

Abstract: *Omissions*—any events, actions, or things that do not occur—are central to numerous debates in causation and ethics. This article surveys views on what omissions are, whether they are causally efficacious, and how they ground moral responsibility.

The Metaphysics of Omissions¹

Sara Bernstein

1. Introduction

Suppose that the gardener fails to water your plant, and consequently, the plant dies. Intuitively, the gardener’s failure to water the plant caused the plant to die. Such *omissions*—roughly, events that do not occur—are central to numerous debates in causation and in ethics. But their natures remain puzzling.

What, exactly, are omissions? Are omissions causally efficacious? Are you morally responsible for failing to do things in the same way that you are morally responsible for things that you do? This paper addresses each of these questions, and shows the ways in which the answers to the questions interact.

Let us stipulate at the outset that “omission” refers to any action or event that doesn’t occur. In contrast, one might use “omission” to denote exclusively intentional failures (my refraining from picking up the dry cleaning), exclusively agent-involving failures (the gardener’s failure to water the plant), or failures with an explicitly normative dimension (as in Billy not following through on a promise to walk Suzy’s dog.) Rather, let us assume that “omission” is maximally broad, and includes unintentional failures (my forgetting to pick up the dry cleaning), failures that do not involve agents (the failure of rain to fall), and failures that do not involve norms (Suzy’s forgetting to update her software).

2. What is an Omission?

2.1 Views on Omissions

There are roughly four families of views about what omissions are. (I say “roughly” because the following taxonomy will not be exhaustive, and some views may

not fit neatly into a single category.)

The first family of views holds that omissions are not anything at all. It is easy to see why one would be tempted by this idea: by definition, omissions do not occur. Thus one might hold that “omission” is a *façon de parler* or “useful fiction”, but that there is no metaphysically substantive entity to which the term refers. Call the view “No Omissions”.

No Omissions has the virtue of keeping ontologically spooky entities out of our causal relation and metaphysics. But, like nihilist views of objects that trade explanatory power for ontological parsimony, No Omissions does not account for robust intuitive data about omissions. We reify omissions and assume their causal relevance. In addition to their intuitive roles, omissions play largely the same predictive and explanatory roles as actual events. By way of example, consider the following two cases:

(Lever) Depressing a lever at time t will cause a weapon to detonate and kill innocent civilians.

(Modified Lever) Failing to depress a lever at time t will cause a weapon to detonate and kill innocent civilians.

Here, there are no causal, explanatory, or moral asymmetries between depressing the lever and failing to depress the lever. Either the action or the omission predicts whether the weapon will be detonated, and either the action or the omission explains why the outcome occurs. The agent is equally morally responsible for the deaths of the civilians in both scenarios. These explanatory and predictive symmetries establish a theoretical desideratum of modelling the existence and causal power of omissions.²

One challenge in meeting this desideratum is to model the existence of omissions in a way that accords both with our intuitions about the world and about omissions themselves. With respect to the former, it is not as if the existence of omissions gives rise to a Swiss Cheese-like picture of reality, with omissions as holes and “positive” events as substantive being. When the gardener fails to water the plant, we do not find a perfect void—a literal hole in reality-- when and where the plant-watering was to occur. Rather,

we just find “positive” reality; for example, the gardener painting his fence when the plant-watering should have occurred. With respect to the latter, taking omissions to be nothing more complicated than positive chunks of reality does not vindicate the idea that omissions are non-occurrences—that omissions are different, in some sense, from events that happen.

The second school of thought stems partly from this challenge. It views omissions as reducible to, identifiable with, or realized by some sort of “positive” thing. For example, one might reduce the gardener’s failure to water the plant to whatever activity he was doing instead of watering the plant. Suppose that while the gardener should have been watering the plant, he was instead painting his fence. In this vein, Schaffer (2000, 2004, 2012) holds that the failure to water the plant is just the painting of the fence “described negatively”. Clarke (2012, 2014) holds a view that occupies a middle ground between the positive event strategy and No Omissions. Clarke holds that in many cases when there is a failure to act, there is nothing that is the omission. But sometimes an omission is an action. For example, there are actions of refraining, such as placing one hand over another to refrain from tapping one’s hand, that count as omissions.³ Varzi (2006, 2007a) holds a similar view.

