasons. First, within these debates there is a reasonably strong (although not perfect) agreement on desirability, meaning that disagreements are primarily grounded in feasibility issues. Secondly, there is a rich source of written material, from academic journals and books to magazines and blog posts. This frequent back and forth provides a solid data source.

Anarchists claim we should have no state at all (e.g., D. Friedman 1989; Rothbard 1973; Stringham 2015); minarchists claim that we should have a minimal state restricted to a few basic functions (e.g., Buchanan 1975; M.

Friedman 1962; Nozick 1974; Rand 1964).² Both anarchists and minarchists have accused their opponents of being utopian (i.e., advocating the infeasible). In this section, I outline these feasibility arguments. I make no attempt to evaluate the arguments; the purpose is simply to tease out what exactly is being claimed when the concept of feasibility is deployed. My aim here is to sample the arguments made by a few influential libertarian scholars rather than conduct a comprehensive review of the literature.

4. Anarchy as Utopian

Any (outcome-sensitive) libertarian anarchist will presumably accept the following propositions:

- (i) If implemented and maintained, the “policy outcome” of statelessness is sufficiently likely to produce a situation in which individual rights are respected.
- (ii) If implemented, the policy outcome of statelessness is sufficiently likely to be maintained (i.e., it is stable).
- (iii) Statelessness can be implemented.

Each of these propositions can be disputed on feasibility grounds. Someone philosophically opposed to libertarian anarchism could deny that anarchism is desirable even while endorsing (i)–(iii) as true, because they do not consider the (factually undisputed) outcomes of statelessness preferable to the relevant alternatives.³ This is not a feasibility claim, but rather a desirability claim. A minarchist could also endorse (i)–(iii) as true but reject anarchism on the grounds that they see a minimal state as more desirable than orderly anarchy. This is likewise not a feasibility claim, since such claims must in some sense take desirability as given. In broad terms, we might say that any argument against (i), (ii), or (iii) is a feasibility argument.

² Minimal-government libertarians differ a great deal in terms of just what the state can legitimately do. Nozick and Rand restrict the minimal state to a basic law-and-order function, while others such as Buchanan and Hayek allow for the production of public goods and even some basic redistribution. Since I am here interested in feasibility concerns, I set aside these differences in this paper.

³ Someone concerned with social justice or moral purity, for example, might accept completely the economic argument that anarchy promotes efficiency or liberty but deny that this makes anarchy more desirable than the relevant alternatives because anarchy produces distributional patterns or allows behaviour that their nonlibertarian value system deems undesirable (and sufficiently so to outweigh any positive weight given to efficiency or liberty).

There will of course be differences of opinion on the level of likelihood required to meet conditions (i) and (ii). Two libertarians might agree on the desirability of orderly anarchy and on the probability of anarchy becoming disorderly or producing a de facto state while disagreeing on whether such a gamble is worth the risk. Such a disagreement would come down to risk preference, and this is an issue of desirability rather than feasibility. The method of elimination endorsed here can be used to tease out which disagreements are due to differences in probability judgements and which are due to differences in risk preference. The statement “Anarchy would be good if orderly, but it is too risky” is vague and can be made more precise by eliminating the term “too risky.” For the statement to be taken seriously, some probability judgment and probability standard must be specified.⁴ If thus reformulated, the statement would be made more precise and argument could focus on the real grounds of disagreement; if not, the statement can be conditionally rejected as meaningless until it is reformulated in more precise terms.

Each of these propositions has been attacked by non-anarchist libertarians. We can classify these arguments as (a) policy-effect arguments (those rejecting [i]); (b) policy-stability arguments (those rejecting [ii]); and (c) political-accessibility arguments (those rejecting [iii]). Below I discuss prominent examples from each category.

a) Policy effect

Anarchists argue that voluntary transactions will secure an acceptable level of social order and liberty. This claim has, to put it mildly, received a good deal of criticism, even among fairly radical libertarians. The criticism I am interested in here is the claim that anarchism, if realized (in the sense that anarchists have their way and the state ceases to exist), would produce, with certainty or with unacceptably high probability, violence and disorder. I take this to be a feasibility argument in the sense that it claims a political outcome would not produce the social outcome intended by its advocates. In political theory, the idea is normally traced to Hobbes; among libertarians and classical liberals, Ayn Rand and James M. Buchanan hold variants of this view.

