Omission Impossible?: It Depends

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OMISSION IMPOSSIBLE? IT DEPENDS

By

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Suppose I don’t give this dissertation a title. In such a case am I responsible for not giving my dissertation a title? Does my responsibility for not giving my dissertation a title require that I could have given my dissertation a title? Would I still be responsible if some villain opposed to ironically not giving dissertations titles were prepared to see to it that I did not give my dissertation a title if I were to show some sign of doing so? In any case, what exactly is it to not give a dissertation a title? What might have caused this behavior? Is my not giving my dissertation a title the sort of thing that can be caused at all?

The preceding questions concern whether I am responsible for omitting to give my dissertation a title. In my dissertation I want to show that because of certain peculiarities about the metaphysics of omissions and causation, the first three questions cannot be adequately answered without investigating the last three questions. More specifically, I want to argue for the thesis that moral responsibility requires a morally salient causal relationship between an agent and an outcome, and I want to argue further for a unique asymmetry thesis about responsibility for omissions and positive actions.¹ A morally salient causal relationship is a causal relationship which has a morally salient cause. The thesis will explain why Frankfurt cases differ when they describe an agent doing a positive action from when they describe an agent omitting to perform some action.

If my thesis is correct, it will do the following things:

(1) Give a systematic explanation of the success of Frankfurt cases.

(2) Provide theoretical guidelines for evaluating Frankfurt-style omission cases independently of intuitions about moral responsibility.

(3) Show why Frankfurt-style omission cases are often more problematic than positive action Frankfurt-style cases.

In short it will account for the prima facie plausibility of asymmetry theses such as the following:

\[(AT): \text{responsibility for positive actions does not require the ability to do otherwise, but responsibility for omissions does require the ability to do otherwise}\]

¹ I will typically use the phrase “morally salient,” but I will also sometimes use the phrase “morally significant,” which has the same meaning.
INTRODUCTION

Preliminaries

Suppose I don’t give this dissertation a title. In such a case am I responsible for not giving my dissertation a title? Does my responsibility for not giving my dissertation a title require that I could have given my dissertation a title? Would I still be responsible if some villain opposed to ironically not giving dissertations titles were prepared to see to it that I did not give my dissertation a title if I were to show some sign of doing so? In any case, what exactly is it to not give a dissertation a title? What might have caused this behavior? Is my not giving my dissertation a title the sort of thing that can be caused at all?

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In short it will account for the prima facie plausibility of asymmetry theses such as the following:

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2 I will typically use the phrase “morally salient,” but I will also sometimes use the phrase “morally significant,” which has the same meaning.
(AT): responsibility for positive actions does not require the ability to do otherwise, but responsibility for omissions does require the ability to do otherwise.

I am not interested in arguing in favor of or against AT. In fact, I need not argue for a specific asymmetry thesis at all. Although there may very well be plausible asymmetry theses worth considering, the truth of a specific asymmetry thesis is not my concern in this dissertation. Instead, I want to show why justification for the claim that moral responsibility for positive actions does not require the ability to do otherwise is more readily available to philosophers than is justification for the claim that moral responsibility for omissions does not require the ability to do otherwise.

**Methodology**

I will be using the methods of analytic philosophy in the traditional sense. A great deal of my work will involve critically examining thought experiments and giving a theoretical justification for the judgments many philosophers make about them. I will sometimes make my own judgements about thought experiments. In each chapter, I will try to anticipate and respond to possible objections.

**Frankfurt Style Cases**

A Frankfurt-style case is a type of thought experiment made famous by Harry Frankfurt which involves some agent, call her the “would-be victim,” performing some action of moral significance on her own, but where some villain or device, call her/it the “would-be intervener,” is prepared to see to it that the agent performs that action if it starts to look like the would-be victim is not going to perform the action in question. The situation never does require an intervention on the part of the would-be intervener, so the would-be intervener and the would-be victim are exactly what their names imply. No intervention occurs. Even so, the would-be victim lacks an ability to do otherwise in these scenarios because she's a *would-be* victim. The would-be intervener is prepared to see to it that she performs the action no matter what. However, because the would-be victim has no responsibility undermining properties and she does not seem to be in any sort of responsibility undermining situation, she seems to be responsible for the thing she did. Here’s a typical example of a Frankfurt case:

*A Typical Example of a Frankfurt Case:* A undergoes rational, sane deliberation and decides to kill a particular innocent person based on her deliberation. She takes a gun and kills

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3 See (Frankfurt 1969).
the innocent person by shooting her. What A does not know is that if A had shown any sign of not deciding to killing the innocent person and doing so, B, an evil neuroscientist who has a special device implanted into A's brain, would have seen to it that she decided to kill the innocent person and done so by manipulating A's brain states. In any case, B never got involved at all.

In this case A is the would-be victim and B is the would-be intervener. The case above involves a positive action, but the cases can also be described where the would-be victim fails to perform an action or fails to perform an action.

Positive Actions and Omissions

There are two variants of these cases under consideration here: those where the agent performs a positive action and those where the agent omits to act. I think that Frankfurt-style cases show that it is possible for an agent to be responsible for some action or outcome of an action even if the agent was unable to do otherwise, but I do not think it is very clear that Frankfurt-style omission cases can be similarly successful. Many philosophers agree with me about this and have proposed asymmetry theses to account for this difference. The simplest version of it says something like AT, that an agent does not require the ability to do otherwise in order to be responsible for a positive or ordinary action but does require the ability to do otherwise in order to be responsible for an omission. I will not try to defend this asymmetry thesis, but I believe that if we closely examine Frankfurt-style cases as they apply to positive actions we can discover why one might be justified in finding them plausible. Once we find out what feature makes them so plausible we can try to determine if the same feature is present in Frankfurt-style omissions cases. I think that there is such a feature in Frankfurt-style cases which involve positive actions. I think the feature present in Frankfurt style cases involving positive action is a sort of morally salient causal relationship between an agent and whatever it is that the agent is purported to be responsible for. This is a bit of a divergence from the typical view. Many philosophers have noted that the would-be intervener plays no role in the actual sequence of events that led to the agent’s action/outcome and take the lesson from Frankfurt cases to be that we should focus on the actual sequence of events that led to the action/outcome when we morally

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4 A Frankfurt-style case is “successful” when it shows that an agent can be morally responsible without having the ability to do otherwise.

5 See (Fischer 1985-1986) and (Sartorio 2005).
evaluate agents. But I think this view is limited and not specific enough. I think there are many reasons why it’s more specific and less limiting to say that a morally salient causal relationship between the agent and the action explains why the would-be victims are responsible in the typical sorts of Frankfurt cases. On my view, there will be some cases where the presence of a would-be intervener is irrelevant to the would-be victim’s responsibility and other cases where the presence of a would-be intervener is very relevant to the would-be victim’s responsibility. The general idea is that a would-be intervener has no effect on whether an agent is physically connected to an outcome, but the would-be intervener will have an effect on whether the occurrence of an outcome depends on the agent. So the two types of causal relationships most relevant to Frankfurt cases are physical connection and dependence. I expand on this in the second chapter.

**Morally Salient Causal Relationships**

The causal relationship needs to be morally salient. Call a causal relationship “salient” if it stands out among other causal relationships in a particular situation. Call a relationship “morally salient” if it stands out among other causal relationships in a particular situation for moral reasons. In cases of causation involving salience in general, Lewis (1973, 558) describes salience in the following way:

> We sometimes single out one among all the causes of some event and call it “the” cause, as if there were no others. Or we single out a few of the “causes,” calling the rest mere “causal factors” or “causal conditions.” Or we speak of the “decisive” or “real” or “principle” cause. We may select the abnormal or extraordinary causes, or those under human control, or those we deem good or bad, or just those we want to talk about.

