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Omissions, Absences and Causation

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Abstract

Many philosophers believe that the omission of an act or that the absence of a cause can be causally efficacious; that they can genuinely produce effects or be the result of a cause. I think this view is mistaken. In this article, I will try to show that since omissions are not actions, they cannot be events. I will then argue that the most plausible account of causation available is one where causation is a relation between events. This would rule out the possibility of both omissions and absences to have any causal efficacy. The mistaken intuition behind the idea that omissions and absences can be causes or effects is mind-related, i.e. *they depend on what we usually expect from events around us. Causation, on the other hand, should have nothing to do with what we expect.*

Consider the three following claims:
(1) Causation is a physical relation between events.
(2) Absences (and therefore omissions) are not events.
(3) Absences (and therefore omissions) can be causes or effects.

There is an obvious tension between those claims. Claims (1) and (2) together lead us directly to the conclusion that absences cannot be causes or effects, thereby contradicting claim (3); thus, at least one of these claims must be false. Yet, they may all, intuitively, appear to be true. The first claim is widely held to be true – at least implicitly – by scientists, while also being quite intuitive. The second claim is not obviously true but, as we will see, it seems to follow from the very meaning of "absence" or "omission". The third claim seems to be implied by much of our everyday usage of the concepts of omissions

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and causation. We even tend to hold people legally and morally responsible for their omissions. In the following, assuming that all actions are events, I will try to show that omissions cannot be actions because they are not events. This would therefore mean that (2) is true. I will then try to show that (1) is more plausible than alternative accounts of causation and argue that (3) must be rejected. But first, some preliminary distinctions are in order.

Omissions come in different "flavors". Aaron can unintentionally fail to pay off his debts because he does not have enough money to do so. Bob can refrain from eating a second slice of cake because he is trying to lose weight. Claire can allow her teenage daughter to take the car for the night. All these examples involve what we may call "negative causation"; *i.e.* cases where the absence of an action seems to cause an event. Aaron's *non-payment* seems to have been caused by his *not* having enough money. Bob's trying to lose weight seems to have caused the *absence* of the event consisting in Bob having a second slice of cake. As for Claire, it seems to be her *not* preventing her daughter from taking the car that causes the ensuing event. Claire does not have to actually do anything in order to allow her daughter to leave with the car (they might have a prior agreement stating that her daughter can borrow the car unless Claire clearly tells her otherwise). Prevention is a close relative of omission in that it also seems to require negative causation. For instance, Diana may prevent the cat from coming in by closing the door. Diana's closing the door causes the absence of the event consisting in the cat coming in.

Aaron's case is one of unintentional omission. Aaron does not need to do anything in order to omit to pay his debts – there need be no positive action for the omission to take place. The omission is, of course, unintentional, because in this case, Aaron did not intend to omit to pay his debts. Notice that the focus here is on the absence of *action*; what Aaron is omitting is what he should have *done*. Bob's case is one of intentional omission, or refraining. As is the case with Aaron, it seems that Bob does not need to do anything in order to refrain from taking another slice[1], but as opposed to Aaron, Bob does so intentionally. Similarly to Aaron's case though, we are focusing here on the action: Bob refrains from *having another slice*.

[1] This may not be entirely obvious but I will come back to this point in the next section. We will just assume that it is so for now.

Just like Aaron and Bob, Claire does not have to do anything in order to allow her daughter to take the car. But notice that her allowing can either be intentional or unintentional. If it is intentional, then it seems to be a case of refraining: she refrains from preventing her daughter from taking the car. If it is unintentional, then it would seem to be an unintentional omission Omissions, Absences and Causation: she unintentionally omitted to prevent her daughter from taking the car. What distinguishes allowing from the two other types is, I believe, merely the object we are focusing on. When we say that Claire allowed her daughter to take the car, we are not focusing on Claire's action – or lack thereof – but on its result: her daughter taking the car.

The same is true in cases of prevention like Diana's. There are many ways in which Diana could have prevented the cat from coming in, apart from closing the door. By saying that Diana prevented the cat from coming in, we are not focusing on what she actually did in order to do so. The focus is rather on the result: the cat not coming in. But in contrast to Aaron, Bob and Claire, Diana's preventing is a positive action; it is its effect that is an absence: the cat did *not* come in[2].

Since allowing is not genuinely different from unintentionally omitting or refraining, we will not be concerned with it here. Also, since preventing is not a case of omission, I will come back to this issue later when absences in general are discussed. This means that, for now, I will focus the discussion around unintentionally omitting and refraining.

1. Are omissions actions?

According to the standard account laid out by Davidson, for an action to occur, it must at the very least be caused by some desire (Davidson talks of "pro-attitudes") and some relevant belief[3]. This

[2] Notice that the first two categories – unintentional omission and refraining – can also result in absences. My unintentional omission to mail the letter resulted in my niece not receiving it in time for her birthday; and my refraining from smoking resulted in my not contracting lung cancer. Aaron's omission also incidentally results in an absence.