⁴ These need not be precise point estimates or standards. For example, the claim “Anarchy would certainly be too risky if there were a 5 percent chance of disorder, and although I am not confident of the exact probability I am confident it is greater than 5 percent” would be a meaningful statement that would allow productive argument on both the estimate and the threshold.

Rand (1964, ch. 14) argues that anarchy is incapable of protecting individual rights. She gives two reasons for this view. First, lacking a centralized coercive power, individuals would be vulnerable to the whims of nasty people. Rand (1964, 104) concludes that “if a society left the retaliatory use of force in the hands of individual citizens, it would degenerate into mob rule, lynch law and an endless series of bloody private feuds or vendettas.” Second, decentralized enforcement is inconsistent with the enforcement of “objective law”: “Even a society whose every member were fully rational and faultlessly moral, could not function in a state of anarchy; it is the need of objective laws and of an arbiter for honest disagreements among men that necessitates the establishment of a government” (Rand 1964, 107).

There are two feasibility claims here:

Rand’s Hobbesian social undesirability: Anarchy would lead to constant violence and rights violations. Thus, the anarchist’s proposed policy of statelessness is an infeasible means of securing the desired social outcome of liberty.⁵

Rand’s imperfect liberty: There is no possible way for the anarchist’s policy proposal to perfectly achieve the desired social outcome of respect for libertarian rights.

Buchanan’s argument against anarchism is more developed than Rand’s and more explicitly based on the Hobbesian state of nature and feasibility concerns. Buchanan (1975, 5) endorses anarchism as a philosophical doctrine: “To the individualist, the ideal or utopian world is necessarily anarchistic in some basic philosophical sense.” Although the utopian anarchist vision of everybody respecting each other’s rights is appealing, Buchanan sees it as a “conceptual mirage” since absent a unanimously agreed set of rights, there can be no perfect respect for those rights. This argument is similar to Rand’s “imperfect liberty” argument, but Buchanan is not willing to hold up objective law as a meaningful standard of comparison. Buchanan’s point is simply that utopian (i.e., conflict-free) anarchy is a logical impossibility as long as there is some disagreement over the assignment of rights and the boundaries of individual autonomy. Rand treats this as an argument for government because she believes there is an objective law that the government ought to enforce; Buchanan makes no such claim and sees

⁵ It is not entirely clear whether Rand thinks the Hobbesian outcome is a certainty or merely very likely. Her use of terms such as “cannot” and “would” suggests the former, but interpretation is complicated by the fact that Rand reacted to criticisms of her argument against anarchy by cancelling the critic’s subscription to the *Objectivist* rather than responding to the arguments (see Stringham 2007, 6–7).

disagreement over rights as a problem that does not disappear with the emergence of a state. The comparison is, as always, between two imperfect alternatives (Buchanan 1984; Demsetz 1969).

Buchanan does, however, argue that disagreement in anarchy would produce disorder for basically Hobbesian reasons: without external enforcement mechanisms, individuals would have incentives for predation rather than production, and this makes everybody worse off (Brennan and Buchanan 1985, ch. 1; Buchanan 1975, ch. 2; Buchanan 2005). Thus, according to Buchanan, the anarchist's claim that statelessness produces high levels of social order is mistaken. Although philosophically appealing on classical liberal grounds, it is unrealistic to expect anarchy to be orderly.