While *prima facie* attractive, positive event strategies face several problems. The first problem is that there is no single obvious reduction base for an omission. Suppose that the plant-watering would have taken ten minutes, and that the gardener could have watered the plant in any ten-minute period within one week. There is no single ten-minute period to which the plant-watering reduces, for any ten-minute period could have sufficed. The omission is multiply realizable. Tiehen (forthcoming) denies the positive event strategy on the grounds of multiple realizability.

One might be tempted towards either a disjunctive or conjunctive variant of the positive event view.⁴ A disjunctive variant holds that it is the gardener’s Facebook-checking OR the gardener’s snack-eating OR the gardener’s napping (etc.) that is the reduction base of the omission. But such an account implies that causes themselves are disjunctive, which many take to be implausible. The conjunctive variant holds that it is the gardener’s Facebook-checking AND the gardener’s snack-eating AND the gardener’s

napping (etc.) that is the reduction base for the omission. But, without a principled restriction on which events can be included in the reduction base, this view yields the unlikely result that every event in the world that is not the plant-watering is the omission of the plant-watering, creating a bloated reduction base for each omission. Intuitively, not every event in the world causally contributes to the plant's death.

The third family of views holds that omissions are negative entities, such as negative properties instantiated in positive things, negative facts, or negative states of affairs. According to the first view, the failure of the gardener to water the plant is something like the property *having failed to water the plant* (as possessed by the gardener). According to the second view, the omission is the fact that the gardener failed to water the plant. The third view can be executed in one of several ways (as Clarke (2014) notes), but the most natural way is to hold that the omission is the gardener and the property *having failed to water the plant*, tied together by instantiation.

While this family of views is plausible, one must be amenable to the genuineness of negative entities, and friendly to negative entities as causal *relata* possessing real causal powers. (More on this in section 3.3) For many, these and other theoretical demands are too high, especially with respect to negative properties. Armstrong (1978) famously repudiates negative properties, while more recently Zangwill (2011) argues against their causal efficacy and powers of determination. The ontological legitimacy of negative entities is a contentious basis upon which to form a theory of omissions.

The fourth family of views takes omissions to be either fully or partially composed of merely possible events. (Examples include Bernstein (2014) and (forthcoming), as well as Hommen (ms).) On the former view, the failure of the gardener to water the plant is the gardener's watering the plant at a possible world. On the latter view, the failure of the gardener to water the plant is partially composed of the event of the plant-watering at a possible world and partially composed of an event at the actual world that occurred in its place. Both views take omissions to include unactualized possibilities.

The possibilist family of views meets many explanatory and theoretical desiderata

of a theory of omissions. Primarily, it models the existence of omissions without incurring many of the burdens associated with the previous two strategies. Possibilism doesn't reduce omissions to actual events (exclusively), so it does not inherit the same problems with multiple realizability. Nor must it accept the genuineness and causal power of negative entities.

However, possibilism about omissions faces additional challenges. Primarily, it is unclear whether and how merely possible events can be causally efficacious. The possibilist about omissions has two options. First, she can bite the bullet and hold that merely possible events *are* causally efficacious. (See Bernstein (ms)) for a defense of such a view.) Second, she can claim omissions are “quasi-causal” or something causation-like. (Dowe (2000), (ms) endorses such a view.) Third, she can relegate the relationship between the possible event and the actual event to causal explanation rather than causation. Beebe (2004), for example, holds that omissions participate in causal explanations, but are not causal. It is also worth noting that the No Omissions view can avail itself of the second and third options: omissions need not be reified in order to play quasi-causal roles or to participate in causal explanations. Arguably, Lewis (2004) holds the first option.

2.2 Individuating Omissions

An underexplored issue is how omissions are to be individuated. Omissions can be taken to be *fine-grained* or *coarse-grained*. If they are fine-grained, then the failure of the gardener to water the plant is a distinct omission from the failure of the gardener to water the plant while humming. There are easily imaginable contexts in which these differences matter causally; for example, suppose that the plant grows faster when exposed to music. Omissions can also be *coarse-grained*, as when *the failure of the gardener to water the plant* and *the failure of anyone to water the plant* are considered one and the same omission.