[3] Davidson, D. (1963), *Essays on Actions and Events*. See especially chapter 1.

seems to rule out the possibility of unintentional omissions being actions of any kind. By definition, an *unintentional* omission cannot be the result of an intentional state. It is clear that if I omit to feed the cat at five because I am stuck in traffic, there is no desire of mine that causes this very omission. Whether I desire to feed the cat or not, it is still true that I will not feed the cat at five. Moreover, an omission *per se* need not involve any relevant movement or even any relevant mental state from the purported agent. Clarke gives the example of Ann, who omits to pick up Bob at the airport because she is asleep[4]. Presumably, Ann is completely still and, for all we know, she may be dreaming of flying unicorns. Unintentional omissions, as it appears, do not seem to be suitable candidates for actions[5].

Cases of refraining, however, are not as clear-cut. At first glance, it seems quite plausible to maintain that some belief and desire can combine in order to cause a refraining. For instance, John's refraining to jump into the water may have been caused by his desire not to save the drowning child and his belief that he would not save the child by standing on the beach. But according to Davidson, a necessary condition for agency is what he calls "primitive actions", namely the intentional movements that are limited to our body. So when I turn on the light by flipping a switch, my primitive – or basic – action is my finger flipping the switch. If Davidson is correct, omissions do not seem to meet this necessary condition. It seems to me that no basic action is ever bound to omissions of any kind. John might remain completely still (or not) while omitting to save the child. But whatever he does, none of his movements need be relevant to his omitting to save the child. There is no basic action that John must do in order to omit to save the child. He might not perform any basic action at all and he would still not save the child. So if basic actions are a necessary condition for agency, then omissions cannot be actions.

[4] Clarke, R. (2010), "Intentional Omissions".

[5] Notice that this does not mean that omissions are not events. Unintentional omissions might still be events of the non-action type, which can cause and be caused. Absences, for example, might still have causal powers. I will argue in section 3 that omissions are not events and I will assess the possibility of causation by absences.

Yet, this may not be entirely satisfying for some. Maybe some will remain uncertain whether intentional omissions are actions. It is generally agreed, however, that all actions are events. If omissions are not events, then, they could not possibly be actions. And as a matter of fact, omissions do not seem to qualify as events. Events are entities situated in space and time; they have a rather clear beginning, a clear end and can be located fairly accurately[6]. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius occurred in 79 CE in the Gulf of Naples. My waking up this morning occurred at six in my bedroom. Omissions, on the other hand, are much harder to pin down. As Clarke points out, if Ann omits to pick up Bob at the airport, where and when did the omission take place[7]? Did it occur at Ann's place when she decided not to leave for the airport? Or did occur at the airport when she did not show up at the time Bob expected her? If Dick does not eat his soup[8], when does this omission start and when does it end[9]? And suppose that, in the course of one day, I travel by plane from Quebec City to Chicago, by train from Chicago to Detroit and by bus from Detroit to Columbus. If I do not eat anything all day, *where* did my omission occur? Notice that these omissions being intentional does not help, for there is no more reason to believe that the forming of an intention marks the beginning of an omission than to believe that an action starts as soon as we form the intention to act. My going to Paris does not start when I merely form the intention to go there.

So if omissions are neither actions nor events, then what are they? Most authors agree that they are nothing, they are just absences[10]. If

[6] There are some fuzzier exceptions, but they are exceptions rather than the norm, which is not the case for omissions.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

[8] Thomson, J. J. (2003), "Causation: Omissions".

[9] The problem becomes even more puzzling if Dick avoids eating soup for his entire life. When does his omission to eat soup start and when does it end? Does it keep occurring for every one of Dick's meals? Or even between mealtimes?

[10] See for example Armstrong, D. (2004), *Truth and Truthmakers*; Beebee, H. (2004), "Causing and Nothingness"; Clarke, R. (2012), "Absence of Action"; Weinryb, E. (1980), "Omissions and Responsibility". Smith, P. (2005), "Feinberg and the Failure to Act" is an exception as she acknowledges that omissions are not actions and yet maintains that they are not nothing. But Smith's criterion for distinguishing omissions from non-action is

this is true, what remains to be determined is whether absences have causal powers.

2. Reasonable expectations

Patricia Smith highlights two fundamental criteria for distinguishing omissions from both positive actions and mere non-actions. She defines a (generic) omission in the following way[11]:

DI. *A* failed to do *s* if and only if:
(i) *A* did not do *s*; and
(ii) It was reasonable to expect *A* to do *s*.

