

## TRYING THE IMPOSSIBLE: REPLY TO ADAMS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper defends the autonomy thesis, which holds that one can intend to do something even though one believes it to be impossible, against attacks by Fred Adams. Adams denies the autonomy thesis on the grounds that it cannot, but must, explain what makes a particular trying, a trying for the aim it has in view. If the autonomy thesis were true, it seems that I could try to fly across the Atlantic ocean merely by typing out this abstract, a palpable absurdity. If we deny the autonomy thesis, we have an easy explanation: one simply cannot try to do something which one believes to be impossible. In response, I argue, first, by means of examples, that one clearly can try and intend to do what one believes to be impossible; and then I show how we can provide an answer to Adams's challenge even so.

**I**

begin with an example.

In "The Ledge," Lawrence Sargent Hall describes a Christmas day hunting trip off the coast of Maine.<sup>1</sup> A self-reliant fisherman takes his son and nephew, with their dog, and their new rifles, duck hunting to Devil's Hump, a rocky ledge off the coast, which emerges from the water for five hours centered around low tide. They anchor their boat at a nearby island, and take a skiff the three hundred yards to Devil's Hump. In the waning day they discover that their skiff, not pulled far enough up on the ledge after their last trip to collect ducks they had shot from the waters around the ledge, has slid off into the water and been pulled far away by the tide toward the shore. They exhaust their ammunition in periodic volleys to attract attention, without effect. In the dark evening, as the tide begins to cover the ledge, the fisherman, gathering his son and nephew to him, lifting the dog under his arm, wedges his feet and legs into a crevice in the rock.

When the waves reached his knees the fisherman set the warm dog loose and said to his son, "Turn around and get up on my shoulders." The boy

obeyed. The fisherman opened his oilskin jacket and twisted his hands behind him through his suspenders, clamping the boy's booted ankles with his elbows. ...

He ground his teeth and braced like a colossus against the sides of the submerged crevice. ...

From his thighs upward the fisherman stretched to his utmost as a man does whose spirit reaches out of dead sleep. The boy's head, none too high, must be at least seven feet above the ledge. Though growing larger every minute, it was a small light life. The fisherman meant to hold it there, if need be, through a thousand tides.

By and by the boy, slumped on the head of his father, asked, "Is it over your boots, Dad?" "Not yet," the fisherman said. Then through his teeth he added, "If I fall — kick your boots off — swim for it — downwind — to the island...."

"You...?" the boy finally asked.

The fisherman nodded against the boy's belly. "— Won't see each other," he said.

The boy did for the fisherman the greatest thing that can be done. He may have been too young for perfect terror, but he was old enough to know there were things beyond the power of any man. All he could do he did, trusting his father to do all he could, and asking nothing more.<sup>2</sup>

I take as my starting point our reactions to descriptions such as this. What was the fisherman trying to do? What did he intend? He meant to hold his son's head above the water, "if need be, through a thousand tides." Did he believe that he could do this? Did he believe that he would live, or that his son would live? Part of the tragic heroism of the fisherman in the story lies in his knowledge that he could not do this; that both he and his son would die of drowning in the frigid waters of the ocean. If he had believed his efforts could be successful, he would not be heroic, but foolish. 'Perhaps, then, he did not intend or try to save his son's life, but was only going through the motions, or perhaps only meant to preserve it as long as possible.' He did not try to save his son's life! He did not intend to save it! Could he not try to save his son's life, though he had no hope of success? There was nothing that meant more to him than this end. To fail to try, to strain every fibre of his body, would have been ignoble, a failure to act out of the great love that he felt for his child. 'He must have deluded himself, then. He must have thought that he could hold his son's head above the water through the long night.' But this is again to make him out to be a fool. 'Was he, then, perhaps, simply irrational?' *Irrational?* No. Surely the rational man does not have to await his fate passively. These revisionary accounts of this tale of stoic heroism ring false.