Those causes that we single out for moral reasons I would take to be morally salient or morally significant causes. Thus, in some cases there are some causes that are significant in general but are not morally significant and also cases where there are causes which are morally significant but not at all significant for other reasons.

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6 The most notable example being (Fischer and Ravizza 1998).
7 I use the term “relationship” but I do not wish to assume that causation is a relation between events, properties, or anything else. In fact, the question of whether causation is a relation bears central significance to my dissertation. My use of the term is completely for purposes of convenience.
8 I expand on this notion of agential dependence in my summary of Chapter 3 below.
I think the notion of a morally salient causal relationship can be used as a test to evaluate Frankfurt style omission cases, but a problem arises when we try to do this: The questions of (1) whether or not omissions can be caused and (2) how omissions would be caused if they are caused become relevant. How and whether omissions can enter in causal relationships depends both on the sort of causal relationship in question and what omissions are. These issues are also further fleshed out in my third and fourth chapters.

In the first chapter, I will argue that Frankfurt cases in general, insofar as they are successful in showing that an agent can be responsible for an action/outcome without having the ability to do otherwise, are successful because they show that a morally salient causal relationship between an agent and an action/outcome does not always require an agent to have the ability to do otherwise. The general idea is that an agent can be physically connected to an action/outcome in a morally significant way even if the action/outcome does not depend on the agent. I will explain that since the dissertation is about Frankfurt-style omission cases and the asymmetry thesis, I will be operating under the assumption that some of the Frankfurt-style cases involving ordinary actions are successful.

In the second chapter I will be investigating several issues surrounding the metaphysics of omissions because I think that these issues are relevant to the question of whether responsibility for omissions requires the ability to do otherwise. In the second chapter, I want to introduce the concept of omissions, examine the metaphysical disputes that surround omissions, and closely examine the consequences of those views. The metaphysical status of omissions is highly controversial, and my only aim is to account for the views that commonly appear in the philosophical literature about omissions and explain the reasons that philosophers accept these views. There are three general types of views that philosophers tend to adopt about omissions: eliminative, reductive, and non-reductive realist.\(^9\) An eliminativist says there is nothing that is an omission, a reductionist thinks she can reduce omissions to some other sort of ordinary entity, and the realist says that omissions are entities in their own right which need not be reduced to any other sort of ordinary entities.\(^10\) I am not interested in endorsing any of these views, but the

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\(^9\) Or “realist” for short.

\(^10\) A theory need not say the same thing about all instances of omissions. Perhaps some omissions are nothing at all and others can be plausibly reduced to relatively unproblematic entities, this point will be relevant to the fourth chapter.
disputes concerning these views is important because the ability for omissions to enter in certain sorts of causal relationships depends on what sort of thing an omission is if it is anything at all.

The third chapter will be a discussion of the metaphysics of causation. The metaphysics of causation is relevant to the dissertation because I will be appealing to some research suggesting that there are two concepts of causation: one of which is friendly to omissions being causes and effects and one of which is hostile to the idea of omissions being causes and effects. Some philosophers think that the omissions-hostile accounts capture the correct concept of causation and others think the omissions-friendly concept is the correct one or the most appropriate. Some think that the omissions-hostile and the omissions-friendly notions are on a par. I will not need to take any stand in this dispute, and I will not.

Instead, I will introduce a distinction between connection and dependence, and argue that dependence is friendly to omissions as causes irrespective of what omissions are but that connection can be hostile to omissions as causes depending on the metaphysics of omissions. The case of throwing a baseball at a window and thereby breaking the window differs not only in detail but also in kind from the case of watching a kid who I could easily stop throw a baseball at a window and break a window. If I throw a baseball at a window, my throw caused the window to break because of the physical connection between me and the window’s breaking. If I watch a kid I could easily stop throw a baseball at a window and thereby break it, then we have a kind of dependence: whether or not the window broke depended on whether or not I stopped the kid. Additionally, if I was capable of stopping the kid, it depended on me whether or not the window broke.

My distinction is inspired by other philosophers such as Ned Hall (2004), Phil Dowe (2000), (2004), Helen Beebee (2004), and David Lewis (2004), but it is decidedly unique. Hall’s distinction is between production and dependence, where production is a local, intrinsic, transitive relation while dependence is just counterfactual dependence. Dowe makes at least two separate distinctions, but the one I have in mind is his distinction between causation and quasi-causation. Causation, for Dowe, is accounted for in terms of objects possessing conserved quantities and interacting with other objects by exchanging those conserved quantities, and quasi-causation consists of counterfactuals about causation. Beebee takes a more general approach and distinguishes relationist and non-relationist notions of causation. Lewis distinguishes biff from causation, where biff is a relation and causation is the ancestral of causal
dependence/causal influence. My plan is to just summarize the views of Hall, Dowe, Beebee, and Lewis, so I will not be evaluating the merits of their respective distinctions. My goal is simply to separate my own distinction from those of other philosophers of causation.

In any case, my distinction is one between connection and dependence. The notion of connection will be quite like what Hall has in mind when he talks about production and what Dowe has in mind when he talks about causation. I think agents can enter into causal interactions with things in the world in much the same way as objects, and that an agent can be a relatum in a local intrinsic transitive relation, but dependence, at least the sort of dependence relevant to the issues I will be discussing, is not counterfactual dependence. Instead, it is something I call “agential dependence.” Some x depends on an agent A just in case whether or not x occurs depends on A. Unlike counterfactual dependence, it is not immediately clear that agential-dependence can be analyzed in terms of Lewis-style counterfactuals or counterfactuals at all for that matter (I will further investigate this question in Chapter 3.) It will also be necessary for me to distinguish agential-dependence from agent-causation. That some x was agent-caused by an agent A is compatible with the claim that x agentially-depends on A, but I will not claim that there is any entailment in either direction. In this chapter I will anticipate and respond to objections about the relevance of the metaphysics of causation to the issue of responsibility for omissions and also about my appeal to the notion of agential-dependence.

In the fourth chapter, I will examine the Frankfurt-style omission cases that have already appeared in the literature and apply the developments that arise out of the second and third chapters to evaluate them. I expect to reach the following results: (a) dependence between an agent and an omission is possible irrespective of what omissions are; (b) connection between an agent and an omission is impossible assuming eliminativism; (c) connection between an agent and an omission is possible assuming certain versions of reductionism; (d) connection between an agent and an omission is possible assuming certain versions of realism. Because a morally salient causal relationship will require either connection or dependence, because dependence between an agent and whatever it is that the agent did or failed to do cannot exist in a Frankfurt case (if a would-be intervener was prepared to ensure that the agent did A, then whether or not the agent did A does not depend on the agent), and because it is impossible for an omission to be

11 By “agent” I just mean whatever it is that can be responsible for acts, omissions, and outcomes.
12 See (Lewis, Counterfactuals 1973) for his theory of counterfactuals.
connected to anything assuming eliminativism about omissions, the only hope for a successful Frankfurt-style omission case, and consequently any theory of responsibility for omissions that does not involve the ability to do otherwise, will require connective causation and a specific sort of realist or reductive account of omissions. I will anticipate and respond to attempts at developing successful Frankfurt-style omission cases without any regard to the conclusions I reach in this chapter.

In the preceding chapters I assume that it is theoretically feasible to draw a distinction between morally salient causal relationships and causal relationships that are not morally salient, but in the final chapter I try to systematically flesh out the distinction between the two. Most philosophical theories of causation take the question of whether some causal relationship obtains to be completely independent of norms. For example, if Greta with a green light and Rachel with a red light collide in an intersection, there is no question that there’s a causal relationship between Greta and the accident according to most theories of causation, but because Rachel had a red light, the causal relationship between her and the accident is legally salient in a way that Greta’s relationship to the accident is not. Any given event has several different causes, but philosophers take it that some causes can be more salient than others because of epistemic, legal, and moral norms. Causation by omission itself is significant because some philosophers have taken the question of whether causation by omission has occurred at all to depend on whether certain norms apply.