As we can easily see – and as Smith herself points out –, (i) serves to distinguish omissions from positive actions, whereas (ii) helps make the distinction between omissions and non-actions. I find this definition quite acceptable and intuitive. Smith also proposes a more specific definition for unintentional omissions (refraining):

DII. *A* unintentionally failed to do *s* if and only if:
(i) *A* did not do *s*; and
(ii) *A* did not think, at the time, of doing *s*; and
(iii) It was reasonable to expect *A* to do *s*.

Notice here that (ii) focusses on the beliefs of the agent, not on her desires. The key intentional element seems indeed to be the agent's belief: I might desire to take today's train for Toronto but *unintentionally* fail to do so because, unbeknownst to me, it has already departed. The reverse is not true. Knowing that the train is leaving the station, while at the same time not desiring to take it, would count as an *intentional* omission, rather than an unintentional one (assuming, of course, that I did not take that train). This is a key element for our concerns. An action *s* is the result of an agent's strongest desire *d*

"reasonable expectation". Yet, this criterion has nothing to do with the agent and seems to play no *causal* role whatsoever in the event. It is therefore very hard to see how this would make the difference between something and nothing on the ontological level.

[11] Smith, P. (2005), "Feinberg and the Failure to Act", p. 238.

paired with a relevant belief *b*. When the desire is not strong enough or when it is entirely absent *but* the agent still has the relevant belief *b*, we are facing a case of intentional omission or refraining. In contrast, if the agent does not entertain belief *b*, we are dealing with unintentional omission *regardless* of her having a desire to do *s*. It is on this last point that the idea of reasonable expectation hinges, which in turn helps us tell the difference between omissions and non-actions[12].

Suppose Fred desires to φ and believes that in order to φ, he ought to ψ. Being a rational agent, Fred further believes that he ought to ψ. Compare with Helen who desires to φ but who does not – although she should – believe that in order to φ, she ought to ψ. We generally accept the idea that if an agent desires an end, she must also desire the necessary means to that end. And if she does, all other things considered, she should act upon this desire. This, at least, is what we would *reasonably expect*, all things considered. An agent who would not follow this standard model – either by lack of desire to ψ or by not ψ-ing while she ought to, given that ψ is necessary for φ and that her strongest desire is to φ – would seem to be omitting something. We might say that she is omitting to behave rationally, that she is omitting to do what she most desires to do or that she is omitting to connect the dots. But all these omissions could be comprised under a general one: she would be omitting to meet our expectations[13].

[12] See also Milanich, P. (1982), "Allowing, Refraining, and Failing: The Structure of Omissions".

[13] Some (*e.g. ibid.*; Smith, P. (2005), "Feinberg and the Failure to Act".) identify two different disjunctive criteria for distinguishing cases of refraining from cases of non-actions : reasonable expectations or a belief by the agent that she could or should perform the given action. I think this second criterion can be reduced to that of reasonable expectation. Once we know the agent's considerations, it becomes reasonable for anyone to say that she omitted to φ if she did not perform the action she once considered doing. Even if we do not agree that φ-ing is a reasonable thing to do *per se*, we would still find it reasonable to *expect* her to φ. For instance, I might decide to set the house on fire just because I am bored. I could spread gasoline all over the house and then sit on a couch and wait. If I do not light the gasoline, we could reasonably say that I omitted to set the gasoline aflame and that I omitted to set the house on fire even though we would not

Under normal circumstances, the previously mentioned expectations are generally regarded as reasonable. But we may encounter unreasonable expectations. It would be unreasonable to expect a crying infant to change her own diaper even if it is necessary for her being dry, which is what she might desire. It would also be quite unreasonable to expect the same infant to *know* what the necessary means to her ends are. Notice that in such cases – and, I surmise, in all cases of unreasonable expectations –, it would seem inappropriate to speak of omissions. The infant does not omit to change her own diaper or to identify the necessary means to her ends; she simply does not do so. These are clearly cases of mere non-actions. In the same spirit, we would not be tempted to assert that a paraplegic is omitting to stand up during the national anthem. But we would not be afraid to say so about her able-bodied – and non-sleeping – friend, whether or not he does so intentionally. Smith underlines the importance of context, central to this distinction:

> there is no positive act and no thought or intention by which to distinguish omission from simple nonaction in the case of unintentional omission. There is only a standard or pattern of human conduct, the deviation from which turns nonaction into omission by attaching it to a particular agent within a specific context. It is this connection that ultimately provides the needed link to agency and responsibility[14].

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find it reasonable to do so. But given my intentions, these do become reasonable *expectations*. The agent's considerations may not even be necessary. Suppose that, when coming at a fork in a path, I choose to go right rather then left. If going left was not unreasonable, then it would be perfectly acceptable to say that I omitted to go left regardless of my own considerations. Going left was just something that one could have reasonably expected me to do.
I may be wrong on this point, but this is a rather minor detail that would not affect the core of my argument. If I actually am wrong and if there really are two disjunctive criteria rather than just one, this would merely make my account less "elegant".