Omissions run from *simple* or *complex*, with several dimensions of complexity. One dimension of complexity is spatial: the failure of a particle to appear versus the failure of a galaxy to form. Another dimension of complexity is temporal: the failure of a

camera to flash versus the failure of a 10-year-long-war to happen. Omissions can involve one person, object, or action, as when the gardener fails to water the plant. Or they can involve multiple persons, objects, or actions, as when an army fails to invade.

Omissions can be *event-types*, as when there are many token events of the omissive type *failing to water the plant*. Many assume that omissions are only event types, since unlike positive events, they are not located in spacetime and are hence multiply realizable.⁷ (For example, multiple people and sprinklers failed to water the plant.) But it seems clear that omissions can also be *event-tokens*, as when one refers to the failure of the gardener to water the plant at 9am in Tucson, Arizona.

One problem is how to individuate intuitively different token omissions. Consider (i) the failure of the gardener to water the plant, (ii) the failure of the gardener to do his laundry, and (iii) the failure of Barack Obama to water the plant. Unlike “positive” occurrences, omissions cannot be individuated by their causal roles, since countless omissions share the same causal role. (I discuss this problem at length in 3.2).

Actual event identification strategists cannot ontologically individuate omissions by the positive events to which they reduce, because a single positive event fails to be infinitely many other individual events. For example, my typing is a failure to score a football goal, failure to cook a nine-course meal, and failure to fix a broken iPhone, to name a few.⁸ Each failure is also identical with each other failure, since they are all identical with the typing.⁹ One option available to the event identification theorist is to hold that the typing can be described many different ways. But note that the different-description strategy only provides linguistic, rather than ontological, individuation of omissions.

If one holds that omissions are positive events with negative property ascriptions, then different negative property ascriptions individuate different omissions. However, as above, one and the same negative property ascription can be had by multiple positive events. For example, the property *not being a plant-watering* can be ascribed to any positive event in history that is not a plant-watering.

Possibilism about omissions can utilize a similar strategy, with similar results.

Possibilism can hold that a particular event is possibly another kind of event, and that omissions are individuated by modal predicates of the kind *possibly a* _____. For example, suppose that the gardener's karaoke-singing has, as modal predicates, *possibly a plant-watering* and *possibly a Facebook-checking*. The plant-watering omission is different from the Facebook-checking omission, as given by the two different modal predicates.

3.0 Causation by Omission

One topic to which omissions are of central importance is causation. The question of whether omissions can be causes is inextricably bound up with views on the causal relation and the causal *relata*.

Intuitively, omissions are causes, effects, and causal intermediaries. Omissions are *causes*, as when the failure of the gardener to water the plant causes the plant to die. Omissions are *effects*, as in a case in which good police work causes the failure of the terrorist attack that would have occurred in its absence. And omissions are *intermediaries*, as when a bullet piercing a heart causes an absence of oxygenation, which causes Victim's death.¹⁰

Among causal theorists, there is a methodological split as to whether and how such data are to be incorporated into our theories of the causal relation. One approach takes causation by omission to motivate or require a particular theory of causation. Schaffer (2000), for example, takes accounting for omissions as causes, effects, and intermediaries to require a "Hume-style, extrinsic, absence-relating, necessary and/or sufficient condition component" theory of causation. The other method is to begin with a theory of causation, and hold that if it cannot account for causation by omission, so much the worse for omissions. Energy-transfer or process theorists take such an approach.

3.1 Omissions and the Causal Relation

Following Hall (2004), let us distinguish between a "production" account of causation, according to which causation involves a production or transfer of energy, and a "dependence" notion of causation, according to which causation involves counterfactual

dependence. Hall holds that omissive causation drives the concept of the latter type.

An example of productive causation, in contrast, is when one domino strikes another: the second domino falls due to the force transferred from the first domino. Productive accounts of causation cannot accommodate causation by omission, because there is nothing from which the energy can be transferred. “Network models” of causation, according to which causation is a matter of relations between “nodes”, face a similar problem: there are no nodes between which the causal relation can obtain.