Thus, in the fifth chapter I will try to pinpoint the norms most relevant to attributions of moral responsibility in Frankfurt cases and Frankfurt style omission cases in order to distinguish causal relationships between agents and outcomes that are not morally salient from those that are. If I touch shoulders with a bank robber on my way out of the bank, and she proceeds to rob the bank, then there is a very small causal relationship between my touching shoulders with the robber and the robbery. There is a physical connection between the robbery and me. But this is not a salient causal relationship. If I accidentally trip up the bank robber and she is caught, then there is certainly a salient causal relationship between my tripping the bank robber up and her being caught, but it is not morally salient in the way I have in mind. If I spot the robber and alert security resulting in the robber being caught, then the relationship between me and the robber’s being caught is morally salient. My final chapter is meant to make some suggestions as
to which sorts of norms allow us to distinguish the causal relationships that obtain in these sorts of cases.

**Preliminary Worries**

Some might worry that metaphysical questions about the ontological status of omissions and the nature of causation are only tangentially relevant to questions about responsibility for omissions. It is possible to investigate several of these questions, taking causation and omission as primitive or leaving “causation” and “omission” undefined. In general, if auxiliary notions can be taken as primitive or left undefined, then we should do so.

In response to this objection, I first agree that we can take auxiliary notions as primitive and leave them undefined if it is feasible to do so but not that we must do so. The questions I will be investigating in this dissertation have consequences concerning whether or not a certain class of Frankfurt cases can be successful at all and it also provides an explanation for why such cases would be successful.

There is an additional point of clarification that I think provides a further response to this line of objection. I make no commitments about which theory causation or omissions is correct in my dissertation. Think of the following line of argument in the context of theories of knowledge:

1. According to the causal theory of knowledge, we acquire knowledge about things by causally interacting with them.
2. According to the correct theory of causation, the absence of light from black holes does not causally interact with our perceptual apparatus.
3. We have knowledge of black holes.
4. So, the causal theory of knowledge is incorrect.

I do not make any arguments like this in my dissertation, and I think these sorts of arguments will always have premises that are very difficult to support. Unless a slam dunk argument can be made in favor of the second premise, it is simply off topic. There are theories of causation according to which the absence of light from black holes does causally interact with the perceptual apparatuses of subjects. A causal theory of knowledge need not be committed to the correct theory of causation, only compatible with the correct theory of causation. It seems to me that it can appeal to a much looser notion than the one the metaphysician is seeking. However, I think the following sort of argument is a better one in the context of theories of knowledge:
(1) According to the causal theory of knowledge, we acquire knowledge about things by causally interacting with them.
(2) According to every combination of plausible theories of causation and abstract objects, we never causally interact with abstract objects.
(3) We have knowledge of abstract objects.
(C) So, the causal theory of knowledge is incorrect.

However, just because this is a good argument does not mean that the following is not also a good argument in the context of theories of knowledge:

(1) According to the causal theory of knowledge, we acquire knowledge about things by causally interacting with them.
(2) According to every combination of plausible theories of causation and abstract objects, we never causally interact with abstract objects.
(3) The causal theory of knowledge is correct.
(C) So, we have no knowledge of abstract objects.

In my dissertation I will be making arguments more similar to the last two we just considered. I am concerned about whether the following argument is a successful one.

(1) According to every combination of plausible theories about causation and omissions, Frankfurt-style omission cases cannot succeed, even if Frankfurt-style positive action cases can succeed.
(2) Some combination of these theories is correct.
(C) Frankfurt style omission cases cannot succeed.

It is too early to say if the argument above is a good one, but my investigations will determine whether or not arguments of this sort are workable.
CHAPTER 1

FRANKFURT-STYLE CASES

Introductory Section

A Frankfurt-style case is a scenario where an agent, call her the would-be victim, decides on her own to do something, A, on her own but where some villain, call it the would-be-intervener, was prepared to ensure that the would-be victim would do A if it started to look like the would-be-victim was going to do something other than A. When confronted with these sorts of cases, we are supposed to make the judgment that the would-be-victim is responsible for doing A even though he was unable to do otherwise. If the examples succeed, they show that the following principle of alternative possibilities is false:

(PAP): If an agent is responsible for Aing, then the agent was able not to A.

The principle is relevant to philosophical disputes between compatibilists and incompatibilists about moral responsibility because determinism, the view that a complete description of the state of the universe at any time plus a statement of the laws of nature entails every truth about the state of the universe at every other time, is thought by incompatibilists to be incompatible with free action and moral responsibility. If determinism is true, the argument might go, agents are unable to avoid performing as they actually do and are thus never responsible for acting as they do. Compatibilists about responsibility and determinism have the options of either denying that determinism rules out the ability to do otherwise or denying PAP. Those who deny PAP often appeal to Frankfurt-style cases. Here’s an example of one:

**Typical Frankfurt Case:** A undergoes rational, sane deliberation and decides to kill B based on her deliberation. She takes her gun and kills B by shooting her. What A doesn’t know is that if A had shown any sign of deciding not to kill B, C, an evil neuroscientist, would have seen to it that she decided to kill B carried out that decision by manipulating A’s brain states. In any case, C never needed to get involved.

In this case, the argument goes, A was unable to avoid killing B, but A was responsible for killing B, contrary to PAP.

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13 Of course, anything at all can play the role of the would-be intervener. It need not be a villain. It could be forces of nature or machines which have no intentions or motivations.
Compatibilists can take many lessons from Frankfurt cases, but I think one of the most interesting lessons is based on the observation that the actual sequence of events that led from A’s rational, sane, deliberation to A’s killing B is intrinsically the same whether we add or subtract the presence of C. Facts about the would-be intervener seem irrelevant to A’s being responsible for what she did. If we were to subtract the would-be intervener from the scenario, the actual sequence of events going from A’s firing of the gun and B’s dying plays out in the same way. Call this lesson the actual sequence lesson.\(^\text{14}\)

I take a different lesson from Frankfurt cases. Note that in Typical, there is a morally salient causal relationship between A and A’s shooting B. The causal relationship between A and A’s shooting B obtains independently of any facts about A’s inability to avoid her shooting of B. Call this lesson the morally salient causal relationship lesson. The presence of the right sort of actual sequence and the right sort of causal relationship often overlap, but when we start discussing cases of responsibility by omission, we will find that they come apart.

By “morally salient causal relationship” I mean two things: first, there is a causal relationship. A made a decision, which caused her to fire the gun. A’s firing of the gun caused B’s death. There is a physical connection between A the agent and B’s death. There is a series of causal processes that start with A and end in B’s death. This is all true, but the presence of a causal relationship is not sufficient for a successful Frankfurt case because A could have been coerced and there still would have been a causal relationship between A and B’s death, so we need to appeal to the right kind of causal relationship. Second, I mean that the causal relationship is salient for moral reasons. Some causal relationships are more salient than others. To call some cause salient is just to say that it stands out among other causes. One thing that leads to some causes standing out more than others is that its occurrence is deviant or abnormal in some way or another. The occurrence of a cause may stand out because of a statistical norm, an epistemic norm, because of a norm about our expectations, or many others. When I talk about morally salient causal relationships, I mean causal relationships that stand out for moral reasons.\(^\text{15}\) In Typical Frankfurt Case, the causal relationship between A and B’s death is a

\(^{14}\) Fischer and Ravizza (1998) defend an actual sequence view.