[14] Smith, P. (2005), "Feinberg and the Failure to Act".

It is not the action – or lack thereof – that changes, but the normative aspect of the situation. We call one event a mere non-action because of what we reasonably expect from the agent, and we call the other event an omission because we expect something else. Both agents might have the same beliefs and desires, for all we know, but that would not change our different assessments of those two events. It can be reasonable for me to shake hands with a guest, but it may be reasonable for that guest to, say, kiss me instead. From one point of view, I might omit to kiss him; from the other point of view, he might omit to shake my hand. But if my guest shared my cultural background, no one would be tempted to say that we omitted to kiss. Obviously, this is not a feature of positive actions. The reason is that in cases of omission, there are some core elements that are mind-dependent and that cannot be observed empirically[15]. Indeed, those elements are what distinguishes an omission from a mere non-action.

The notion of reasonable expectations evidently is not without problems. Its main weakness is the vagueness that plagues it. As Smith points out[16], the notion of reasonableness is a slippery one. It relies on context and is entirely inter-subjective. Two different people might disagree on what is reasonable and what is not. Something can be considered a reasonable expectation inside a large community, *e.g.* to respect certain cultural customs. Someone who did not respect them would *omit* to respect them – assuming that it was possible for her to do otherwise. At the other end of the spectrum, reasonable expectations might hold between only two individuals. I might reasonably expect, for instance, that my wife – and only her – will laugh when I remind her of a certain anecdote. If she does not, it would not be entirely out of place to claim that she omitted to laugh.

But, one may ask, *whose* expectation are we interested in? Suppose a paraplegic was unaware of her situation and intended to get out of

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[15] Of course, in this example the different expectations come from the fact that my guest and I share different cultural backgrounds. But it is clear that the *source* of the expectation is of no import here. What *is* important is that what we perceive as an omission depends on what we expect. And expectations are found only in people's minds.

[16] Smith, P. (1990), "Contemplating Failure: The Importance of Unconscious Omission".

bed[17]. Can she be said to have omitted to get out of bed given that she would have no reason to believe that she cannot – *i.e.* she would reasonably expect to be able to get out of bed? To me, it does not seem to be the right way to look at it. It would make the standard of reasonable expectation too subjective. A reasonable expectation is the expectation of a well-informed third party who knows enough about the relevant context and practices. She must also be aware of all the relevant elements (*e.g.* it would not be reasonable to expect Iris to have watered the plants if Larry lied about this being her responsibility[18]). The standard is not entirely subjective since *any* well-informed and rational observer knowledgeable enough in the relevant context would, in principle, come to the same conclusion about whether a given course of action could be reasonably expected or not. Of course, some extreme cases may be more open to debate, but I believe they are the exceptions rather than the norm. The standard of reasonable expectation is an inter-subjective one[19]; it cannot depend on the judgment of a single person.

Still, despite these precisions, the notion of reasonable expectation remains in flux. What is reasonable for one group will not be reasonable for another. While it may be reasonable for the eighteenth-century citizens of Königsberg to expect Kant to pass by at the same time every day, this same expectation would not be reasonable for their counterpart today. And what is reasonably expected in my family might not be in yours. This means that, most of the time at least, one's omission is someone else's non-action and vice-versa[20]. Given the relative character of reasonable expectations,

[17] Clarke, R. (2010), "Intentional Omissions", p. 163.

[18] *Cf.* McGrath, S. (2005), "Causation by Omission: A Dilemma". While McGrath criticizes some conception of reasonable expectation, she defends an account of causation by omission in terms of "the normal". Her account shares important similarities with what I mean – and what I believe Patricia Smith also means – by "reasonable expectation".

[19] Some go so far as calling it objective. See for example Smith, P. (2005), "Feinberg and the Failure to Act".

[20] Due to lack of space, I will not dwell any longer on the notion of reasonable expectation here. For an interesting and more detailed discussion on the matter, see Smith, P. (2005), "Feinberg and the Failure to Act", especially p. 163-170.

it is easy to see that if the notion of omission really does hinge on that of reasonable expectation, it does not bode well for the idea of causation by omission. Unless, that is, non-actions themselves – or, more generally, absences – can have real causal powers.

3. Can absences be causally efficacious?

I subscribe to the generally accepted and, I think, rather intuitive *process theory of causation* which states that causation must involve a physical connection between causes and their effects. I take it that this view of causation is at least implicitly endorsed by an overwhelming majority of scientists. The most widely accepted model of causation in philosophy is what Helen Steward has called the *network model of causation*[21]. In this model, the causal universe is conceived of as a huge web with events as nodes bound together by causal relations. This model is perfectly compatible with the process theory. As Helen Beebee points out[22], the assumption that the network model is right, combined with the further assumption that there are no negative events[23], leads us directly to the conclusion that absences cannot have causal powers[24]. While there are still some issues with these accounts that need to be settled[25], I think we should be very careful before rejecting what seems to me like a very convincing conception of causation. More specifically, I think it would be quite hasty to reject this conception on the sole basis that absences appear to have causal powers. However, some thinkers are not as reluctant as I am. Schaffer, for instance, fiercely argues against the process theory of causation:

[21] Steward, H. (1997), *The Ontology of Mind*, chapter 7.