Counterfactual accounts of causation, on the other hand, easily handle causation by omission. Omissions straightforwardly satisfy counterfactuals of the form

If c had not occurred, e would not have occurred.

where either c , e , or both c and e are failures of some sort, such as:

(Gardener) If the gardener had not failed to water the plant, the plant would not have died

This well-suitedness to handle causation by omission is a mixed blessing for counterfactual theorists. Lewis (2004) is a No Omissions proponent who nonetheless holds that omissions can cause and be caused. Because of this, sometimes causation is not a relation, since a relation requires *relata*.

Hall also points out that omissions violate the intrinsicness of the causal relation more generally. If causation is intrinsic to a causal structure s , then s 's duplicate exhibits the same causal relationships no matter what happens outside of the structure. But this is not true for omissions. For c can be an omissive cause of e in one causal structure but be rendered causally irrelevant by enabling or disabling causes of e extrinsic to the duplicate.

3.2 The Problem of Profligate Omissions

Proponents of the counterfactual account who also accept causation by omission face the *problem of profligate omissions*.¹¹ For though (Gardener) is true, the following counterfactual is also true:

(Queen of England) If the queen of England had not failed to water the plant, the plant would not have died.

Accepting any omissions as causes seems to result in accepting *all* omissions of acts of the same kind as causes.

Attempts to solve the problem of profligate omissions take many forms. Menzies (2004) suggests that pragmatic pressures dictate which omissions are causes. Thus whether a particular omission is the cause of an outcome is partly determined by context. McGrath (2005) holds that the causal relation itself is normative.¹² Whether an omission is a cause of *e* depends on whether there is a norm operating on a particular agent. For example, the gardener's promise to water the plant creates a norm which dictates that he, rather than others, is causally responsible for the plant's death. Bernstein (2013) takes distance from actuality to track which omissions are causally relevant. Thus omitted events closer to actuality count as causes of the outcome.

One recent attempt to solve the problem of profligate omissions comes from Dowe (2010). Dowe uses proportionality to select a single omission at the right level of specificity as the cause proportionate to the outcome. The procedure of proportionality is to counterfactually test various omissions at different levels of specificity until one comes out true. Suppose that the properties of the plant are:

- (a) *not watered by the gardener while humming*
- (b) *not watered by the gardener*
- (c) *not watered by anyone or anything*

(a) is too specific: the plant's survival doesn't depend on the gardener's humming while watering the plant. (b) is also too specific, for the plant could have received an influx of water from rain, and thus survived the gardener's failure. (c), however, is correct: had the plant been watered by anyone or anything, it would have survived. Thus according to proportionality, the plant's property *failing to be watered by anyone or anything* is the cause of the plant's death.

While initially promising, there are many reasons to be skeptical of such a

strategy. Bernstein (2014) argues that proportionality solves the wrong problem. The traditional problem of profligate omissions concerns profligate omissions at the same level of specificity; for example, the gardener's failure and the Queen of England's failure. But proportionality screens off omissions at different levels of specificity— anyone watering the plant, the gardener's watering the plant, the gardener's watering the plant while humming, etc. Moreover, proportionality denies that anything external to the *relatum* in question is a cause of the relevant outcome. For example, the plant's having the property *failing to be watered by anyone or anything* is the cause of the plant's death. *Failing to be watered by anyone or anything* is a property of the plant itself. According to proportionality, it is this property of the plant that causes it to die. But intuitively, something external to the plant (for example, the gardener's failure to water it) is the cause of its death. Strictly speaking, proportionality about omissions denies this fact, holding that the negative properties of the plant cause the plant's death.

Shapiro and Sober (2012) suggest that proportionality is moot because there is no causal competition between causal candidates for a particular outcome. Depending on context, they are all informative and give rise to true causal claims. The relevant claim in the plant case is that “The failure of the gardener to water the plant rather than the failure of the Queen of England's to water the plant caused the plant to die rather than to survive.” Weslake (2013) argues that proportionality applies to causal explanation rather than causation itself.