\(^{15}\) This approach is intended completely compatible with both realist and anti-realist meta-ethical views of morality. The question of whether a causal relationship has obtained is independent of norms on my account. The moral norms that determine whether a causal relationship is salient or not can be read in either a realist or anti-realist manner.
morally salient causal relationship. Our moral expectations of those who are capable of sane rational deliberation and who have not been coerced are that they do not kill people. Causal relationships can also be salient when agents do good things. Supererogatory acts are contrary to our moral expectations because they go beyond them, but even non-supererogatory but right acts can be morally salient. Even merely good and morally obligatory actions are morally salient. In general, I want to say that if a causal relationship stands out in virtue of a moral norm, then there is a case of a morally salient causal relationship.

**The Actual Sequence**

Frankfurt himself seems to take the actual sequence lesson from Frankfurt style cases. He says the following about such cases:

It would surely be no good for the person to refer to circumstances of this sort in an effort to absolve himself of moral responsibility for performing the action in question. For those circumstances, by hypothesis, actually had nothing to do with his having done what he did. He would have done precisely the same thing, and he would have been led or made in precisely the same way to do it, even if they had not prevailed. (Frankfurt 1969, 837)

Also here:

The fact that a person could not have avoided doing something is a sufficient condition of his having done it. But, as some of my examples show, this fact may play no role whatever in the explanation of why he did it. It may not figure at all among the circumstances that actually brought it about that he did what he did, so that his action is to be accounted for on another basis entirely. Even though the person was unable to do otherwise, that is to say, it may not be the case that he acted as he did because he could not have done otherwise. (Frankfurt 1969, 836)

He concludes as follows:

Whatever it was that actually led the person to do what he did, or that made him do it, would have led him to do it or made him do it even if it had been possible for him to do something else instead.

The thought seems to be that considerations about whether or not an agent has the ability to do otherwise are considerations about whether or not the agent in fact does otherwise in some range
of possible scenarios which are available to the agent. But such considerations are irrelevant to
the agent’s responsibility in the Frankfurt scenario. In a successful Frankfurt-style case, this
range of possible scenarios is unavailable to the agent because of the presence of a would-be
intervener, but we still find that the agent, the would-be victim, is morally responsible for
whatever it is she did. In fact, when we remove the would-be intervener from our Typical
Frankfurt Case in the following way:

Typical Case: A undergoes rational, sane deliberation and decides to kill B based on her
deliberation. She takes her gun and kills B by shooting her,

we find that we have changed nothing at all about what led to the agent’s behavior. In our case,
A still underwent rational, sane deliberation, made a decision, and acted upon her decision.
Removing the would-be intervener C from the scenario Typical Frankfurt Case seems to have
no impact on A’s responsibility. A seems morally responsible for killing B in both Typical
Frankfurt Case and Typical Case.

Despite its intuitiveness, I think that there are many problems with the actual-sequence
lesson. First, I think contemporary defenders of the actual-sequence approach have blurred the
line between focusing on the actual sequence and focusing on other possible sequences. Take
Fischer for example:

By an ‘‘actual-sequence’’ account I simply mean an account of moral responsibility
which does not require the availability of alternative possibilities (of the sort
corresponding to Austin’s ‘‘all-in’’ sense of ‘can’). I do not mean that such an account
cannot make use of alternative scenarios (or other possible worlds), perhaps as a means
of fixing the modal characteristics of the actual sequence. (Fischer 1999)

This is strange considering that whether or not an agent acted having the ability to do otherwise
arguably concerns “modal characteristics” of the actual sequence that gives rise to the agent’s
behavior because if an agent has the ability to do otherwise, then she does do otherwise in other
possible sequences. If acting while having the ability to do otherwise counts as a relevant modal
feature, then the actual sequence lesson is the wrong one to take from Frankfurt cases, as they are
also supposed to be examples where an agent lacks the ability to do otherwise than what she

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16 It is not enough to say that the scenarios are metaphysically or nomically possible because one could argue that
there are cases where agents are unable to do otherwise, but where there is still a metaphysically or nomically
possible scenario where the agent in fact does otherwise.
actually does. Thus, the actual-sequence theorist needs an account of “modal characteristics” of actual sequences which rules out the ability to do otherwise but which still counts other modal characteristics that may be relevant.

Even if the actual sequence theorist can accomplish this, there are two additional points of concern: First, it seems to be a case of special pleading for the actual sequence theorist to allow that there are some modal characteristics of the actual sequence relevant to responsibility and others which are not when the lesson behind Frankfurt cases is supposed to be to focus on the actual sequence instead of the ability to do otherwise. Second, once I have explained how the metaphysics of omissions interacts with the metaphysics of causation, it will be become clear that the actual sequence lesson does not appear to apply very well at all to Frankfurt style cases which involve omissions.

Carolina Sartorio has an actual causal sequence view, meaning that she accepts the actual sequence lesson and takes a causal interpretation of the actual sequence lesson, which commits her to the view that the actual sequences relevant to moral responsibility are actual causal sequences. Sartorio discusses four highlights of her view but the highlight most relevant to our discussion is the following:

Actual sequences are causal histories. Freedom is a function of actual sequences in the sense that what grounds freedom is the fact that certain events are causally linked in certain ways (and not, in particular, the mere fact that those events obtain). If this is right, it means that an actual-sequence view cannot ignore the role of causation in grounding freedom.17

Since we both emphasize causation it is worthwhile to clearly distinguish the difference between my view and Satorio’s view. In taking the moral salient causal relationship lesson, I claim that it is the causal relationships not the actual sequence that is relevant to whether the agent is morally responsible. Satorio emphasizes that moral responsibility in grounded in actual causal sequences and is thereby still committed to the actual sequence view. If we were to arrange Fischer’s view, Sartorio’s view, and my view on a spectrum. Fischer would be on one end as one that emphasizes the actual sequence and places very little emphasis on the nature of causal relationships. Sartorio’s would be a centrist view that emphasizes both the actual sequence

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17 See (Sartorio 2016), 3-4.
and causal relationships. My view would be on the other end as one that emphasizes causal relationships and is indifferent to whether or not actual sequences are relevant.

I do not take Sartorio’s approach for reasons similar to the reasons that I do not take Fischer’s approach and reject the actual sequence view generally. Causal relationships, and especially causal relationships involving agents that are morally responsible for actions, omissions, and outcomes are not only accounted for in terms of actual sequences. Counterfactual facts figure significantly in instances where agents are morally responsible for omissions. My intention is to show that the phenomenon of omissions problematizes this focus on actual sequences.

**Causal Relationships**

I have taken the morally salient causal relationship lesson from Frankfurt cases. I think a morally salient causal relationship between the agent and what the agent did is the relevant feature that makes Frankfurt cases so successful. In Typical Frankfurt Case, there is a clear causal relationship between A and the shooting of B despite the presence of a backup who would have ensured that A shot B. But there are many different ways in which a causal relationship can obtain and many different ways in which a causal relationship can be morally significant.

I think there are two basic sorts of causal relationships. There are causal relationships of the connection variety and causal relationships of the dependence variety. Causal relationships of the connection variety are difficult to define but have a few key features:

- Processes/interactions
- Energy/force
- Persistence
- Intrinsicness

We might call these features the “connection connotations of causation.”\(^{18}\) Take an ordinary case of a person throwing a baseball at a window, where the baseball flies through the air and shatters the window and there is nothing else strange going on.\(^ {19}\) Note that the person’s throwing of the baseball is linked to the breaking of the window by a process and the baseball interacts with the window, the throwing of the baseball transfers energy to the window, there is a persisting object (the baseball) going from throw to the window’s breaking, and the relationship between the

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\(^{18}\) Compare to Jonathan Schaffer’s (2000) “central connotations of causation.”
\(^{19}\) No one is waiting in the trenches to shatter the window if the person doesn’t throw the baseball.
throwing and the window’s breaking is \textit{intrinsic} because changing the surrounding factors in this scenario does not change the causal status of the ordered pair \(<\text{the throw, window breaking}>>.