[22] Beebee, H. (2004), "Causing and Nothingness", p. 291.

[23] Negative events are events that lack properties and which also cannot be particulars. Consider the absurdity of questions like "how loud was the non-explosion?" and "how many non-explosions occurred?".

[24] If causation is a relation between events and if omissions are not events, then causation by omission is a contradiction in terms. Mellor tries to work around this issue by defending an account of causation as a relation between facts (see for example Mellor, D. H. (1995), *The Facts of Causation*).

[25] See for example Dowe, P. (Fall 2008), "Causal Processes"; Schaffer, J. (Fall 2008), "The Metaphysics of Causation".

> to dismiss negative causation is to swallow the following: counterfactual, statistical, agential, evidential, explanatory, and moral implications are not marks of causation; the folk are wrong that voluntary human action is causal, the law is wrong that negligence is causal, ordinary language is wrong that "remove," "release," "disconnect," and so on are causal; philosophers are wrong that reference, decision, and perception are causal; and scientists are wrong that electron–hole pair generation and other negative processes are causal. I submit that no theory so dismissive deserves to be considered a theory of *causation*[26].

As I see it, there seems to be two conflicting intuitions at the roots of this disagreement. On the one hand, those who reject negative causation rest their claim on a conceptual intuition, namely that causation involves a physical connection between at least two entities. On the other hand, those who defend the reality of negative causation seem to base their claim on the intuition that our common usage of the language of negative causation is largely right. At least one of these intuitions must be wrong and I will argue that the second intuition is, and that the term "cause" is often used too loosely.

The first problem with the idea of causation by absences is that causes seem to produce their effects in virtue of their properties. It is in virtue of being square and heavy that the box leaves a square imprint on the carpet. And it is in virtue of being hot and somewhat triangular in shape that a hot iron forgotten on a shirt will leave a triangularish and fuming hole in my shirt. Properties seem to be quite relevant for causation. But it is the nature of absences to be devoid of properties. If there is no entity – *i.e.* if there is an absence –, there can be no property instantiated in that non-entity. Moreover, if we want to avoid the problem of disjunctive events in cases of causation – such as the cause of the accident being the child running in front of the car with clenched fists *or* with open hands, and so on[27] –, we must pick out the properties that really do have causal efficacy in relation

[26] Schaffer, J. (2004), "Causes Need not be Physically Connected to their Effects: The Case for Negative Causation", p. 205.
[27] See Dowe, P. (2000), *Physical Causation*, p. 127.

to the effect in question. This means that what must be the right candidate for a given cause and a given effect is a *class of events*; *i.e.* a class of events that share all the causally efficacious properties in relation to the causal relations at play. So there is a sense in which the properties are more primitive, causally speaking, than the particular events *per se*. Dowe points out that the disjuncts in the case of positive causation are not *highly* disjunctive because they are "appropriately unified by similarity" – *i.e.* in virtue of their sharing some causally efficacious properties –, whereas the negative cases of causation *are* highly disjunctive[28]. There is an infinity of unrelated "negative properties" that could be relevant for a negative causal relation: my staying healthy could have been "caused" by my not drinking fifty milliliters of spoiled milk *or* by my not lying in the snow for thirty-six minutes while wearing only blue underwear and so on. Additionally, a positive case of causation generally has to be very specific. The slightest change generally brings about a very different effect (especially in the subsequent causal *chain*). But as the problem of disjunctive events shows, this does not seem to be true of absences[29]. An absent cause – or an absent effect, for that matter – need not be as specific. While the car that caused the accident might have been big, coming fast or made of steel, the car which I have not bought – thereby causing me to take the bus every day – might or might not have been big or fast or even made of steel[30]. It seems like those "properties" or any others have no further effect on my taking the bus. My taking the bus is not affected by the purported properties of the absent car.

David Lewis – who welcomes the idea of causation by absences – recognizes the problem of disjunctive events. Lewis acknowledges that accepting the idea that absences can have causal powers creates many difficulties for his own counterfactual account of causation, but

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[28] See Dowe, P. (2000), *Physical Causation*, p. 127.

[29] Unless, maybe, we talk about absences in terms of degree: the absence of half the normal amount of air caused James to choke; or the absence of ten percent of the required amount of air caused James to choke. But notice the troublesome normative terms here. And notice also that the notion of absence could easily be put in terms of presence – *i.e.* a given amount of air.

