
Book Section:
Steward, H orcid.org/0000-0003-1654-577X (2015) Helping It. In: Buckareff, A, Moya, C and Rosell, S, (eds.) Agency, Freedom and Moral Responsibility. Palgrave Macmillan , Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK , pp. 153-164. ISBN 978-1-137-41494-6

https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137414953_10

Helping It

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There is a long-standing debate[1] in the literature on moral responsibility about the general idea that there is some sort of control condition on our assignment of blameworthiness[2] to agents. On the one hand, it is asked how it could possibly be fair to blame an agent for something manifestly not under his control? Surely what is beyond our control is also not our fault? On the other hand, it is pointed out that there do seem to be numerous sorts of case in which we do in fact regard as blameworthy for certain things, agents who appear to lack the requisite kind of control. I may, for example, be excessively and disproportionately angry at some state of affairs, and since anger is generally involuntary, it might appear not to be the sort of state for which I could be expected to take the blame, if some sort of control principle is true. And yet we *do* often blame those who are excessively and disproportionately angry (see, for example, Adams 1985), even where they are entirely successful in controlling the expression of their anger in behaviour. We blame the unreasonable state of mind *itself,* where we know that it exists. We also blame those who forget things, who are careless and negligent, who become distracted, make foolish cognitive errors through lack of concentration, and so on, even though none of these kinds of behaviour is normally willed or chosen by the agent. In this paper, I do not take a view on the general question whether or not any version of this sort of control principle can ultimately be justified in the face of these and other sorts of examples. For all I shall say here, it may well be that no version will be found to be satisfactory in the end. What I want to try to do, rather, is to defend the claims of a very ordinary, everyday locution to offer, at any rate, a better means than many others which are often employed, of formulating a version of the control principle that stands some chance of being true.

The locution whose merits I intend to champion is the 'can't help it' locution, as used in sentences such as 'I can't help it', I couldn't help it', 'I can't help *that*', and so on. Because the locution is in a certain sense colloquial, I think it tends to be avoided in philosophical discussion when getting down to precise details – though it often appears in initial, stage-setting statements of the philosophical problems surrounding the issue of control and blame. But it soon gets replaced by something which is apparently regarded as more tidy or more precise – a Principle of Alternate Possibilities, for example, or a Principle of Avoidable Blame.[3] My claim here will be that none of these commonly utilized replacement locutions is able properly to express the sorts of things we can express by saying, for example, 'I couldn't help it'. Being able to help it, I shall argue, is a distinctive and important power, and for a number of significant reasons, no other way of saying what kind of control is needed for blameworthiness will do as well.[4]

I shall begin by looking at three alternative ways of attempting to capture what I shall call the Control Intuition and will concur with the opponents of these various strategies that certain sorts of examples reveal that they do not work. At the same time, though, I shall try to show that claims to the effect that the agent in question could (or couldn't) have helped it are aligned rather well with our moral intuitions in the difficult cases which make trouble for versions of the Control Intuition which are expressed in other terms. I shall then go on to try to explain some features of the 'couldn't help it' locution which I believe can help us understand some of its rather distinctive and interesting virtues.

(i) *The Principle of Alternate Possibilities*

One classic formulation of the Control Intuition is represented by what has often been called the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (Frankfurt, 1969). As formulated by Frankfurt, the principle states that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. Since I am here restricting myself to blameworthiness, let us consider it, for present purposes, to be the principle that a person is *blameworthy* for some wrong

s/he has committed only if s/he could have done otherwise. As is well known, Frankfurt believed himself to have shown by means of a counterexample that the Principle of Alternate Possibilities was false. Frankfurt imagined a situation in which a person, Jones, is said to be so positioned that if he does not undertake a certain action which he is contemplating, another agent will intervene and manipulate him into taking the action in any case. Usually, we are asked to imagine that this second agent has impressive powers to intervene immediately in Jones's neurophysiology, ensuring that, should he fail to take the wanted action of his own free will, it will be brought about (by this second agent) that he does so in any case. But suppose Jones does undertake the action – that he shoots the President, say – quite deliberately and of his own accord, owing to some powerful and nefarious motive. In that case, surely, Frankfurt argues, we would regard him as blameworthy for what he has done. After all, the counterfactual intervener did nothing but observe - everything else just happened as it would have happened without his presence. But Jones surely could not have done other than he did, given the presence of the counterfactual intervener. For example, he surely could not have done other than shoot the President. Here, then, it seems, our moral intuitions in the case are at variance with the Principle of Alternate Possibilities – we have a blameworthy agent who nevertheless could not have done other than φ, where φ-ing is the thing for which we regard him as blameworthy.