Sartorio (2009) identifies a closely related problem that she calls *the Prince of Wales Problem* for counterfactual theories of causation. This problem involves unwanted positive causes in addition to profligate omissive causes. It is illustrated by the following case:

(Prince of Wales) The Queen of England has asked the Prince of Wales to water her plants regularly in the afternoon. But the Prince's priorities are to eat oaten biscuits instead of watering the plants and, consequently, the plant dies. The Prince's failure to water the plants, not his eating the oaten biscuits, caused the plant's death.

Here, if the Prince of Wales had not eaten the oaten biscuits, he would have watered the plant. Counterintuitively, the Prince's eating the oaten biscuits counts as a cause of the plant's death. There is a similar problem with unwanted negative causes, as in:

(Stomach Ache) The Prince of Wales eats biscuits instead of watering the plant. Eating the biscuits leads to a stomach ache. The Prince's eating too many oaten biscuits, not his failure to water the plant, caused his stomach ache.

In this example, if the Prince of Wales had watered the plant, he would not have gotten a stomach ache. Counterintuitively, the failure to water the plant counts as a cause of the stomach ache.

Initially, proportionality seems to be a promising solution to the Prince of Wales problem. For we can say that the Prince's eating biscuits does not cause the plant's death because something less specific-- the Prince's failure to water the plant-- is sufficient for the plant's death. Since eating biscuits isn't proportionate to the plant's death, it is not the cause. And in the case of the stomach ache, we can deny that the prince's failure to water the plant causes the stomach ache because something more specific-- eating the biscuits-- is required for the stomach ache's occurrence. Proportionality can be incorporated into the very conditions of a counterfactual account of causation: it must not only be the case that had the cause not occurred, the effect would not have occurred; the cause must also be at a level of specificity proportionate to that of the effect.

Nevertheless, Sartorio contends that a counterfactual account of causation which incorporates proportionality lacks the "neatness" of the original counterfactual account, and also introduces new problems with preemption. Responses to the Prince of Wales problem include Menzies (2011), who proposes emending Lewis' counterfactual analysis to cull unwanted causal candidates; and Weslake (2013), who partly appeals to contrastive causation to solve the problem.

3.3 Omissions and the Causal *Relata*

Whether or not omissions can be causes also depends on what the causal *relata* are. Taking causal *relata* to be events, where events are particular goings-on in spacetime

regions, would seem to disallow causation by omission. Consider the failure to depress the lever. There seems to be no particular spacetime region which is the omission, since every spacetime region contains some sort of positive occurrence.

The positive event identity view might or might not have an advantage with respect to omissions as causes. On the one hand, the positive event identity theorist can hold that it is the positive event which is causally efficacious. For example, suppose that I am typing while I am supposed to be watering the plant. Then we can hold that, because my failure to water the plant is identical with the typing, there is causation between the failure and the plant's death in virtue of causation between the typing and the plant's death. On the other hand, it does not seem as if *the typing* causes the plant's death—indeed, it would be incorrect to say so. Neither productive nor dependent notions of causation straightforwardly apply to such cases. The relevant positive event-involving counterfactuals (for example, “If the typing hadn't occurred, the plant's death wouldn't have occurred”) are false, for it is not necessarily the case that had the typing not occurred, the plant wouldn't have died. And the typing does not transfer energy to the plant, as in the case of one domino's strike against another. It may be the case that *some* positive event (for example, oxygen around the plant) transfers energy to the plant, resulting in its death. But *the typing* does not transfer energy to the plant.

Views of causal *relata* as facts or properties easily handle causation by omission. For then the causal claim “The gardener's failure to water the plant caused the plant to die” becomes:

The fact that the gardener failed to water the plant caused the fact that the plant died.

Similarly, the property instance *being dead* is caused by the property instance *having failed to receive an influx of water*.

However, many take facts and property instances to be ill-suited as causal *relata*. Facts are too abstract, and do not seem to engage in the “push and pull” that, intuitively, causation involves. Similarly, property instances must be instantiated *in* something else—events or objects, for example—that are seen to do the real causal work.

The debate over omissions and causal *relata* mirrors the methodological split mentioned at the beginning of this section. Some metaphysicians take omissions to be a driving motivation towards a particular view of the causal *relata*. Mellor (1995), for example, holds that causation by omission supports *transcendent* causal *relata* (that is, causal *relata* that are not spatiotemporally located.) Others do not take intuitive data about omissions to constrain theories of causal *relata*.