Buchanan's Hobbesian social undesirability: Anarchy would lead to constant conflict and little cooperation. Thus the anarchist's proposed policy of statelessness would not produce the desired social outcome of Pareto nondominance by government.

b) Policy instability

Others have argued that although the Hobbesian view is overly pessimistic, libertarian anarchy would endogenously lead to the re-emergence of the state.⁶ Cowen (1992, 268), for example, argues that "libertarian anarchy is not a stable equilibrium." Cowen accepts for the sake of argument that the Hobbesian jungle can be avoided through cooperation among competing protection agencies but claims that this ability to cooperate will itself lead to the emergence of a *de facto* state.⁷ Similarly, Holcombe (2004, 326) argues that government is "unnecessary but inevitable" on the grounds that

⁶ This view is sometimes attributed to Nozick (1974), though that is not quite correct. Nozick argued that a minimal state *could* emerge through voluntary interaction and used this as a normative justification for the minimal state. This does not imply that actual anarchy *would* lead to the re-emergence of the state.

⁷ See also Cowen and Sutter (1999). Cowen's argument is perhaps best interpreted as the claim that anarchy would either be disorderly (if protection agencies cannot cooperate) or unstable (if they can). Caplan and Stringham (2003) respond by arguing that avoiding interagency war requires less cooperative efficacy than collusion since agreements to avoid war are self-enforcing whereas collusion is not. This gives rise to an anarchist "sweet spot" of intermediate interagency cooperation. Cowen and Sutter (2005) admit that such a sweet spot exists but argue that it will be small and thereby insist that orderly anarchy is unlikely. This is a slightly more complicated feasibility argument in that it states that depending on some uncertain conditions anarchy is either disorderly or unstable.

“without government—or even with a weak government—predatory groups will impose themselves on people by force and create a government to extract income and wealth from these subjects.”

Cowen’s political instability: The proposed political outcome of statelessness is not a stable equilibrium. Even if the policy were implemented and would produce desirable social outcomes for as long as it existed, it would not exist for long.

Some libertarians accept that neither anarchism nor minimal-state libertarianism is a stable equilibrium, though minimal-state libertarianism is in some sense more stable. In a 1995 interview with *Reason* magazine, for example, Milton Friedman makes this claim (Doherty 1995):

Reason: Why aren’t you [a zero-government libertarian]?

Friedman: Because I don’t think it’s a feasible social structure. I look over history, and outside of perhaps Iceland, where else can you find any historical examples of that kind of a system developing?

Reason: One could argue the same thing about minimal-state libertarianism: that historically it seems to not be stable.

Friedman: I agree. I wrote an article once arguing that a free society is an unstable equilibrium. Fundamentally, I’m of the opinion that it is. Though we want to try to keep that unstable equilibrium as long as we can! The United States from 1780 to 1929 is not a bad example of a limited-government libertarianism that lasted for a long time.

This raises the question of just how long an institution must survive to be considered stable, and as with the riskiness issue considered above, the method of elimination does not provide a definite answer but can be used to make stability claims more precise. Cowen’s claim above would need to be reformulated in a way that specifies a time horizon. If anarchy lasted for only a day, it would surely be deemed unstable by any reasonable person, but requiring that a stateless society maintain itself for all time is an unreasonably high standard (Newhard 2016). To make an instability claim meaningful through the method of elimination, it must be reformulated in terms of the expected lifetime of the institution and a standard by which to judge it. As with riskiness, this reformulation need not make a definite prediction but needs to set reasonable parameters that can be debated openly.

c) Policy accessibility

Though it has received less attention in the academic literature than the other two categories of argument, a common argument in less formal debates

among libertarians is the extent to which anarchy is achievable as a political goal. This is related to arguments about gradual versus radical change and the relative merits of activism within or outside existing political structures, though it is a distinct issue. Non-anarchist libertarians will often claim that anarchism is an infeasible proposal because it is unlikely to come about given current political realities; there is no path from here to there.

This is a feasibility argument in a sense quite different from the other two categories. Whereas rejecting (i) and (ii) would provide reasons against implementing anarchy if given a decisive choice,⁸ rejection of (iii) provides no such reason but perhaps provides a reason not to waste one's time endorsing anarchism. If there is no way to bring anarchy about and we take action-guidingness to be a hard constraint on political theory, rejection of (iii) would lead us to exclude statelessness from the feasible set.