[30] To paraphrase Clarke, is my lack of a phone my lack of an iPhone? (Clarke, R. (2012), "Absence of Action", p. 362).

he nonetheless bites the bullet and clings to his belief in negative causation[31]. In addition to the problem of disjunctive events, Lewis identifies two more problems that seem to render causally efficacious absences incompatible with his account. The first one is that a counterfactual analysis of causation is supposed to apply between events, while an absence is precisely that: the absence of any event. As he puts it: "The counterfactual is not: if event *c* (the omission) had *not* occurred . . . It is rather: if some event of kind *K* (the omitted kind) *had* occurred . . ."[32]. The second problem is that a proper analysis of causation should allow us to clearly distinguish between different events, something absences render very difficult. Suppose an explosion did not occur. We might say that this absence prevented the death of some people, the destruction of a building and a loud noise being heard. But are these non-events distinct or is it the same non-event? Accepting the causal efficacy of absences seems to drag us down a rather inhospitable philosophical pit[33].

But then why do absences appear to have causal efficacy? Why does applying the brakes appear to prevent one from hitting the child in the middle of the road? Or why does a lack of glucose appear to cause hypoglycemia? I think the problem lies in our otherwise very useful ability to predict the likeliness of an event to occur. I also believe that this ability springs in large part from our prior experience of causal relations. We know from experience that when a heavy moving object hits another solid object standing in its path, there will be an impact; it will not go through it leaving the two objects intact. This is a classic case of causation. If the objects did pass through each other, we would be looking for some reason that would explain why the collision did not occur, why the expected causal relation did not take place. But notice that it would seem rather strange to ask what *caused* the lack of a causal relation in such a case. What we are looking for is an explanation for the absence of a physical impact between the two objects, but we are not looking for a *causal* explanation. Rather,

[31] Lewis, D. (1987), "Postscripts to 'Causation'".

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

[33] Not to mention the fact that if causation does not require a physical connection between events, this would render the phenomenon of causation even more mysterious than it already is. If it is not a matter of physical connection, then what *is* causation?

we are looking for something that bears closer resemblance to a *conceptual* explanation. If I were to ask you why bachelors are unmarried, you would likely tell me that it is so because "bachelor" is what we call unmarried men ; that is because being unmarried is part of the meaning of "bachelor". The use of "because" here has no causal import whatsoever. Being unmarried does not cause one to be a bachelor and neither is it an effect of being a bachelor.

Likewise, when trying to find out why two objects passed through each other without any sign of impact, we look for an explanation that gravitates around our conception of causation. If causation requires a physical connection between two objects, then maybe one of these objects was not actually physical. Maybe it was just a projection on a screen that we mistook for a physical object. Or maybe the objects did not actually pass through each other but just passed *by* each other very closely, leaving us with the mere illusion that they passed through each other without colliding. These explanations tell us that the events that took place failed to meet the sufficient conditions for a causal relation to occur. There was no causal relation *because* the required conditions were not met. The term "because", here, is not causal in nature; it is conceptual.

This distinction, I believe, helps clear out some confusion. Bruce Vermazen claims that "if I intentionally pass up a chance to win at cards by laying down the ten of clubs, I have done something – performed an act – describable as not laying down the ten of clubs and as not bringing about my winning"[34]. As Vermazen sees it, refraining from laying down the ten of clubs caused my not winning. I think this is mistaken. It seems to me, rather, that not laying the ten of clubs, under those circumstances, was *constitutive* of losing the game. If causation is a *sequence* of events – as is generally accepted – it is clear that not laying the ten of clubs did not cause the failure to win. We can certainly say that scoring a goal caused a given team to win since that particular goal allowed them to have more goals than the other team. But it does not seem adequate to say that scoring more goals than the other team caused them to win. The rules of the game stipulate that winning *is* scoring more goals than the other team.

[34] Vermazen, B. (1985), "Negative Acts", p. 93-94.

But this is not enough. What I have just said explains that we might sometimes confuse a causal relation with a conceptual explanation about causation. The implication is obviously that this is often what happens in cases of negative causation. But what if we *do* seem to perceive a negative causal relation – rather than just the absence of a positive one? When we say that a lack of glucose caused hypoglycemia in the patient, we are not baffled by the absence of an expected causal relation; rather we mean to say that there *was* a causal relation, and that it was negative. I believe that this view is also mistaken; the apparent perception of a negative causal relation is illusory. The reason for this is, I believe, based on expectations.