4. Moral Responsibility and the Metaphysics of Omissions

Another place that omissions are of interest is in their relevance to moral responsibility. The literature on moral responsibility for omissions is vast, and I will not do justice to it here. Rather, I will briefly summarize some ways in which the metaphysics of omissions intersects with moral responsibility.

4.1 Moral Asymmetries Between Actions and Omissions

It seems clear that in simple contrast cases such as (Lever) and (Modified Lever), there is no moral asymmetry between actions and omissions: each agent bears equal moral responsibility for the deaths of the civilians. But as the complexity of the omissive scenarios increases, so, too, does the picture of moral responsibility. Consider the following two contrast cases put to use in Sartorio (2005) (originally from Fischer and Ravizza (1998)):

(Sharks) While walking by the beach, I see a child drowning. I think I could jump into the water and save him but I deliberately refrain from doing so. The child drowns. Unbeknownst to me, the water is infested by sharks. Had I jumped in, the sharks would have attacked me and prevented me from saving the child.

(Planted Sharks) This time I am responsible for the sharks being in the water: yesterday I negligently released the sharks in the area—I had no good reason to release the sharks, and I had good reason not to, but I still did. Today I see that the child is drowning but I do not attempt a rescue because it would be fruitless.

In the first case, Sartorio claims, the agent is not responsible for the child's death because she could not have saved the child due to the sharks. In the second case, it seems clear that the agent *is* responsible for the child's death owing to the release of the sharks in the water. Moreover, it does not seem as if the agent is *additionally* responsible because she

failed to jump into the water. The agent brought about the death in (Planted Sharks) by bringing about a scenario in which she could not later prevent the death. Sartorio holds that this is a specific kind of moral asymmetry between actions and omissions, and that it is grounded in the following causal asymmetry:

NA (Causal): An action can cause an outcome even if the outcome would still have occurred in the absence of the action. By contrast, an omission cannot cause an outcome if the outcome would still have occurred in the absence of the omission.

According to this principle, an agent can cause an outcome via “positive” action even if the outcome would still have occurred had she not acted, but an agent cannot cause an outcome by omitting to act a certain way if the outcome would still have occurred had she acted that way. This causal principle undergirds differences in moral attributions to agents involved in actions and omissions that lead to the same outcomes:

(NA) An agent’s responsibility for an action can transmit to an outcome even if the outcome would have occurred anyway in the absence of the action. However, an agent’s responsibility for an omission cannot transmit to an outcome if the outcome would have occurred anyway in the absence of the omission.

Here, the metaphysical difference between actions and omissions is said to affect how and whether moral responsibility is transmitted.

A *prima facie* asymmetry between actions and omissions is that moral responsibility for the consequence of an action does not require freedom to refrain from performing the action (as shown by Frankfurt cases). In contrast, responsibility for failure to perform an action requires freedom to perform the action. In (Sharks), for example, the agent is not responsible for the victim’s drowning because he could not have saved the victim in the first place. However, Frankfurt cases of omission seem to show that an agent can be responsible for failure to perform an action even if she did not have freedom to perform the action. Clarke gives the following such example:

“Sam promises to babysit little Freddy. But Sam forgets. No one makes Sam forget; it just slips his mind. Consequently, he fails to show up to babysit little Freddy. Unbeknownst to Sam, a mad scientist is monitoring his thoughts. Had Sam been going to remember his promise, the scientist would have intervened and prevented him from remembering it. The scientist would not have intervened in

any other way. As it happened, the scientist did not intervene at all; there was no need to.” (Clarke 1994)

Here, Sam is morally responsible for forgetting to babysit Freddy, even though he could not have done so.¹³

Another prominent application of the metaphysics of omissions to ethics is in the distinction between killing and letting die. (The distinction between killing and letting die is an instance of a more general moral distinction between doing and allowing.) Those who hold that there is a moral distinction between killing and letting die face the question of how to ground such a distinction. One way to ground this distinction is by holding that there is a deep metaphysical difference between “positive” harm, such as administering poison, and omitting to help, such as failing to administer the life-saving serum. Quinn (1989) favors such an account, as does, more recently, Moore (2009)¹⁴. Opponents argue that there is a moral difference without a causal difference. And still others (such as Howard-Snyder (2011)) hold that any causal distinction between killing and letting die is not morally significant.