Causal relationships of the dependence variety are those which involve difference-making. If we return to the baseball example. We also find that whether or not the baseball shattered the window \textit{depended} or whether or not the person threw the baseball. The throw made a difference to whether or not the window broke. If the person had not thrown the baseball, the window would not have shattered.

Dependence and connection often occur together, but they can also come apart. There are cases of connection without dependence and cases of dependence without connection. Here is a case of connection without dependence: If someone breaks a window by throwing a baseball but another person was ready to break the window with a hammer if the thrower somehow failed, then whether or not the window broke would not have depended on the throwing of the baseball. Now a case of dependence without connection: In an ordinary scenario where a person fails to check a mailbox and the mailbox fills up with mail over several days, it is correct to say that the mailbox’s filling up depended upon the person’s failing to check the mail but that there is no connection between the failure to check the mail and the filling up of the mailbox.

The wider lesson to take here is that the question of whether a causal relationship obtains sometimes depends wholly on the actual sequence and sometimes depends partially on other possibilities. Connection-type causal relationships concern the actual sequence and dependence-style causal relationships concern other possibilities. To see how connection-type causal relationships concern the actual sequence, return to the baseball example. In a way remarkably similar to Typical Frankfurt style case, we find that removing the person standing by waiting to break the window with a hammer is irrelevant to whether or not the throwing of the baseball is physically connected with the breaking of the window. To see how dependence-style causal relationships concern other possibilities, note that although abstracting away the backup in the baseball scenario is irrelevant to whether or not there was a physical connection between the throwing of the baseball and the breaking of the window, we find that abstracting away the backup is completely relevant to whether or not the breaking of the window depended on the throw. If the backup is present, the breaking of the window does not depend on the throw. If the backup is not present, the breaking of the window does depend on the throw.
Frankfurt-style cases are characteristically dependence-undermining. They are cases which involve outcomes which do not depend on the agent. Consider Typical Frankfurt Case again. Whether or not A kills B does not at all depend on A.\(^\text{20}\) Therefore, if the morally salient causal relationship lesson is the right one, then the responsibility of agents in some Frankfurt-style scenarios may not wholly be a matter of the actual sequence.

**Asymmetry**

Consider the following two cases adapted from Fischer and Ravizza (1998):

**Hero:** A sees B drowning in the ocean at the beach. Being a good swimmer and believing herself capable of saving B, after rational sane deliberation, A decides to save B. She jumps in the water and brings B back alive. Unbeknownst to A, C had a device implanted in A’s brain such that if A showed some sign of not saving B, C would have activated it and caused A to decide to save B and carry out her decision. C did not need to get involved.

**Sharks:** A sees B drowning in the ocean at the beach. Being a good swimmer and believing herself capable of saving B, after rational sane deliberation, A decides not to save B. Unbeknownst to A, the ocean is swarming with sharks (who are apparently uninterested in eating B) who would have attacked and killed A if she tried to save B.

Hero and Sharks both have all of the ingredients of a Frankfurt case that I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. There is an agent, A, who does or does not do something on her own. There is a would-be intervener, C which would have seen to it that A did not behave otherwise than she actually did. Yet in Hero A is responsible for saving C and in Sharks A is not responsible for failing to save B. After considering Hero and Sharks, we might be led towards adopting the following principle:

\[(\text{PPA}) \text{ If an agent is responsible for not } \text{Aing, then the agent was able to } \text{A.}\]

If we deny PAP and accept PPA, then the following asymmetry thesis follows:

\[(\text{AT}) \text{ Responsibility for } \text{Aing doesn’t require that an agent was able to avoid } \text{Aing, but responsibility for not } \text{Aing does require than an agent was able to } \text{A.}\]

Accepting AT based on a comparison of Hero and Sharks would be premature. Sharks is not taken to be a convincing counterexample to PPA in the philosophical literature, but this fact, in

\(^{20}\) Note that I say “depends on A” and not “depends on A’s decision.” I further elaborate upon what it is for an outcome to depend on an agent in later chapters.

\(^{21}\) Fischer (1985-1986) defends a version of PPA.
itself does not rule out the possibility of Frankfurt cases which are counterexamples to PPA. In order to give a good counterexample to PPA, a prima facie reasonable strategy would be to see to it that Frankfurt-style omission cases are as similar as possible to the best Frankfurt cases as possible. Take the following case:

**Typical Frankfurt-style Omission:** A sees B drowning in the ocean at the beach. Being a good swimmer and believing herself capable of saving B, after rational sane deliberation, A does not reach a decision to save B and does not save B. Unbeknownst to A, C, an evil neuroscientist, would have seen to it she never reached a decision to save B and did not save B and would have done so by manipulating A’s brain states if it was starting to look like A was about to decide to save B. In any case, C never needed to get involved.

**Typical Frankfurt-style Omission** is a lot more like our **Typical Frankfurt Case**. Note that it is prima facie difficult to say what counts as part of an actual sequence in these sorts of cases in **Typical Frankfurt-style Omission**. What sort of actual sequence led to A’s failure? A underwent rational sane deliberation, but it appears not to have led to any ordinary action or positive outcome. In fact, the case seems to describe a scenario where the rational sane deliberation failed to lead to an action. Note that it’s also hard to say whether or not there’s a causal relationship between A and A’s failure to save B. Take connection: It is difficult to say if the agent’s deliberation transferred any sort of energy to the agent’s failure to make a decision. There seems not to be any sort of process or interaction leading from the agent’s deliberation to the agent’s failure to make a decision. There seems not to be any sort of persisting entity which leads from the agent’s deliberation to the agent’s failure to make the decision. With ordinary actions, we can suppose that there are certain electro-chemical signals in the brain and nervous system that lead to certain bodily movements that can be categorized as actions, but it is not at all clear how such electro-chemical signals lead to failures to act.

My line of reasoning in this section leads to two worries that I will leave to other chapters. The first worry is that omissions are the sort of thing which can never figure in connection-type causal relationships at all. The second worry is that failures only depend on agents in non-Frankfurt cases. As I said before, Frankfurt-style cases are characteristically dependence-undermining. Yet if omissions can only figure in dependence-type causal relationships, then there cannot be a successful Frankfurt-style case involving omissions, because Frankfurt-style cases by their very nature rule out the right sort of dependence-style causal
relationships. If agents can be responsible for omissions, it might be that they are never responsible for omissions in Frankfurt-style cases. I actually think the picture is significantly more complicated than this. I will return to this matter in a later chapter when I discuss Frankfurt-style omission cases.

Sartorio on Moral and Causal Responsibility

I claim that responsibility for an action, omission, or outcome requires the agent to be causally relevant to the outcome, but some might have worries about the claim based upon the fact that it is possible to convincingly argue that moral responsibility does not require causation. Carolina Sartorio (2004) (2007) has made such an argument. She argues that moral responsibility does not entail causal responsibility and suggests instead that causation transmits responsibility from causes to outcomes. Any worries founded on Sartorio’s argument should not apply to my thesis about causal relevance and moral responsibility. The thesis that shared moral responsibility entails shared causal responsibility is both compatible with Sartorio’s denial of the claim that causation requires responsibility and with my claim that moral responsibility requires causal relevance.

The principles Sartorio takes under consideration are the following:

(Moral-to-Causal): If an agent A is morally responsible for an outcome O, then A is causally responsible for O.

(Moral-to-Causal-Exp): If an agent A is causally responsible for an outcome O, then A’s moral responsibility for O is at least partially explained by A’s causal responsibility for O.

(Moral-to-Quasi-Causal): If an agent A is morally responsible for an outcome O, then A is at least quasi-causally responsible for O.