We all see certain things as normal and others as unusual, some behaviors as standard and others as deviant, some features of our lives are bland while others stick out more. Because accidents are statistically rare events, we view them as atypical events. We generally do not mention to people that we did not have an accident today[35]. If we did, the implication would clearly be that it was actually unusual for us not to have had an accident. But if a child stands in front of a moving car, we know that the car is likely to hit her. Although the event itself is unusual, the causal relation between the car and the child is one that we would expect given the context. If someone grabbed the child before the impact and pulled her away from the incoming car, we would readily say that this person prevented the accident from happening. In other words, we would tend to say that the person caused the absence of an accident. But this is only because, given the circumstances, we expected the accident to occur. The person's pulling the child to safety *explains* why there was no accident, given our reasonable expectations founded on our prior experience of causation[36]. But it did not *cause* the absence of accident. Here again, we tend to confuse the explanation with an actual relation. If a billiard ball is a solid object – rather than, say, a hologram – it will collide with any ball on its path. Likewise, if the child had stayed in the car's path, the car would have hit her. In both

[35] Similarly, it would seem ridiculous to say "Lack of poison caused him to remain alive" (Armstrong, D. (1978), *A Theory of Universals*, p. 25).

[36] Dowe argues for something very similar, but he focuses on counterfactuals rather than on expectations (see Dowe, P. (2000), *Physical Causation*, chap. 6).

cases, we focus on – absent – factors we expected and from there we provide an explanation for the actual resulting state of affairs. We then mistakenly take this explanation for the actual causal relation. If the ball is a hologram, however, its being so cannot *cause* the lack of collision; it merely *explains* it. And the same is true regarding the car and the child[37]: there was no collision because there was no physical contact[38].

4. Mind-dependence

I believe, along with others[39], that every case of negative causation can be described in terms of positive causation and vice-versa[40]. In fact, since I believe only positive causation is genuine causation, what this really means is that negative causal explanations are always reducible to positive causal explanations[41]. To kill is to prevent from living; to sleep is to avoid being awake; to leave is to omit to stay; and so on. Claims like "John's not having turned off the water caused the bath to overflow" may seem to not work this way. But in fact, what is

[37] To take another example, we might be surprised that the plants died because, under normal circumstances, we would expect them to thrive. Upon learning that Jim omitted to water them we get a fuller understanding of the situation. This fact now explains why the plants are dead, *an event we did not expect*, but it does not describe a causal relation. All it does is provide us with the information that helps us understand why what we expected did not actually occur.

[38] I am aware that this seems to be begging the question. Many critics will point out that I am assuming here that causation is a relation between physical entities. Although this is true, I believe I have shown earlier that rival conceptions face too many problems to be taken seriously, at least as they relate to causation by absences.

[39] For example Armstrong, D. (2004), *Truth and Truthmakers*, p. 64 and Dowe, P. (2000), *Physical Causation*, p. 130.

[40] This is, of course, impossible to prove and if critics can provide a single counter-example for which no one could find a positive equivalent, then this would carry a great weight in favor of causation by absences.

[41] Notice that I am talking about *explanations* here. I do not mean to say that every omission corresponds to a positive action. I accept Sartorio's position that for most omissions, there are no positive action that corresponds to them (Sartorio, C. (2009), "Omissions and Causalism".)

really happening, most likely, is that gravitational forces are pushing the water out of the tap and into the bath. And the same gravitational forces pull the water onto the bathroom floor when the bath is full. Some may argue that this explanation is incomplete and that important pieces of information are missing[42]. I agree that from *our* perspective, this is a rather unsatisfying explanation. But it is so only because of our expectations. We normally expect the water not to overflow and so we want to know why it did on this particular occasion. Similarly, we know that the water will not flow out of the tap unless someone turns the tap on (which would lead us to argue that the tap being turned off *prevents* the water from flowing out). But causation does not and should not depend on expectations. Causation is a phenomenon that would occur regardless of our existence and regardless of what is usual or unusual. When the tap is turned off, the valve does not prevent the water from flowing out; it causes it to *stay* in the tap. We have an almost irresistible urge to talk of prevention because we already know what would happen if we turned on the tap, but causation is not a function of prior knowledge; causation has nothing to do with possible or foreseeable future events. Causation is strictly a matter of "right there, right now" and what happened before that. Talking of prevention or omission is talking about possible events that could happen or could have happened. I see no reason why causation, unlike other laws of nature, should have such a modal dimension.

Of course it is often very hard not to talk in terms of negativity or of absence. Talks of debts, of something not being enough, of misses, and so on all imply some notion of absence. And it is perfectly fine that it should be like this. It would very often be too cumbersome to always speak in terms of positive causation. But this should not lead us to the belief that absences do exist, that they are *real* in a metaphysical sense. We also use definite and indefinite articles because it makes it much easier to understand each other. But this should not lead us to believe that there are such things as

[42] Martin explains that if absences are not causally *operative*, they can nonetheless be causally *relevant*; that is, they can be explanatorily useful even if causally inert (Martin, C. B. (1996), "How it is: Entities, Absences and Voids", p. 6). See also Molnar, G. (2000), "Truthmakers for Negative Truths", p. 77-78.

definiteness and indefiniteness – or even articles, for that matter. Nothing is unbelievable *per se*. There is no such thing as the unbelievability of something. So we should not think that every word or every idea corresponds to something out there in the world. For pragmatic reasons, we should keep talking in terms of omissions and causation by absences, but we need to keep in mind that by doing so we are solely taking a linguistic shortcut.