Our aim, as I see it, is to explain the possibility we recognize in this story, not to explain it away. In this, there is a fundamental methodological difference between Adams and me. Adams begins with a theory which he urges on us

because of its simplicity. Wayward examples he redescribes so that they do not conflict with his theory. I begin with our intuitions about the application of the concepts we wish to understand, and construct a theory to conform to them. Intuitions are defeasible, and can yield to theoretical considerations. If it turned out that admitting the possibility of trying or intending, when one believes what one intends or tries to do is impossible, made it impossible to give a coherent theory of human agency, then we would be forced to return to our examples, and to reexamine our intuitions. I don't think that the case for this has been made.

The theoretical question that drives Adams's objection is this. A trying is always a trying to do something: What makes a particular instance of trying to lift a cup of coffee a trying to do that particular thing? One is tempted to say that it is that it was caused (in the right way) by an intention to do that particular thing. In this case, the question of whether believing that one can lift a cup of coffee is necessary for trying simply reduces to the question whether it is necessary for intending. But there is no parallel difficulty about how the intention gets the content that it has. It gets it from the agent's desire for the end in view. So if this response were open to me, Adams's objection would be easily met. But this response does not (entirely) meet the difficulty, and in this lies one of the most interesting aspects of the present dispute.

Let us take an example. I believe that you have made rash (even absurd) assertions about my athletic prowess. You tell me you are confident that I can hit a softball over 50 meters. I know myself to be a sedentary office worker who has never played softball, and I genuinely believe that that would be something beyond my physical capabilities. You taunt me, telling me you *know* that I can do it *if* I will only try. Fed up, I aim to show you that even if I try as hard as I can to hit a softball 50 meters, I cannot do it. You toss me a soft pitch, and I take a mighty swing, and, lo and behold, the ball sails a good 55 meters. The story has me trying and succeeding in hitting a softball over 50 meters. On repeating the trial we find I can do this consistently. It was not an accident. Thus, I tried and intentionally hit a softball over 50 meters despite believing it to be beyond my capabilities, and, according to the Simple View,<sup>3</sup> it follows that I intended to hit the ball over 50 meters while believing it to be impossible for me to do so.

But suppose that as I had stepped up to the plate, instead of taking a mighty swing with the bat, I had merely held it over the plate. Would this have constituted trying to hit the ball over 50 meters? No. So even if the ball had struck the bat and flown over 50 meters, I would not have tried or succeeded in hitting the ball over 50 meters. Why does the mighty swing count as a trying and not merely holding the bat over the plate? Suppose we grant for the moment that I can intend to hit the softball over 50 meters despite believing it to be impossible. It is still the case that I cannot conceive of simply firmly grasping the bat and making as if to bunt as trying to hit the ball over 50 meters. Thus, we cannot answer Adams's question of what makes an activity a trying for a certain end

simply by saying that it is the presence of an intention to carry out that end — or that it was an activity caused in the right way by that intention, for we want to know when that can occur.

Adams's answer to this question is that a certain kind of activity counts as trying to *A* provided that (a) one intends to *A*, (b) one's intention causes one's activity (in the right way), and (c) one lacks the belief that it has no chance of bringing about *A*. His challenge to my position is to provide a plausible alternative criterion for distinguishing between activities that can be conceived of as tryings to do a certain thing and those that cannot.