(Moral-to-Quasi-Causal-Exp): If an agent A is quasi-causally responsible for an outcome O, then A’s moral responsibility for O is at least partially explained by A’s quasi-causal responsibility for O.

Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal are entailment principles while Moral-to-Causal-Exp and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal-Exp are explanatory principles (see Sartorio 2007, 750). Sartorio typically conjoins the entailment and explanatory principles, but I will keep them separate here because the explanatory principles make a weaker claim than the entailment principles and the explanatory principles may be true even if the entailment principles are false.
I make a distinction between causal and quasi-causal responsibility because, as I have mentioned before, philosophers disagree about causation. Some take causation to be a sort of difference making (Lewis 1973) and others take it to be a sort of connection (Dowe 2000). Causation as difference-making is friendly to causation by omission and causation as connection is hostile to causation by omission (see Dowe 2004). Omissions make a difference to what happens in the world. For example, omitting to check the mail makes a difference to whether or not one’s mailbox fills up. Suppose I do not check the mail and the mail carrier fills the box up over the week. If I had checked the mail, my mailbox would not have filled up. There are reasons to think that omissions do not connect to the world. Here’s one: Suppose omissions are located where the person who omits is located. It seems I can leave town and omit to check the mail so far away from the event of my mailbox filling up that any connection between my omission and the filling up of the mailbox would require faster than light causal connections (Dowe 2009).

Even so, according to Sartorio (2004, 315), to claim that Moral-to-Causal is false because there is no causation by omission but responsibility for omissions is possible is philosophical uninteresting. This is where Moral-to-Quasi-Causal comes in. Connection theorists often appeal to quasi-causation schemas that analyze apparent causation by omission in terms difference-making claims about causation (Dowe 2000, Chp. 6). In the mailbox case, if I had checked the mail I would have prevented the mailbox from filling up by causally interacting with the process which involves the mailbox filling up.

So which principle we take to be under consideration depends on what causation is. If causation is some sort of difference-making, then Moral-to-Causal will likely be the principle we need to take under consideration. If causation is a sort of connection, then Moral-to-Causal is likely false because of causation by omission and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal will be the principle we need to consider. All of this suggests that the question of whether responsibility requires (quasi) causation can be investigated both by those who accept causation by omission and by those who reject it. However, the question of which theories best characterize difference-making and connection is one I must leave to the side. Although I will explore this issue in greater detail in a later chapter.

I will spend the rest of this chapter evaluating Sartorio’s argument in favor of replacing Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal with her transmission principles. After doing this I
will suggest my own replacement principle for Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal. One
that says that shared responsibility requires shared causation.

**Responsibility without (Quasi) Causation**

Sartorio argues that Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal are both false. She starts
by giving two thought experiments, she then makes an argument based on a comparison between
the thought experiments, and suggests that Moral-to-Causal be replaced with a transmission
principle that she says has all of the benefits of Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal. The
first thought experiment is below:

**Two Buttons:** Imagine the following situation. There was an accidental leak of a
dangerous chemical at a high-risk chemical plant, which is on the verge of causing an explosion.
The explosion will occur unless the room containing the chemical is immediately sealed. Suppose
that sealing the room requires that two buttons—call them “A” and “B”—be depressed at the
same time t (say, two seconds from now). You and I work at the plant, in different rooms, and we
are in charge of accident prevention. Button A is in my room, and button B is in yours. We don’t
have time to get in touch with each other to find out what the other is going to do; however, we
are both aware of what we are supposed to do. As it turns out, each of us independently decides
to keep reading his magazine instead of depressing his button. The explosion ensues (Sartorio

Here is the second thought experiment:

**Two Buttons One Stuck:** Now consider the following variant of the case. Again, button A
is in my room, and I fail to depress it. This time, however, there is no one in the room containing
button B; instead, a safety mechanism has been automatically set to depress B at t. When the
time comes, however, B becomes stuck while being up. Just as in the original case, then, neither
button is depressed and the explosion occurs. (Sartorio 2004, 318).

Her argument then goes as follows (with some modifications):

1. She is responsible for the explosion in Two Buttons.
2. Her failure to depress A didn’t (quasi) cause the explosion in Two Buttons One Stuck.
3. If her failure to depress A didn’t (quasi) cause the explosion in Two Buttons One
   Stuck, then her failure didn’t (quasi) cause the explosion in Two Buttons.
4. Therefore her failure to depress A didn’t (quasi) cause the explosion in Two Buttons
   (From (2) and (3))
(5) No other action or omission of hers (quasi) causes the explosion in Two Buttons.
(6) Therefore, (Moral-to-(Quasi)-Causal) is false (Sartorio 2004, 318).

I have “quasi” in parentheses to indicate that we can switch out all instances of “caused” with instances of “quasi-caused” and the argument would apply to Moral-to-Quasi-Causal equally.

Sartorio takes (5) to be intuitively plausible and gives explicit arguments in favor of (1)-(3) (Sartorio 2004, 319-325). In favor of (1), she says that denying (1) entails that Two Buttons is a case of moral luck, which it is not. Instances of moral luck are cases where some agent does something that would have led to someone being harmed but did not because of some factor beyond the agent’s control. She points out that if (1) is false and she is not responsible for the explosion in Two Buttons, then the same applies to me. This means neither of us is responsible. But it is implausible that two wrongs can neutralize one another in this particular scenario. Sartorio takes it that the better way to think about Two Buttons is that we share responsibility for the explosion.

In favor of (2) she says that denying (2) leads to an exacerbated version of the problem of what Menzies (2004) calls “profligate causation.” For example, according to standard difference-making theories of causation, the absence of an alien invasion caused me to eat breakfast this morning because if they had invaded I would not have eaten breakfast. Sartorio points out that the problem is even worse if we deny (2), we would need to say that since the explosion depended on her failure and the explosion together, her failure caused the explosion. Thus, we must commit ourselves to the claim that if $e$ depended on $c$ and $d$ together, then $c$ caused $e$.

Sartorio points out that $d$ might be an obstacle to $e$. For example, if Kevin Hart is locked out of his house while an ice sculpture of his is melting, it would be false to say that his failure to go into the house caused the ice sculpture to melt because if he tried to go into the house and the door were unlocked, then he would have saved the ice sculpture. The examples easily multiply. Consider that $e$ might depend on $d$ on its own and $c$ might be completely irrelevant to $e$. For example, if Dave Chappelle relaxes at home in a completely different part of the United States unaware of Kevin Hart’s situation while the heat melts the ice sculpture, it would be false to say that Kevin Hart relaxing at home caused the ice sculpture to melt just because if Kevin Hart had not relaxed at home, and the room were colder, then the ice sculpture would not have melted.

In favor of (3) Sartorio argues that there is no causal difference with respect to her failure between Two-Buttons and Two Buttons One Stuck. A mere difference between there being a
person on the B side (in the case of Two-Buttons) and a malfunctioning machine on the B side (in the case of Two-Buttons One Stuck) makes no difference to whether her failure caused the explosion respective cases. She also mentions that most theories of causation will likely say that there is no causal difference between the two respective cases with respect to her failure to depress A. They either take her failure to be a cause in both cases or in neither case.

After all of this, Sartorio offers an alternative account of the relationship between causation and responsibility. She starts out by suggesting that our failure to simultaneously depress A and B at t caused the explosion and that neither of our failures caused the explosion on their own. She then proposes that we replace Moral Entails Causal with the following (Sartorio 2004, 329; 2007, 761):

**(TRANSMIT):** If an agent A is morally responsible for C and C (quasi) caused an outcome O, then A is morally responsible for O.

In addition she accepts the following:

**(TRANSMIT-EXP):** If an agent A is responsible for C, then [if C (quasi) caused an outcome O, then that the agent is responsible for C at least partly explains why the agent is responsible for O].