Though economists and political theorists tend to ignore in their formal writings the question of how to get "from here to there" in a practical sense, disagreements among libertarian academics on such matters are common in less formal settings such as dinner parties and non-academic essays. Holcombe's (2007) contribution to the *Cato Unbound* exchange on anarchy, for example, makes the argument that anarchism is not within the politically feasible set: "I have no quarrel with people who make those arguments [that anarchy is desirable], but from a policy perspective they are irrelevant. Government will be with us for the foreseeable future, so the real policy issue is not whether government should be eliminated but how to make it better." Holcombe sees the major barrier to implementation of anarchy in industrialized countries as the preferences of citizens: "American support for their government is the main reason why anarchy is completely infeasible from a policy perspective. Americans have it pretty good today, and they are not going to give up a reasonably comfortable status quo in exchange for an experiment in statelessness. So, regardless of its merits, anarchy has no prospect as an actual policy option. The bottom line is: in developed nations, most people support their government."

Many anarchists, such as the target of Holcombe's remarks, Peter Lesson, accept that anarchy is not a feasible option in this sense but see this as irrelevant to their position. In response, Leeson (2007a) writes: "I have not

⁸ Some would dispute that instability is any argument against experimenting with anarchy. Rothbard, for example, argues that if the worst that can happen is that we get back to where we are, anarchy is a costless gamble that any rational person would take. As Cowen and Sutter and Holcombe emphasize, however, the state that re-emerges from anarchy could be much worse (i.e., less libertarian) than the one we abandon.

said anything that could be construed as identifying steps we could take to achieving anarchy in the U.S. Nor will I attempt to suggest how we might do this here. This is not because I do not think it is an important question. It is because I am not a political strategist, and this question of the political expediency of anarchy is really a question of political strategy.” Later, Leeson (2007b) summarizes his response to the charge of infeasibility: “The political feasibility of anarchy does not in any way bear on the question of anarchy’s superiority (or inferiority, depending upon one’s position) to government.” Leeson evidently does not see proposition (iii) as essential to his anarchism.⁹

5. The Minimal State as Utopian

Minarchists presumably endorse the following claims:

- (i) If implemented and maintained, the “policy outcome” of the minimal state is sufficiently likely to produce a situation in which individual rights are respected.
- (ii) If implemented, the policy outcome of a minimal state is sufficiently likely to be maintained (i.e., it is stable).
- (iii) A minimal state can be implemented.

Many anarchists would reject (i) were it not for the qualification that the undesirability of other options is undisputed. There is little disagreement among libertarians on the desirability of a minimal state if that policy outcome can be implemented and maintained. Feasibility arguments against the minimal state are thus directed at propositions (ii) and (iii). As before, I label these “policy stability” and “policy accessibility” arguments.

a) Policy stability

Many anarchists (and pessimistic libertarians) see the idea that government can be limited to anything close to the size and scope imagined by minarchists as entirely fanciful. David Friedman (1989, 146–47), for example, concedes that a seriously restricted government capable of providing national defense and other public goods might be preferable to anarchy, but insists that no such limited government is possible:

⁹ There are some related issues here about whether it’s worthwhile advocating anarchy even if it’s not a feasible option. In his contribution to the *Cato Unbound* conversation, Bruce Benson (2007) claims that having an ideal end-goal in mind is useful in structuring evaluations of incremental steps even if we think there is no chance of the goal ever being fully realized. We do not discuss these issues here.

One cannot simply build any imaginable characteristics into a government; governments have their own internal dynamic. And the internal dynamic of limited governments is something with which we, to our sorrow, have a good deal of practical experience. It took about 150 years, starting with a Bill of Rights that reserved to the states and the people all powers not explicitly delegated to the federal government, to produce a Supreme Court willing to rule that growing corn to feed to your own hogs is interstate commerce and can therefore be regulated by Congress.