Do we, though, in addition, have an agent who *couldn't help* shooting the President? Perhaps in one sense we do. We have an agent, certainly, who couldn't have *avoided* shooting the President, and there is, I think, a reading of the claim that Jones couldn't help shooting the President on which it is simply equivalent to the claim that Jones couldn't have avoided doing what he did. But I maintain there is also another reading of this claim that Jones couldn't help shooting the President, a reading which positively forces itself upon us once one considers not the claim that Jones couldn't help shooting the President, as such, but rather the anaphorically formulated claim that Jones couldn't help *it*. It would be mighty strange, I think, to say of Jones, who in fact of course shoots the President calmly, coolly

and collectedly of his own free will – 'Oh,yes – Jones shot the President. But he couldn't help it. There was this counterfactual intervener guy around, you know ...'. The existence of the counterfactual intervener may make it the case that Jones couldn't have done other than shoot the President. But he does not, I want to suggest, make it the case that Jones couldn't help it, at any rate on the most natural and unforced reading of that claim.

It might be responded, of course, that it would be equally strange to say 'Oh yes, - Jones shot the President. But he couldn't have *done otherwise*. There was this counterfactual intervener guy around you know ...'. But I deny that it is equally strange. There is a certain oddness at the level of conversational implicature, perhaps – the 'but' suggests a context of excuse which, precisely because our moral intuitions do not support the claim that Jones can be let off the hook, might seem inappropriate in this case. This factor, I concede, is present in both contexts. But I want to suggest that beyond this, there is an additional and strictly semantic problem about the use of the claim that Jones couldn't help it, to convey the consequence of the counterfactual predicament he is in. The problem is that on what is quite clearly the dominant interpretation of this sentence, it is *false* (and not merely slightly unnatural, possibly misleading, and so on) under the circumstances described. I shall return later in the paper to try to explain further what, precisely, the claim that 'Jones couldn't help it' conveys and how exactly it differs from the claim that he couldn't have done otherwise. For now, I just want to point out that the claim that Jones could help it aligns correctly with our moral intuitions in the Frankfurt case.

(ii) *Sher's Control Principle*

Let us consider a second case, taken this time from Sher (2006). Sher says at the outset of this paper that he aims to argue that there are many everyday contexts in which we hold agents responsible for their acts 'even though considerations unrelated to determinism strongly suggest that they cannot help performing them.' (Sher 2006, p. 285). Sher then

proceeds to describe a number of cases which he thinks support his position. For present purposes, I shall simply focus on the first – a case that Sher calls 'Hot Dog':

> Alessandra, a soccer mom, has gone to pick up her children at their elementary school. As usual, Alessandra is accompanied by their family's border collie, Bathsheba, who rides in the back of the van. The pickup has never taken long, so although it is very hot, Alessandra leaves Sheba in the van while she goes to gather her children. This time, however, she is greeted by a tangled tale of misbehaviour, ill-considered punishment, and administrative bungling which requires several hours of indignant sorting out. During that time, Sheba languishes, forgotten, in the locked car. When Alessandra and her children finally make it to the parking lot, they find Sheba unconscious from heat prostration. (Sher, 2006, pp. 286-7).

Sher contends, and I agree, that we would certainly hold Alessandra responsible for the suffering of Sheba, though we might, of course, at the same time sympathize with her situation. I also agree with Sher that there is nothing voluntary about Alessandra's memory lapse. But I don't agree with Sher that it would be at all tempting to describe Alessandra's situation by saying that she couldn't help leaving the dog to suffer. If she had pleaded after the event that she couldn't help what had happened, we would be likely, I think, to give her short shrift. Not everything that we do not will, not everything that we do involuntarily, is well described as something that we couldn't help. Once again, the 'couldn't help it' locution, I maintain, aligns with our moral intuition – we think Alessandra *could* help it, even though her omission was involuntary.