Once again, TRANSMIT is an entailment claim about causation and responsibility and TRANSMIT-EXP is an explanatory claim about causation and responsibility.

The principles TRANSMIT and TRANSMIT-EXP, Sartorio says, (i) capture the relationship between (quasi) causation and responsibility without the costs of Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal, (ii) explains why she is responsible for the explosion in Two Buttons and why she is not responsible in Two Buttons One Stuck, and (iii) has applications to the voting problem.

As to (i), her replacement principles suggest that moral responsibility does not entail (quasi) causation, but instead (quasi) causation is a way that moral responsibility transmits to outcomes. TRANSMIT and TRANSMIT-EXP are also not subject to her counterexample and argument.

As to (ii), given TRANSMIT, we have an explanation for (1): because she is responsible for our failure to depress A and B simultaneously, and our failure to depress A and B simultaneously caused the explosion, she is responsible for the explosion. The same applies to me. Because I am responsible for our failure to press A and B simultaneously, and our failure to
depress A and B simultaneously caused the explosion, I am responsible for the explosion. Moreover, Sartorio contends that her responsibility for the explosion is explained by her responsibility for our failure to simultaneously depress A and B. TRANSMIT also explains (2) because she is not responsible for any of the explosion’s causes in Two-Buttons One Stuck.

As to (iii) Sartorio also applies TRANSMIT to the voting problem discussed in (Goldman 1999), which is the problem of giving a rational justification for voting when one particular voter does not make a difference. She considers an example just like the following (Sartorio 2004, 331):

**Things Get Bad:** Suppose two candidates, Good and Bad, are running for office. Good is good and Bad is bad. 100 people could have voted, but 20 vote for Good and 30 vote for Bad, and 50 are too lazy to vote. Bad wins and things get bad.

Sartorio is able to say here that each lazy would-be voter is responsible for Good not getting 11 more votes,\(^{22}\) that Good not getting 11 more votes caused the Bad to win the election, so each lazy would-be voter is responsible for Bad winning the election.

**Transmission Problems**

Sartorio notes that TRANSMIT is not very plausible without a “and the required provisos are met” clause (2005, 464). But it is not immediately clear what the required provisos ought to be. Take the following example:

**Glasses Jacket Shirt:** I put on a black dress shirt, a jacket, and some sunglasses and I’m responsible for doing so. I go to the bank and unintentionally distract an inexperienced burglar in the middle of a robbery who thinks I’m a police officer and flees the scene.

Glasses Jacket Shirt is a case where I am responsible for wearing glasses, a jacket, and a shirt, where my wearing glasses, a jacket, and a shirt caused the inexperienced bank robber to flee the scene, but where I am not responsible for the inexperienced bank robber fleeing the scene. So instead of TRANSMIT, we need something like the following:

(TRANSMIT\(*\): If an agent A is morally responsible for C and C caused O (and the required provisos are met), then A is morally responsible for O.\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) “Good not getting 11 more votes” does not exactly pick out a single event. There are many ways in which it could occur. 11 more people from the north side of town could have voted for good, or 11 more people from the south side, or 4 from the north and 7 from the east side, and so on.

\(^{23}\) This is also the way Sartorio (2005) puts it.
She gives one example of a required proviso, that the outcome was foreseeable (2005), 464, but I think this should be a cause for concern. The example Sartorio gives of a required proviso, that the outcome must be foreseeable, looks like an epistemic condition on moral responsibility. What rules out including a control condition as a required proviso as well? If we cannot rule out including a control condition among the required provisos, then there is a risk that once we fill in the required provisos we will be told that causation transmits responsibility, so long as the agent is responsible for the outcome. The transmission principle would border on being uninformative.

**Causation and Responsibility**

A natural alternative to the transmission principle is suggested by Sartorio’s own claim that our failures to press A and B simultaneously caused the explosion. This is a judgment which lends itself to the following revision of our initial principles Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal:

(Moral-to-Causal*): Where n\(\geq 1\), if agents \(A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_n\) are everyone morally responsible for an outcome \(O\), then \(A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_n\) share causal responsibility for \(O\).

(Moral-to-Quasi-Causal*): Where n\(\geq 1\), if agents \(A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_n\) are everyone morally responsible for an outcome \(O\), then \(A_1, A_2, \ldots, A_n\) share quasi-causal responsibility for \(O\).

The spirit of the two following principles is that shared responsibility requires shared causation. Applied to her example, it turns out that she and I together are both responsible for the explosion which entails that we are both causally responsible. If we had not both failed to depress the buttons, the explosion would not have happened. The principles also entails that individual responsibility requires causal responsibility since it might be that n=1. I think these replacement principles have many positive features:

(i) the replacement principles account for the prima facie plausibility of Moral-to-Causal and Moral-to-Quasi-Causal. This is only because the replacement principles are very similar in spirit to our initial principles. They both say that there is a sense in which moral responsibility requires causal responsibility.

(ii) as I mentioned before, the replacement principles are not subject to Sartorio’s argument any more than Sartorio’s transmission principle is. In Two Buttons, since she and I are both responsible for the explosion, we share causal responsibility for the explosion, despite her not being causally responsible in Two Buttons One Stuck.
(iii) my replacement principles account for shared responsibility in terms of shared (quasi) causation. That she and I share responsibility for the explosion in Two Buttons can be partly explained in terms of the fact that she and I share causal responsibility for the explosion because our failures are both partial causes.

(iv) my replacement entailment principle is not subject to the Glasses Jacket Shirt counterexample because it is not a transfer principle. Sartorio’s transfer principle is subject to the Glasses Jacket Shirt counterexamples without a “required provisos” clause. My principles sidestep these concerns.

(v) my replacement explanatory principle is compatible with the explanatory principles Moral-to-Causal-Exp, Moral-to-Quasi-Causal-Exp, and TRANSMIT-EXP. It is even compatible with the claim that causes often transmit responsibility to their effects whether the required provisos are present or not. So we may still appreciate the general force of Sartorio’s transmission principles.

The considerations above, taken together, count greatly in favor of appealing to a principle which preserves the intuition that moral responsibility requires causation. Moreover, if the alternative I have proposed is correct, it is naturally compatible with the claim that moral responsibility at least requires causal relevance.
CHAPTER 2

METAPHYSICS OF OMISSIONS

Introductory Section

The primary aim of this chapter is to lay out some of the positions on omissions that appear in the philosophical literature and to examine the consequences of those positions relevant to the issue of whether omissions can enter into causal relationships.

Omissions and Omitting

There is distinction between omissions and omitting. When I discuss omissions, I am discussing the metaphysics of instances where an agent fails to perform an action. Questions concerning whether there are omissions and what they would have to be are metaphysical questions. It may be true that an agent is omitting to act (or failing to act) but also that there are no omissions at all. A successful account of the metaphysics of omissions should be compatible with the claim that agents sometimes omit to act.

Restrictive and Broad Characterizations of Omitting

There are broad and general characterizations of omitting. If one were using the broadest characterization possible, one could say that every case where an agent does not do something is a case where an agent omits to do that thing. A consequence of such a broad view is that everyone who is not doing twelve consecutive back flips is omitting to do twelve consecutive back flips. A worry about this sort of view is that it seems that people who are unable to do twelve consecutive back flips should not be described as people who are omitting to do so. The idea that anything a person is not doing counts as an instance of omitting seems to lead to a sort of proliferation about omitting.24

A more restrictive characterization than the first I mentioned could have it that every case where an agent does not do something that she is able to do is a case where the agent omits to do the thing in question. According to a view like this, everyone who is not dancing like a chicken (and who is able to) is omitting to dance like a chicken. This view also fails to avoid profligacy about omitting. In some contexts, failing to dance like a chicken seems like an instance of

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24 We should distinguish profligacy about omitting itself from the distinct yet related issue of profligacy about causation by omission. I will discuss causation by omissions in the next chapter.
omitting. If someone told me to dance like a chicken or else, I am perfectly able to dance like a chicken, but I refuse to do it, then I have omitted to dance like a chicken. But there are many other contexts where there is almost no potential for the issue of dancing like a chicken to come up at all, even when the people involved in these contexts are able to dance like a chicken. According to the characterization of omitting under consideration, every instance where an agent is able to dance like a chicken and does not do so is an instance where that agent is omitting to dance like a chicken.