The logic of limited governments is to grow. There are obvious reasons for this in the nature of government, and plenty of evidence. Constitutions provide, at the most, a modest and temporary restraint. As Murray Rothbard is supposedly said, the idea of a limited government that stays limited is truly Utopian. Anarchy at least might work; limited government has been tried.

Here we seem to have a social-imperfection or political-instability claim as discussed above combined with the claim that we cannot be certain that anarchy has similar problems. Thus, we have a claim similar to but subtly different in form from those presented above.

b) Policy accessibility

Anarchists have argued that a minimal state is inaccessible in at least two ways: such an outcome is very unlikely or no individual has the capacity to bring about such an outcome. These are very different views of feasibility. The former is not agent relative and is essentially a probability claim. The latter is agent relative and more in line with Brennan and Southwood's (2007, 10) conception of feasibility as a "reasonable probability of success conditional upon trying." Here, it is not enough that the relevant outcome occurs, but that the relevant individual plays a sufficient role in bringing the outcome about. Patri Friedman (2009) makes both types of claim in his *Cato Unbound* essay "Beyond Folk Activism." His probability claim is that "libertarians are a minority, and we underperform in elections, so winning electoral victories is a hopeless endeavor." Thus, given the current political context, a minimal state is extremely unlikely. Instead of working within the system, Friedman argues libertarians should find ways to "make systemic changes, outside entrenched power structures, that could realistically lead to a freer world." For Friedman, this involves efforts to escape the power of the state geographically or economically. Friedman and Taylor (2010 2012) expand on this argument from a public choice perspective, arguing that since a single vote has virtually no chance of deciding an electoral outcome and very few people are capable of making a significant impact through political campaigning, the expected return of political activism is higher when working

“outside the system” to undermine or sidestep government rather than attempting to influence policy.

6. Eliminating Feasibility

As we can see from the brief discussion above, anarchists and minarchists have deployed a number of different feasibility claims against one another in political argument. Some of these are agent relative, while others are not. Some concern the likely effects of a political outcome, others the accessibility or sustainability of an outcome. Rather than attempting to fit this diversity into a single formulation, I argue, we should take each argument on its own terms to determine whether its application of terms such as “feasibility” and “practicality” is covering for a lack of substantive argument.

The approach I take is the method of elimination. This was mentioned in passing by Richard Feynman (1969) as a way of determining whether an explanation of some phenomenon has been truly grasped. If an explanation using a scientific term such as “energy” or “gravity” cannot be rephrased in simpler language, then the explanation is a faulty one. Saying “Energy causes the car to move” does not mean anything unless the physical process through which this happens is to some sense understood in more basic terms. Chalmers (2011) introduces the method as a way of resolving philosophical disputes, and Bosworth (forthcoming) extends this to political argument. If there is disagreement on a proposition containing a vague term, the proposition should be capable of being rephrased until the vagueness is removed. If a political proposition cannot be rephrased once key terms are eliminated, this is proof of its nonsubstantiveness.

If an advocate of the minimal state accuses an anarchist of advocating the infeasible, we should demand that they rephrase their assertion in more basic terms. If they are making a meaningful statement, this should be possible. If they are unable to rephrase their statement without using vague terms such as “practical” or “feasible,” the method of elimination tells us to reject the proposition as empty rhetoric, at least until somebody does find an acceptable rephrase of the argument in question. A single round of elimination will not resolve all disagreement, of course, but as the process is repeated, vagueness is reduced and the real grounds of disagreement are laid bare.

Thus the claim that orderly anarchy is unstable must be rephrased as a claim that some specific state of affairs meets some (presumably comparative) threshold of probability conditional on some action or event. This does not resolve the disagreement, of course, but helps reveal its source. Do the participants disagree on what constitutes a reasonable standard of

feasibility or on the probabilities? If the former, we could have a disagreement on desirability rather than feasibility (e.g., on risk preference) or a merely verbal dispute. If a participant is unable to reformulate their argument in agreed-upon language, we either have a meaningless statement or an irreconcilable breakdown in political argument.