Sher proceeds to argue that 'if we interpret 'X's wrong act was within his control' to imply that X either (a) chose to perform the act despite his awareness that he should not do so or (b) knowingly and wrongfully assumed the risk of performing such an act unwittingly,

then our examples show that we often take agents to be responsible for wrong acts that were not within their control.' (Sher 2006, p. 295). I agree with Sher that his examples do indeed show that on this interpretation of 'X's wrong act was within his control', it is possible to be blameworthy for something which was not within one's control. But that might argue as much for the inadequacy of the definition of control suggested by Sher as it does for the falsity of the Control Intuition itself. If we interpreted 'X's wrong act was within his control' to mean 'X's wrong act was something he could have helped', perhaps we would obtain a different verdict.

(iii) *Involuntary Sins*

For a final piece of evidence that the 'could have helped it' locution does better as a means of formulating the Control Intuition than some alternative locutions, I want to turn finally to consider an example offered by Adams (1985). The version of the Control Intuition with which Adams is concerned in this paper is what he calls the Principle of Voluntariness, and it says simply that 'we are ethically accountable only for voluntary actions and omissions'. (Adams 1985, p.3). Adams' paper delivers a sustained attack on this principle, seeking to show that we can be ethically accountable also for such things as morally objectionable states of mind. We can be blameworthy for such states of mind, he insists, even when it is not the case either now or in the past that there is any voluntary act or omission which led to our being in the state of mind in question, or any voluntary act or omission by means of which the state of mind in question is expressed. Suppose, for instance, to take one of Adams' rather brilliant examples, that I am unbearably self-righteous. I shall quote Adams' description of self-righteousness in all its glorious detail, so that it is clear what kind of situation he has in mind:

> It sometimes happens that two people sin approximately equally against each other although one of them offends greatly against the other in voluntary actions whereas the behavior of the second party is almost impeccable. The latter's offence is self-righteousness. He wants to be above the other person, to be in the right against the other person. The passion with which he clings to this superiority is what energizes all his wit and will-power to do his duty as he sees it – and to see his duty as he has done it. He thinks he would like the other to be a better person, but he would hate to lose his position of being in the right. He is more interested in that position than in friendship or the larger ends of morality. And of course something of this arrogant and self-centred attitude comes through to the other person with damaging effect. (Adams 1985, p.5)

In a case such as this, what would be the voluntary acts in virtue of which, by hypothesis of the version of the Control Intuition currently under consideration, we are to find the self-righteous agent blameworthy? As Adams notes, this self-righteous person is most careful to ensure that his overt behaviour is above reproach – that is part of the phenomenon he is attempting to describe. It is his attitude that is the problem, not anything that he does. One might point out, of course, that we are not necessarily saddled with our attitudes; we can be responsible for having allowed them to grow up in the first place, so that the natural move for a defender of the Control Intuition to make at this point is to insist on searching for *prior* voluntary acts or omissions in virtue of which the agent can be found to be guilty of having allowed himself to become self-righteous. But Adams claims that it seems implausible that there need have been particular voluntary actions or omissions of this kind in order that the agent count as blameworthy for his obsession with his own moral superiority. Another case discussed by Adams – the case of ingratitude – serves even more clearly to make his point. Adams imagines a case in which a person has been ungrateful to someone who has done a lot for him, perhaps at great cost to herself. Instead of responding appropriately with

appreciation, the person has made light of the sacrifices of this other person in his own mind - and indeed actually resents them, because he hates the feeling of indebtedness to others. Surely, says, Adams, this attitude is blameworthy, and yet it is very difficult to trace the blameworthiness to any voluntary act or voluntary omission:

> What have you left undone that you ought to have done? You have not begun sooner to struggle against this ingratitude. But it would not be correct to say that you have thereby voluntarily consented to the bad attitude. For voluntary consent, as ordinarily understood, implies knowledge; and you did not realize that you had a problem in this area. How then can you be blamed for not having fought against your ingratitude? ... You should have known of your ingratitude. Why didn't you? Presumably because you did not want to recognize any shameful truths about yourself ... And that's a sin too, though not a voluntary one. Thus the search for voluntary actions and omissions by which you may have caused your ingratitude keeps leading to other *in*voluntary sins that lie behind your past voluntary behaviour (Adams 2005, p.13).