4.2 Omissions and Free Will

Finally, there has been a recent flurry of work on the intersection of omissions and free will. In this vein, Sartorio (ms) argues that omissions can be of help in formulating the best version of the actual sequence view of free will. According to actual sequence views, if two acts have the same actual causal history, then they are equally free or not free. Views of free will often involve *reasons sensitivity*. An agent is *reasons-sensitive* in acting in a certain way when there is an appropriately wide range of scenarios where the agent would have recognized sufficient reasons against acting in that way and would have refrained from acting in that way as a result. The problem with reasons-sensitivity is that it is often formulated counterfactually. If sensitivity to reasons is counterfactual, then difference in reasons might not be reflected in actual causal scenarios. For example: suppose that there are two agents, Frank and Insensitive Frank, both of whom make the choice to shoot Furt. And suppose that Frank is sensitive to reasons not to shoot Furt, but Insensitive Frank is not. This difference might not be reflected in the actual causal sequences of each shooting, which might be identical. Sartorio’s solution is

to distinguish between Frank and Insensitive Frank's Furt-shootings by taking omitted reasons to be part of each agent's causal history. For example, part of the causal sequence in Frank's causal history is the *absence* of an overriding reason *not* to shoot Furt, whereas the same absence is not present in Insensitive Frank's causal sequence because it would not have made a difference to whether or not Insensitive Frank shoots Furt.

Clarke (2014) suggests that there are several respects in which one might be free in omitting to do something. An agent can freely perform some action that is incompatible with another action, as when a child holds her body still while playing hide-and-seek. An agent might freely perform an action that causes an omission, as when he crosses his legs in order to avoid tapping his foot. And an agent can freely decide to refrain from an action, as when she decides not to walk through freshly laid concrete. Finally, an agent might be free to do the thing that she omits to do, having the ability and opportunity to do it; it might be up to her whether she does it. Clarke suggests that such freedom can be *basic*, rather than deriving from one's responsibility for performing an action.

References

- Armstrong, David. *Universals and Scientific Realism, Vol. 2: A Theory of Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Beebe, Helen. 'Causing and Nothingness.' *Causation and Counterfactuals*. John Collins, Ned Hall & Laurie Paul (eds.), The MIT Press. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 291-308.
- Bernstein, Sara. Omissions as Possibilities. *Philosophical Studies* 167:1 (2014): 1-23.
- _____. Two Problems for Proportionality about Omissions. *Dialectica* 68:3 (2014): 429-441.
- _____. Omission Impossible. *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming)
- _____. Possible Causation. (ms)
- Clarke, Randolph. 'Ability and Responsibility for Omissions.' *Philosophical Studies* 73: 195-208.
- _____. Absence of Action. *Philosophical Studies* 158 (2012): 361-376.
- _____. 'Freedom, Responsibility, and Omitting to Act.' *Libertarian Free Will: Contemporary Debates* Ed. David Palmer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 107-126.
- _____. *Omissions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- _____. Joshua Shepherd, John Stigall, Robyn Repko Waller & Chris Zarpentine. Causation: norms, and omissions: A study of causal judgments. *Philosophical Psychology* (forthcoming).
- Dowe, Phil. *Physical Causation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- _____. A Counterfactual Theory of Prevention and 'Causation' by Omission. *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 79 (2):216 – 226 (2001).
- _____. Proportionality and Omissions. *Analysis* 70 (3) (2010): 446-451.
- _____. The Power of Possible Causation. (ms)
- Fischer, John and Ravizza, Mark. *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Hall, Ned. 'Two Concepts of Causation.' *Causation and Counterfactuals*. John Collins, Ned Hall & Laurie Paul (eds.), The MIT Press. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 181-276.
- Henne, Paul and Pinillos, Àngel. Cause by Omission and Norms: What the Folk Tell Us about Omissive Causes. (ms)
- Hommen, D. Absences as Latent Potentials. (ms)

Howard-Snyder, Frances, "Doing vs. Allowing Harm", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/doing-allowing/>.