This is not to say that the use of terms such as “feasible” is completely off limits, only that anyone using them should be willing to rephrase in simpler terms if challenged. Many uses of the concept of feasibility remain useful. For example, Newhard (2016, 221) argues that “the emergence of a single stateless pocket of effective, privately provided defense for a ‘reasonable’ length of time is sufficient to affirm feasibility.” By defining “feasibility,” Newhard has in a sense pre-emptively eliminated it.¹⁰ However, not everyone would agree that this is an appropriate definition of “feasibility,” and this could lead to a debate over which definition better captures everyday usage or the relevant considerations for political argument. The method of elimination allows us to avoid this battle over definitions and instead focus on substantive differences in factual or normative judgements.

7. Conclusion

Feasibility is a crucial element of practical ethics and political theory, and I agree with theorists arguing that more precision and analytical rigor is required when making feasibility claims. I disagree, however, on the feasibility of constructing a general formulation of feasibility. As the above analysis has shown, feasibility claims take a variety of forms and are not easily reduced to a common formulation. Rather than defining “feasibility” as a general concept, I have argued that the term should be capable of being eliminated in political argument, with the claims deploying the concept rephrased in more basic terms agreed on by the parties to the argument.

For those engaged in debates over the feasibility of anarchy and the minimal state, this paper has outlined a useful tool for clarifying the source of disagreement and enforcing substantive argument rather than empty rhetoric or conceptual gerrymandering (Bosworth forthcoming; Dowding and Bosworth forthcoming). Anarchists and minarchists often talk past one another when using vague terms such as “practicality” and “utopian.” A willingness to eliminate such loose talk and rephrase in mutually agreeable

¹⁰ This definition remains vague, most obviously in what constitutes a reasonable length of time, and these terms may also be subject to elimination if they give rise to confusion or disagreement.

language can redirect argument to the real grounds of disagreement, which may be empirical or normative.

My claim that the term “feasibility” ought to be eliminated in certain circumstances should not be taken to mean that the concept is meaningless or unimportant. Rather, my claim is that, like the concept of desirability, it is too rich and contested to be adequately captured by a single conception precise enough to evaluate alternative policies or institutions. There are a number of concerns that can usefully be thrown in the feasibility bucket, and these are often closely related to one another. As the examples above have shown, however, there is no consensus even among libertarians on what policies and institutions count as feasible or infeasible. Arguments over definitions can obscure the real source of disagreement. To make progress, we should be willing to empty the bucket and consider the contents on their own terms.

References

- Benson, B. L. 2007. “Anarchical Policy Analysis.” *Cato Unbound*, August 17. <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2007/08/17/bruce-l-benson/anarchical-policy-analysis>.
- Bosworth, W. forthcoming. “An Interpretation of Political Argument, an Interpretation of Political Argument.” *European Journal of Political Theory*.
- Brennan, G. 2013. “Feasibility in Optimizing Ethics.” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 301–2, 314–29.
- Brennan, G., and J. M. Buchanan. 1985. *The Reason of Rules: Constitutional Political Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brennan, G., and N. Southwood. 2007. “Feasibility in Action and Attitude.” In *Hommage a Wlodek: Philosophical Papers Dedicated to Wlodek Rabinowicz*, edited by T. Ronnow-Rasmussen, B. Petersson, J. Jonefsson, and D. Egonsson. <http://www.fil.lu.se/hommageawlodek/index.htm>.
- Buchanan, J. M. 1975. *The Limits of Liberty: Between Anarchy and Leviathan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Buchanan, J. M. 1984. “Politics without Romance: A Sketch of Positive Public Choice Theory and Its Normative Implications.” In *The Theory of Public Choice II*, edited by J. M. Buchanan and R. D. Tollison, 11–22. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