Let us ask now, though, of our imagined ingrate, whether he *could have helped* his ungrateful attitude. This case is, I think, more difficult than those we have so far considered, since it seems to me this might be a question to which we might not really know the answer, simply from Adams' description of the case. Perhaps it may be that some of those suffering from conditions like the kind of resentful ingratitude that stems from the desire not to be indebted, really are basically stuck with those conditions, so that there is really nothing they could have done to alter the way they feel. Maybe they simply can't help feeling this way about those who attempt to help them. The best they may be able to do, realising the inappropriateness of the attitude, on reflection, is to prevent the ingratitude from showing. But I should want to say that if this were truly so, we ought not to regard the person as blameworthy for feeling resentful either; indeed, they are rather to be praised for their

attempts to prevent the ingratitude irrupting into action or behaviour. Only, I think, if I believed that the person could have helped having the ungrateful attitude would I be prepared to say that the person was blameworthy for feeling as she does. But I see no reason for thinking that there are not plenty of cases in which we would want to say of such an ungrateful person that he certain *could* help his ungrateful attitude – that there are things he might have done in the past, but did not do, to 'struggle against the ingratitude', as Adams put it. And if that were the case, I would be inclined to think the attitude blameworthy.

Having made our a preliminary case, then, for the idea that the claim that an agent could/couldn't have helped it aligns well – and much better than some commonly canvassed alternatives - with our moral intuitions in some of these difficult examples, I want now to turn to ask the question what the difference is, exactly, between being able to help something and some of the other powers and conditions in terms of which people have attempted to capture the Control Intuition.

(iv) *Explaining 'I couldn't help it'*

Let us begin with what I think is the easiest difference - that between having been able to help it and having voluntarily chosen or voluntarily omitted to choose to undertake some action or course of action which would have led to one's acting or feeling differently. It is important here to understand what Adams means by a 'voluntary omission'; for him, voluntariness implies knowledge and hence a voluntary omission only occurs in circumstances in which there is a kind of conscious acquiescence involved in the omission. Roughly speaking, then, the difference between having been able to help it and having voluntarily chosen or omitted to do something which would have changed things, is that to say with respect to some act (or state) that one couldn't help performing it (or being in it) does not require any *actual history* in which either a relevant voluntary choice or a relevant voluntary omission figures. Being able to help it is merely about having *had it in one's power* to make the changes in question – not about having considered the matter explicitly and

made the wrong decision. Of course, one could not have had it in one's power to change unless there had been some voluntary acts which one in fact undertook but need not have undertaken, or some possible voluntary acts that one in fact omitted to perform, but need not have omitted to perform, which would have wrought the change in question. But one's omissions needn't themselves have been voluntary, in Adams' sense, for this latter possibility to hold true. It only has to be the case that one has in fact omitted something one needn't have omitted for it to be false that one couldn't help it.

Suppose, for instance, that if I'd taken advantage of some psychotherapy that I could easily have afforded, I would have acquired some important self-knowledge as a result of which I wouldn't any longer be my unbearably self-righteous self. I didn't exactly voluntarily omit the psychotherapy; let's suppose that the idea that I might need psychotherapy hasn't ever crossed my mind, though perhaps it should have done. Nevertheless, it's not true that I can't help being self-righteous. There are things I could have done, paths I could have taken, but didn't take, which would have led to greater self-knowledge and to the end of my self-righteous smugness. The availability of these paths is enough, I claim, to make it the case that I can help being self-righteous. But it is not enough to make it the case that I voluntarily did or omitted to do something which would have helped me avoid self-righteousness. I certainly omitted to do something I could have done – but the omission needn't be voluntary in the strong sense that I have at any point consciously acquiesced in its occurrence. It needs to be voluntary only in the much weaker sense that no person or set of circumstances actually prevented me from taking the path which would have led to my moral betterment. I could have taken that path. I didn't. Hence, I could have helped it.