Before turning to the defense of my own, alternative answer, it should be noted that it is not clear that Adams's own account gives sufficient conditions. Is lacking the belief that a certain activity can't bring about a certain end sufficient, together with the other necessary conditions? Supposing I intend to hit a ball 50 meters, and lack the belief that holding my bat out horizontally over the plate has no chance of achieving my goal. Could I do this and be trying to hit a ball 50 meters? It seems unlikely. This would not even be halfhearted trying. Lacking a belief about the impossibility of a certain activity bringing about a certain end doesn't fulfill the conditions required for it to count as trying to do that thing. One must have some positive cognitive attitude directed toward the activity, not merely the absence of some cognitive attitude. Suppose we strengthen Adams's account to require believing that one's activity has some *chance* of bringing about one's end. Is this enough? No, because even if I believe holding the bat above the plate may result (though I believe it very unlikely) in the ball being hit over 50 meters, this would not constitute my trying to hit it over 50 meters. So Adams's suggestion for what divides activities which can count as trying to do a certain thing from those which can't is insufficient, and its most natural extension is no improvement. Thus, the question he raises is one to which he has so far given no adequate answer.

What I need to show, however, to defend my position, is that the conditions he gives are not necessary conditions. Before doing this, return to our example above, for it is important to appreciate just why it is so powerful. What you have challenged me to do is to show you that I cannot do something *even if I try as hard as I can to do it*. It is built into this challenge that I try to hit the ball over 50 meters. On Adams's view, it would be impossible for me to take up that challenge, if I really believed that I was not capable of hitting the ball over 50 meters. Nothing less than actually trying (e.g., going through the motions) would be adequate. I think it is obvious that I can take up this challenge. Thus, I must be able to try to do something without believing it to be possible, and, in fact, while believing it to be impossible. The only reason it can seem puzzling that one can intend and try to do something one believes to be impossible is that generally the point of intending and trying is derived from the successful carrying out of the intention. This is a pragmatic, not a conceptual connection, however. The examples I give exploit the possibility of having reasons for intending and trying to do something other than one's chances of success.

My answer to the question what makes a certain activity of an agent the kind of activity which could be a trying to achieve a certain end for that agent is that he conceives of it as designed to bring about that end. This seems right so far as it goes. A mighty swing with the bat at a 45 degree angle I conceive of as designed to hit the ball over 50 meters, but not a feeble swat. Still, the criterion is not very helpful. As Adams's examples bring out, more needs to be said about the conditions under which one can conceive of an activity as designed to bring about a certain end.

Let us begin by distinguishing between type and token activities. My claim is that certain types of activities, relative to certain kinds of circumstance, and given adequate motivation, can be conceived of as designed to bring about certain ends. A particular token of that type may on occasion not be able to bring about that end, but it counts as designed to bring about that end in virtue of its being an instance of the type so conceived.

Here is an analogy to make it plausible that our conception of tryings may have a structure of this type. Consider the application of artifact terms, such as "hammer," or "door," or "wrench." Something counts as a wrench in virtue of having been built and designed to perform a certain function. A good wrench is a wrench that does its job well. But not every wrench does its job well, and some may be unable to do their job at all, because they are poorly made, or in some way flawed. Such a wrench we call a defective one. Why does it count as a wrench at all? Because it is a member of a class of objects which clearly are designed for a certain end, and its failure to be able to do that job is explained by the fact that it has certain specifiable defects, the removal of which we recognize would enable it to perform its function. Of course, not anything can count as a defective wrench. If in the manufacturing process the bit of steel meant for a wrench comes out as a sphere, or a rod, what we have isn't a defective wrench because it isn't a wrench. A defective wrench must be *close enough* to being a non-defective wrench in order to count as a wrench at all. How close? There doesn't have to be a precise answer to this question in order for there to be a distinction between objects which aren't wrenches and objects that are defective wrenches. For convenience, let me put this in terms of possible worlds. Suppose we have a clear conception of a good wrench, one which does its job just as it is supposed to. We can say something is a wrench provided that it is a good wrench in a "close enough" world to the actual world. For the purposes of evaluating wrenches, one world *A* is closer to the actual world with respect to a particular wrench than another *B* just in case one can, as it were, arrive at *A* by fewer changes of a given magnitude to the wrench than *B*.