Lewis, David. 'Causation as Influence.' *Causation and Counterfactuals*. John Collins, Ned Hall & Laurie Paul (eds.), The MIT Press. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 75-106.

_____. 'Void and Object.' *Causation and Counterfactuals*. John Collins, Ned Hall & Laurie Paul (eds.), The MIT Press. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 277-290.

McGrath, Sarah. Causation by Omission: A Dilemma. *Philosophical Studies* 123 (2005): 125–148.

Mellor, D.H. *The Facts of Causation*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Menzies, Peter. 'Difference-making in Context.' *Causation and Counterfactuals*. John Collins, Ned Hall & Laurie Paul (eds.), The MIT Press. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. 139-180.

_____. 'The Role of Counterfactual Dependence in Causal Judgments.' *Understanding Counterfactuals, Understanding Causation: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology* Christoph Hoerl, Teresa McCormack, and Sarah R. Beck (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Moore, Michael. *Causation and Moral Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Quinn, Warren S. Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing *Philosophical Review*, 98 (3) (1989): 287–312.

Shapiro, Larry and Sober, Elliot. Against Proportionality. *Analysis* 2 (1):89-93 (2012)

Sartorio, Carolina. A New Asymmetry Between Actions and Omissions. *Nous* 39:3 (2005): 460–482.

_____. 'The Prince of Wales Problem for Counterfactual Theories of Causation'. *New Waves in Metaphysics*, Allan Hazlett (ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 259-276.

_____. Moore on Doing Versus Allowing Harm, 42 *Rutgers Law Journal* 435 (2011).

Sartorio (ms) *Causation and Free Will*.

Jonathan Schaffer. Causation by Disconnection. *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000) :285–300.

_____. 'Causes Need Not Be Physically Connected to Their Effects: The Case for Negative Causation.' *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Science*, C. Hitchcock (ed.), Malden MA: Blackwell, (2004) 197–216.

_____. Disconnection and Responsibility. *Legal Theory* 18 (2012): 399-435.

Tiehen, Justin. The Role of a Functional Theory of Absences. *Erkenntnis* (forthcoming).

Weslake, Brad. Proportionality, Contrast, and Explanation. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 91 (4) (2013):785-797.

Varzi, Achille. 'The Talk I Was Supposed to Give'. *Modes of Existence: Papers in Ontology and Philosophical Logic*, A. Bottani and R. Davies (eds.), Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2006, pp. 131–152.

_____. 'Omissions and Causal Explanations', in Francesca Castellani and Josef Quitterer (eds.), *Agency and Causation in the Human Sciences*, Paderborn, Mentis Verlag, 2007, pp. 155–167.

Zangwill, Nick. "Negative Properties" *Noûs* 45:3 (2011): 528–556.

¹ Thanks to Paul Henne, Carolina Sartorio, and an anonymous referee for helpful feedback on this article.

² Here I set aside Dowe's "intuition of difference", according to which some cases of absence causation (for example, my failure to pour poison on the plant causes the failure of the plant to die) do not count as genuine cases of causation. (See Dowe (2001)) It is controversial whether such intuitive differences mark real causal differences.

³ Fischer and Ravizza (1998) hold a view that also falls into this family.

⁴ As far as I can tell, no one formally holds these views, though many have been tempted by these views in conversation.

⁷ Here I set aside the positive event identity view, which would locate omissions in spacetime.

⁸ It is also, arguably, a failure to do impossible things, such as prove that $2+2=5$. See Bernstein (forthcoming).

⁹ Thanks to a referee for this point.

¹⁰ This example is taken from Schaffer (2000).

¹¹ So termed by Menzies (2004).

¹² Experimental evidence shows that folk intuitions support this thesis. See Henne et. al (ms), Clarke et. al (forthcoming).

¹³ Fischer and Ravizza (1998) also deny the asymmetry. Instead, they develop an account of "guidance control" for omissions that parallels their account for positive actions. According to that account, moral responsibility issues partly from an agent's ownership of the mechanism that actually results in the agent's behavior, and the reasons-responsiveness of that mechanism. Cases of causation by omission satisfy these requirements.

¹⁴ For a convincing argument against Moore, see Sartorio (2011).