What cases of this sort show, I think, is that the 'could have helped it' condition is comparatively weak. It does not involve the insistence that one must at any point have actively considered and rejected the alternative that would have led to a better result. One simply needs for it to have been in one's power to do so. And moreover one need not actually have the knowledge that would have made the relevant consideration of the

appropriate pathway seem sensible, provided that one *could* have obtained this knowledge by, for instance, careful reflection, wide reading or conversation with others. Provided the knowledge was available to be gleaned somehow by means that are at one's disposal, and that one is intelligent enough to comprehend it, one could have helped one's ignorance.

Let us return now, to Alessandra and Bathsheba. Here again, although there is no voluntary omission on the part of Alessandra, there is a failure to remember the dog in the car that we believe it was in Alessandra's power to avoid. Once again, the omission is not voluntary in any strong sense – and moreover, it is highly understandable, given the distractions Alessandra faced. But it surely isn't true that Alessandra couldn't help forgetting the dog. When we are in charge of the lives of other creatures we ought to take especial care to remember their needs and we are in fact usually able to do so when we are sufficiently careful. Thus, however understandable it may be that Alessandra became distracted by the events at the soccer game, and however sympathetic and inclined to excuse her we may be, she has still failed to do something which she could have done – that is to say, to prioritize and focus on the animal in her care sufficiently to ensure that she was not forgotten. That is what it means to say that she could have helped it, and once again, we see that the condition is weak and very easily met.

What about Frankfurt-style cases? I said earlier that I thought it would be false, on what is the dominant interpretation of this claim, to say of Jones, who shoots the President deliberately and entirely of his own accord, that he couldn't help it, although it is true that he couldn't have done other than shoot the President. But what exactly is the difference between these two locutions, and how are we to understand their semantics, if the intuitive contrast I am trying to insist upon here is to be shored up by some theoretical underpinnings?

A good place to start is by asking what, if anything, the pronoun 'it' refers to, in the sentence 'Jones couldn't help it?', in the context of the Frankfurt case. One possibility is that it refers simply to the act-type 'shooting the President' – for we can, of course, say 'Jones

couldn't help shooting the President' as well as 'Jones couldn't help it'. And it might then be said that since Jones couldn't avoid performing an act of the type 'shooting the President', given the presence of the counterfactual intervener, that it ought to be true also that he couldn't help doing so. As I have already said, I accept, in fact, that there is a reading of the sentence 'Jones couldn't help shooting the President' such that it is indeed true in the Frankfurt-style situation. But I claim that this is only a recessive reading of the anaphoric claim that Jones couldn't help it – and that the dominant reading is not equivalent to the claim that 'Jones could not have avoided performing an act of the 'shooting the President' type'.

What then *is* the dominant reading? On the dominant reading, I think, we have to interpret the 'it' differently. It is not the act-type of Jones shooting the President which is the thing Jones is said not to be able to help – it is rather the particular act itself by means of which the shooting is accomplished. It is the act that it is claimed could not be helped, the individual shooting. Such a claim would be acceptable in circumstances in which, for example, Jones is overwhelmed by a powerful impulse which overtakes him, or in which he is unable to prevent a spasm in his finger at the crucial moment, having lined the President up in his sights for a joke. But it does not seem to be acceptable at all in circumstances in which Jones shoots the President quite deliberately, for reasons of his own. And it is because the dominant reading concerns the individual act that the claim that Jones couldn't help it is not undermined at all by the existence of the counterfactual intervener. That Jones couldn't have avoided shooting the President can be true quite compatibly with its being the case that the actual shooting was a shooting Jones could help.

Can the dominant reading of 'S couldn't help it' really concern individual acts – given that there is no explicit reference to any such act in a sentence of the form 'S φ-ed'? In support of this claim, it might be pointed out that for other reasons, we need to accept that anaphoric 'it' is often susceptible of a type/token ambiguity of this sort. Take, for example, the following sentences:

(i) Jones shot the President. It was a terrible thing to do.