I suggest that we find a similar structure in our thinking about what activities count as tryings for certain ends. Here, however, what matters is not how the world actually is, but how the agent believes the world to be; for Adams and I agree that one can try to do something when it is impossible, provided that one *thinks* (though falsely) that it is possible. So we must think of the world with respect to which we ask whether a given activity is a trying as the notional

world of the agent whose activity we want to evaluate. To turn to an example, turning the key in the ignition of my car I conceive of as designed to start it (it's what I usually do, and I have an idea of how it works). Sometimes, I recognize, the activity may be defective for some specific reason. I may think that the battery is dead or that the charge is too low for it to turn the starter. If I think the charge too low to start the car, my turning the ignition can still count as trying to start the car, given that I have some reason to try. For the world in which that activity would achieve its aim is close enough to my notional world for that to count as trying to start the car. If I think the car has no battery, or no battery and no starter, or no engine, then perhaps I cannot think of turning the key as trying to start the car no matter how well motivated I am to try to start the car: the world in which turning the key starts the car is too far away from my notional world. Similarly, my taking a mighty swing with the bat counts as my trying to hit the ball over 50 meters. The world in which that activity is successful is close enough to my notional world for that activity to count as trying, even though in my notional world it has no chance of success. My simply holding the bat over the plate does not, because the world in which that activity succeeds in hitting the ball 50 meters is not close enough to my notional world.

So much for the general picture. Now let me turn to a diagnosis of the examples that Adams gives to try to undermine it. Here, I think, there is not one thing that goes wrong with them, but an interesting variety of things. In diagnosing them, we will find at least one important principle which guides our intuitions about what sorts of activities can count as tryings for certain ends, a sufficient condition for an activity's success to be too far away.

First case. I design a device that can be attached to my car and which will start it when I whistle nearby. But I do not build it, and I suppose no one else has had the idea. Can I conceive of my whistling now as trying to start the car? No, Adams says, and I agree. Why not? The answer here is instructive. It is not simply that such a world is too far away, though I think that is part of the problem. There is also another, more specific problem. Contrast this case with one in which I have rigged up the device, but think the battery of my car dead or nearly enough so as to make starting the car impossible. You tell me the battery isn't dead, and I can start the car. To show you wrong, I whistle to try to start it, knowing I will fail. There are two differences between this case and the former one. First, a world in which my activity succeeds in starting the car is nearer than in the former case. But also, and more importantly, in the latter case I have a *reason* to try to start the car by whistling, to show you that I can't, while in the former case I have *no reason* to do so. Even if I had a reason to start the car, this would give me no reason to whistle, because I think I can't thereby start the car. In this case, I can't whistle to try to start the car because that would require me to undertake an activity for which I could find no motivation. I might whistle, but I can't whistle in order to start the car, because that would require me to form the intention to start the car by whistling, and that I can do only if I have a reason to try to start the car by whistling. So this

is not a counterexample to my claim, for I never claimed that one could rationally try to do something while believing it impossible *and* having no reason to try. As I noted above, my examples exploit the possibility of having a reason to try not based on the possibility of success.

Next case. My right arm has been severed in a farm accident. You ask me to *try to move my right arm in the usual way*. Twitching the stump of my arm would not count as trying to move it in the usual way. Nothing I could do would count. Why not? Here the difficulty, curiously, has nothing to do with the closeness of worlds in which I succeed. It is that the claim that I have tried to move my right arm in the usual way can't be true, no matter how I twitch the stump of my arm, because it has a false presupposition, namely, that *I have an attached right arm*. Even if I believed that my arm were reattached and that I would experience no difficulty in moving it, nothing I could do would count as trying to move my (attached) right arm in the usual way. This shows that the presence or absence of the belief is irrelevant to our intuitions here. In contrast, no such difficulty is present if my arm has not been severed, but merely suffered nerve damage; in this case, even if I believe it impossible to succeed, if I nonetheless have a reason to try to move my right arm, I may try to do so. Here, my trying to move it entails no falsehood.