- Buchanan, J. M. 2005. "Before Public Choice." In *Anarchy, State and Public Choice*, edited by E. Stringham, 77–87. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Caplan, B., and E. Stringham. 2003. "Networks, Law, and the Paradox of Cooperation." *Review of Austrian Economics* 164: 309–26.
- Chalmers, D. J. 2011. "Verbal Disputes." *Philosophical Review* 1204: 515–66.
- Cowen, T. 1992. "Law as a Public Good: The Economics of Anarchy." *Economics and Philosophy* 82: 249–67.
- Cowen, T., and D. Sutter. 1999. "The Costs of Cooperation." *Review of Austrian Economics* 122: 161–73.
- Cowen, T., and D. Sutter. 2005. "Conflict, Cooperation and Competition in Anarchy." *Review of Austrian Economics* 181: 109–15.
- Demsetz, H. 1969. "Information and Efficiency: Another Viewpoint." *Journal of Law and Economics* 121: 1–22.
- Doherty, B. 1995. "Best of Both Worlds: An Interview with Milton Friedman." *Reason*, June. <http://reason.com/archives/1995/06/01/best-of-both-worlds>.
- Dowding, K., and Bosworth, W. Forthcoming. "Ambiguity and Vagueness in Political Terminology: On Coding and Referential Imprecision." *European Journal of Political Theory*.
- Feynman, R. 1969. "What Is Science?" *Physics Teacher* 76: 313–20.
- Friedman, D. D. 1989. *The Machinery of Freedom: Guide to a Radical Capitalism*. 2nd ed. La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing.
- Friedman, M. 1962. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Friedman, 2009, April 6. "Beyond Folk Activism." *Cato Unbound*. <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/06/patri-friedman/beyond-folk-activism/>.
- Friedman, P., and B. R. Taylor. 2010. "Seasteading: Institutional Innovation on the Open Ocean." Presented at the Australasian Public Choice Society Conference, University of Canterbury.
- Friedman, P., and B. R. Taylor. 2012. "Seasteading: Competitive Governments on the Ocean." *Kyklos* 652: 218–35.
- Gilbert, P., and H. Lawford-Smith. 2012. "Political Feasibility: A Conceptual Exploration." *Political Studies* 604: 809–25.

- Hamlin, A. 2017. "Feasibility Four Ways." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 341: 209–31.
- Holcombe, R. G. 2004. "Government: Unnecessary but Inevitable." *Independent Review* 83: 325–42.
- Holcombe, Randall G. 2007. "Anarchy from a Policy Perspective." *Cato Unbound*, August 13. <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2007/08/13/randall-g-holcombe/anarchy-policy-perspective>.
- Lawford-Smith, H. 2013a. "Non-ideal Accessibility." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 163: 653–69.
- Lawford-Smith, H. 2013b. "Understanding Political Feasibility." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 213: 243–59.
- Leeson, T. 2007a. "Clarifying Matters." *Cato Unbound*, August 20. <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2007/08/20/peter-t-leeson/clarifying-matters>.
- Leeson, T. 2007b. "A Stock-Taking." *Cato Unbound*, August 21. <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2007/08/21/peter-t-leeson/stock-taking>.
- Munger, M. 2014. "Unicorn Governance." Foundation for Economic Education. <https://fee.org/articles/unicorn-governance/>.
- Newhard, J. M. 2016. "On the Conspicuous Absence of Private Defense." *Libertarian Papers* 82: 221–34.
- Nozick, R. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Raikka, J. 1998. "The Feasibility Condition in Political Theory." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 61: 27–40.
- Rand, A. 1964. *The Virtue of Selfishness*. New York: New American Library.
- Rothbard, M. N. 1973. *For a New Liberty*. New York: Macmillan.
- Southwood, N., and D. Wiens. 2016. "'Actual' Does Not Imply 'Feasible.'" *Philosophical Studies* 17311: 3037–60.
- Stringham, E. 2015. *Private Governance: Creating Order in Economic and Social Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stringham, E. 2007. "Introduction." In *Anarchy and the Law: The Political Economy of Choice*, edited by E. Stringham, 1–17. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Wiens, D. 2013. "Demands of Justice, Feasible Alternatives, and the Need for Causal Analysis." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 162: 325–38.

Wiens, D. 2015. "Political Ideals and the Feasibility Frontier." *Economics & Philosophy* 313: 447–77.