If we want a *metaphysical* account of causation, it must be mind-independent. A mind-independent account of causation implies that there must be an entirely objective relation between causes and their effects. But an expectation, reasonable or not, is by nature subjective. Therefore, a metaphysical account of causation must not hinge on expectations – an effect is an effect whether we expect it or not. If causation is to be restricted to the physical realm, omissions or absences cannot be causes or effects, insofar as they cannot be separated from the notion of expectation. A witness who would not share our expectations should be able to observe the same causal relation that we observe. But it seems unlikely that such an observer would perceive absences without some expectation as to what might be absent. Imagine that a teacher always rolls up his sleeves at the beginning of a class[43]. A student who is new to the class could not possibly detect what surprises others when the teacher one day does not roll up his sleeves. The other students do not witness what they expect to witness and this causes them to be surprised[44].

From a third-person perspective, we can see a ball hitting another one and describe what we see without knowing what a ball, a cause or an effect are; or without expecting anything to happen before it happens. But we would not be able to notice the absence of an object or an action without any of this prior knowledge. The third-person

[43] Smith, Patricia (1990), "Contemplating Failure: The Importance of Unconscious Omission", p. 168.

[44] What causes their surprise is the fact that their expectation was not met. But what, in turn, causes their unmet expectation? What causes their expectation is a habit, but *nothing* causes their unmet expectation; that is nothing causes it to be unmet. It is just unmet because nothing caused it to be met. And, as is the case here, an unmet expectation – a mental state – generally and quite naturally causes some other mental states: surprise, anger, sadness, and so on.

perspective – the perspective one must adopt in order to give a metaphysical account of causation – must be purely descriptive and mind-independent. If Frank is in the bathtub, it is a mind-*independent* truth that he is in the bathtub. But it would be a mind-*dependent* truth that Frank is not getting out of the bathtub. This second truth relies on a comparison between the actual world and a possible world, and this comparative element is entirely mental.

If what characterizes an absence and what differentiates it from a presence is simply a reasonable expectation, we cannot claim that absences have causal efficacy. Events can have causal efficacy, but not non-events. Expectations are not physical entities; there is nothing in an expectation that could confer causal powers to anything. And of course, their reasonableness will make no difference. If I unreasonably expect Klaus to die tomorrow, Klaus's not dying does not have causal powers that would differ from that of his not dying in a case where my expectation would be reasonable. And if Mary does not expect him to die, she will react differently than I will upon meeting the living Klaus. But notice that, in both cases, the non-event is that he does not die; there does not seem to be two distinct non-events (if this even makes any sense). Our different reactions therefore cannot hinge on different non-events. What makes all the difference is the expectation; the relevant factor is therefore mental. It is our *beliefs* that cause us to react differently and nothing else[45].

Suppose I am determined to find the treasure at the end of the rainbow. I happen to believe that the rainbow ends just behind the hill. When I get there, not only did the rainbow disappear but I cannot find the treasure. I am disappointed. What caused my disappointment? Could it be the absence of the treasure? If so, then this is a very strange metaphysical entity. For either it exists independently of my mind or it does not. If it does and if I am the only person ever to believe there was a treasure at the end of this particular rainbow, it seems reasonable to claim that this entity cannot be perceived by anyone else than me. If the absence of the treasure has causal powers, then it must also have been caused, but it is hard to see what might have caused it. On the other hand, if the

[45] *Cf.* Sartorio, C. (2009), "Omissions and Causalism", p. 518 and Thomson, J. J. (2003), "Causation: Omissions", p. 85.

"existence" of the absence depends on my mind, then it is hard to see why it belongs to the fabric of the world. It is arguable that ideas are part of the world, but claiming that their content is also part of the metaphysical world is harder to swallow. Moreover, how could I "create" entities like absences but not actual presences? This is quite mysterious.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown that the problem we started with can be solved by rejecting the idea that omissions and absences can be causally efficacious. Over the course of this article, I have argued that a central component of any omission – or any absence for that matter – is the notion of expectation. Expectations – reasonable or not – vary widely with contexts and this should be a strong indication that absences and causation cannot go hand in hand. If absences are largely mind-dependent, then they have no place in a metaphysical account of causation. There are at least two reasons why we are tempted to believe in the causal efficacy of absences. First, it is often much simpler to use the language of negative causation than that of positive causation. And second, we often confuse an explanation involving causal language with the causal relation itself. If I am right, we can do without the strange entities that absences would be and all the conundrums they would pose to metaphysics and action theory.

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