Next case. I want to end world hunger. I complacently make coffee in my kitchen. I cannot conceive of this as my trying to end world hunger. A sufficient reason is that I have no reason to try. So this case is just like the case of whistling to start my car when I have no reason to. But let us modify the example, for it can be put to better use. Suppose I've been challenged to try, at least, to end world hunger, and this gives me a reason to try even in the absence of the hope of success. Still, making coffee doesn't count. Why not? In this case, it is because a world in which making coffee had this effect is not near enough my notional world for my making coffee to count as trying. Suppose instead I send \$30.00 to UNICEF. I do not believe that my sending \$30.00 will succeed in ending world hunger, or that, given the distance of these events from most people, whose cooperation would be required for success, there is any chance of my action bringing about the end of world hunger. But my sending \$30.00 to UNICEF counts as my trying to end world hunger, because the world in which this action succeeds is close enough, and much closer than any world in which my making coffee in my kitchen has the same effect.

This last case illustrates an important principle that governs what we can conceive of as trying to bring about a certain end. Other things being equal (e.g., one has no reasons to avoid certain means of achieving one's ends, an aversion to murder, for instance), one must take (what one believes to be) the most effective means available to one to achieve one's end. We can call this the least resistance principle. *A* is a trying to *B* only if it is conceived by the agent to be the path of least resistance to his end, where that end is in some doubt (when success is virtually guaranteed, small differences in probability are insignificant). This is a reflection of a sincerity condition on trying. To try one must intend, which is a commitment to achieving a certain end. One is not

really committed unless one is committed to taking the most effective means (within certain constraints) to one's end, where there is some significant chance of failure and a significant difference in the means to the end available to one. Thus, in general, when I believe  $A$  and  $A'$  to be in my power, intend to  $B$ , and believe that  $P(B/A) \gg P(B/A')$ , I cannot conceive of my undertaking  $A'$  as trying to  $B$ . (Example: I am due to give a lecture in 30 minutes, and I intend to be there on time. I have a choice of setting out to the campus on foot or in my car. Perhaps I can run the distance in under 30 minutes, though there is some danger I'll collapse from fatigue; driving will surely get me there in time. If I set out on foot, I am not trying to get there on time; this would, on the contrary, be evidence that I was trying to avoid getting there on time, while maintaining the appearance of aiming to.) This same principle, I think, applies to one's options even in cases in which one believes one has no chance of success in the actual world on any of the options open to one. One can't conceive of a given activity  $A$  as trying to  $B$  if there is another activity  $A'$  one can undertake which is successful in a (significantly) nearer world than any world in which  $A$  is successful in bringing about  $B$ . Thus, a world in which a mighty swing hits the ball over 50 meters is much nearer than one in which holding the bat as if to bunt hits the ball over 50 meters. What this last example of Adams's exploits, as modified to give me a reason to try to end world hunger, is this principle of least resistance. He chooses an activity for which there is an alternative which could succeed in a closer world to the agent's notional world than the activity he considers. Thus, we can say that a world is not close enough to one's notional world for an activity to count as trying if another world in which an activity open to one succeeds is significantly nearer.

I doubt that my response will satisfy Adams. The resulting picture is not a simple one, and does not promise to have a sharp informative set of necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as a trying though it is thought of as having no chance of success, any more than there is a sharp informative set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a wrench. But there is no shoehorn that will fit our concepts into a theory not made for them. Our first responsibility is to our data, our intuitions about cases. I agree with Adams that what we want is a simple view, but we do not want an overly simple view, one that does not accommodate the richness of our conception of human agency.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Reprinted in *The Best Short Stories of the Modern Age* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1962), pp. 318-34. Originally published in *The Hudson Review*.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 332-34.

<sup>3</sup>This is Michael Bratman's label for the view that if one intentionally  $A$ 's, then one intended to  $A$ . See his "Two Faces of Intention," *Philosophical Review*, vol. 93 (July 1984), pp. 375-406.