(ii) Jones shot the President. Smith saw it.

In the first of these sentences, it seems plausible that what was a terrible thing to do was *to shoot the* President; that is, that it is a *type* of act that is being characterized as terrible. But in the second, it appears that the 'it' must refer to the individual shooting in which Jones engaged if we are to make sense of the thought that the 'it' was something that Smith *saw*.[5] My suggestion is that the 'it' of 'S couldn't help it' is likewise susceptible of a similar ambiguity and that very often, when we claim that someone couldn't help it, what we mean to say is that the actual φ-ing in which they engaged was out of their control in some way – that, for example, they were overcome by an irresistible desire – or more often, perhaps, that the φ-ing was not an intentional action at all, as when one gives way to uncontrollable laughter or knocks someone over as one stumbles accidentally oneself. But nothing like this applies to agents in Frankfurt-style scenarios. Their individual acts those Frankfurtian agents performed are such that they could have been helped.

In this paper, then, I have tried to suggest that the 'couldn't help it' locution is a better candidate than many others that have been proposed for successful formulation of the Control Intuition. Of course, the basic claim that an agent is blameworthy for φ-ing only if she could have helped it is unacceptable as it stands – it requires the same sorts of qualifications and amendments as have always been found necessary in the case of other formulations of the Control Intuition. For instance, a person who cannot help crashing his car at a given time *t* because he has drunk so much that his reactions are too slow to avert the disaster can still be blameworthy in virtue of the fact that he could have helped getting into the car in a drunken state in the first place. Being able to help something, then, will need to be a matter not just of powers available to one at the time of action; one may have been able to help something in virtue only of powers available at some considerably earlier time. But once such qualifications and amendments are in place, I believe the 'could have helped it' locution

is the best means we have of formulating the Control Intuition. It both dissociates control from the strong conception of voluntary omission, and also locates it as a capacity which relates specifically to an *individual* exercise of active power, not to a type of action. For both these reasons, it is a locution whose merits we ought to take seriously, despite its colloquial feel.

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NOTES

[1] A by no means comprehensive list of contributions to this wide-ranging debate might include, for example: Chisholm 1964; Frankfurt 1969; Dennett 1973, 1984; Wiggins 1973; Fischer 1982, 1994; Van Inwagen 1983; Watson 1987; Wolf 1990; Ginet 1990; Kane 1996; O'Connor 2000.

[2] Some also think a similar principle holds in the case of praiseworthiness, but there is more controversy here (see, for example, Wolf 1990; Nelkin 2011). For simplicity's sake, therefore, I consider only blameworthiness here.

[3] I do not here discuss Otsuka's (1998) Principle of Avoidable Blame in any detail. In some respects, this is a grave omission, because in many ways, the Principle of Avoidable Blame shares certain important virtues with the approach I shall recommend – but I regard it as a principle that in one important respect fails to meet a desideratum that my own suggestion

fulfils. The Principle of Avoidable Blame says that 'One is blameworthy for performing an act of a given type only if one could instead have behaved in a manner for which one would have been entirely blameless' (Otsuka 1998, p.688). It is therefore a principle whose control condition for blameworthiness is itself formulated in *moral* terms. Whereas I think many have hoped to discover a version of the control condition which is, as it were, purely metaphysical, and which makes no use of moral notions.

[4] I am reliably informed by native speakers of a number of languages that it is not always easy to translate the 'couldn't help it' locution, except by means of the sorts of phrases (such as 'couldn't have done otherwise') from which I have here sought to differentiate it. But the expressive powers of different languages can differ in respect of various subject matters, structurally encoded semantic information, and so on. It therefore does not really seem to me to be a serious objection to the view I defend here that not all languages have a colloquial phrase that will do the same job, precisely, as 'I couldn't help it' and its relatives. It is only evidence that English here possesses a certain expressive advantage over those other languages.

[5] See Higginbotham (1983) for some reflections on how to understand the anaphoric reference contained in such perceptual reports.