An even more restrictive characterization says that every case where an agent does not do something, the agent is able to do the thing in question, and the agent is supposed to do the thing in question according to some relevant norm is a case where an agent omits to do something. Such an account seems to avoid profligacy about instances of omitting, and it does not count every person who is incapable of doing forty-four consecutive backflips as omitting to do backflips; only cheerleaders, skilled gymnasts, and martial artists are omitting to do forty-four consecutive backflips in certain appropriate contexts. It also does not count people who we never expected or desired to dance like chickens to be omitting to dance like chickens: only bad comedians, good clowns, and others we might expect to dance like a chicken count as omitting to dance like a chicken.

Thus, there is a range of characterizations that can count more or less instances where an agent does not do something as an instance of omitting. The views which count more instances of an agent not doing something as instances of omitting are broad characterizations and the characterizations which count fewer instances where an agent does not do something as instances of omitting are restrictive characterizations. In this dissertation, I will count every instance where an agent does not do something as a case of an agent omitting to do that thing, meaning that I will be characterizing instances of omitting in the broad way. However, I still hope to avoid running into the issues that can arise when instances of omitting are characterized broadly. As much as possible, I will give examples of instances of omitting that are acceptable on both restrictive characterizations and broad characterizations.
Causation: Connection and Dependence

I will devote an entire chapter to the metaphysics of causation, but for the purposes of this chapter I make the same rough division between connection-style accounts of causation and dependence-style or difference-making accounts of causation that I made in the first chapter. Connection-style accounts of causation require that causation is a relation between entities which have some spatiotemporal location in the actual world. As I mentioned in the first chapter, connective causation connotes that causes transfer energy to their effects, that causes and effects are related by processes and interactions, and so on. Dependence-style accounts of causation require that there are certain sorts of true counterfactual statements of the form "If c had not occurred, then e would not have occurred."

The Metaphysics of Omissions

There are three possible accounts of the metaphysics of omissions which are relevant to my dissertation: eliminativist, reductivist, and non-reductive realist. Eliminativist accounts of omissions say that there are no entities which are omissions. Reductivist accounts of omissions take omissions to be reducible or otherwise identifiable with some other sort of ordinary entity like a positive action or the state of an agent. Realist accounts say that omissions are entities in their own right. They say that omissions cannot be identified with other sorts of entities. All of these views can be applied globally or locally. According to global characterizations every instance of omitting can be accounted for in the same way, and according to local characterizations different instances of omitting need to be accounted for in different ways. So one could have the global view which says that there are no omissions at all, or one could have a local view which says that there are some omissions, but not all cases where an agent fails to do something is a case where there is an entity which is the omission.

Another metaphysical concern about causation arises because omissions seem to be the sort of thing that can have causes and effects. For example, if my not dancing like a chicken is an omission, and omissions have causes and effects, then my not dancing like a chicken might be an effect of my dull sense of humor and a cause for someone else’s willingness to continue hanging around me. This leads to problems because of the nature of causation. As I have

25 I take this way of dividing up the relevant positions from (Lewis 2004, 281-282). It is important to note that Lewis is more concerned with absences in general than omissions. Sara Bernstein (2015) divides views of omissions into four categories, my categorization is roughly similar except that I include the possibilia view as a version of realism.
26 I will discuss this concern in much greater detail in a later chapter.
mentioned before, there is a rough distinction in the metaphysical literature on causation between connection-style views of causation and dependence-style views of causation. The consequences of the metaphysics of omissions arise for all of the possible permutations of metaphysical views about omissions and metaphysical views about causation, for example, when we combine connectionism about causation with eliminativism about omissions, or dependence-views about causation with reductivism about omissions and so on.

Eliminativism

It is not quite right to say that eliminativists say that omissions are nothing at all. Take the following problematic formulation of eliminativism about omissions:

\[(N): \text{Omissions are nothing at all.}\]

Eliminativism is not the view that there are some entities, omissions, and that they are nothing at all. Characterizing eliminativism this way is a mistake if certain versions of the quantifier view of ontological commitment are correct. According to certain versions of the quantifier view of ontological commitment, when we say that omissions are nothing at all, we make an ontological commitment to omissions. The claim that omissions are nothing at all entails that there are omissions by existential generalization, but committing to omissions defeats the purpose of being an eliminativist. The claim that omissions are nothing at all also entails that there is some x such that x is nothing at all, which commits us to nothing-at-alls, which further defeats the purpose of being an eliminativist. Given a seemingly innocent sounding formulation of eliminativism, we start out trying to deny the existence of omissions and end up affirming the existence of omissions and nothing-at-alls! And that is not a desirable way to formulate an eliminativist view. In any case, the safest way to state the (global) eliminativist thesis is as follows:

\[(OE): \text{There is no entity x such that x is an omission.}\]

OE says that there are no omissions. Which is better than N, but which might be misleading for other reasons. That there are no omissions might seem to suggest that nobody ever omits to do anything, but the eliminativist need not say this. Sometimes people omit to do things. It is not a

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27 The quantifier view is famously developed by (Quine 1948). However, Quine’s view requires that we ontologically commit to entities covered by existential generalizations according to our best scientific theories. One could also hold to quantifier views according to which we are committed to entities we quantify over by existential generalizations according to our common-sense beliefs or our best philosophical theories. The problem of ontologically committing to omissions perhaps only applies to the latter sort of quantifier views.

28 I use angle brackets to pick out claims (or statements, or propositions).
consequence of OE that no one ever omits, as OE does not rule out that claims of the following form are sometimes true:

\[(A)\): There is some agent S such that S omitted to \(A\).

That some agent \(S\) omitted to \(A\) does not entail that there is some \(O\) such that \(O\) is identical to \(S\)’s omission to \(A\). As I mentioned in a previous section, the eliminativist can accept that sometimes agents omit to act while denying the existence of omissions. Eliminativism is also compatible with the idea that some claims about what agents do not do are true. Eliminativists can say that Janet did not check her mail, or that Corey omitted to reveal some information without making any ontological commitment to not-checkings and other omissions. Other ontological problems might arise. For example, if certain versions of *truthmaker* based accounts of ontological commitment are correct, then such claims would need to be true in virtue of something. The eliminativist can say this, but what they must deny is that any truths have *omissions* as their truthmakers. In this section I will consider Clarke’s (2012) Lewisian Absence of Action account of omissions.

**Absences of Actions**

In many places David Lewis expresses eliminative sentiments about absences. In “Causation as Influence,” he says:

Absences are not events. They are not *anything*: Where an absence is there is nothing relevant there at all. Absences are bogus entities. (2004, 100)

Lewis’s eliminativist thesis about absences is best stated as follows:

\[(AE)\): There is no \(x\) such that \(x\) is an absence.\(^{29}\)

It is important to distinguish \(AE\) from \(OE\). More things can be absent than can be omitted. For example, a lamp can be absent from a room, but there is no omission of the lamp. This is something we should be careful about. If there is a lamp that is not present in the room, then we can say that the lamp is absent from the room. But <the lamp is absent> entails that <there is something which is absent>. If there is no lamp at all, because the lamp has been destroyed for example, then we cannot say that the lamp is absent. It is better to say that there is no lamp. To say that there is an absence of a lamp leads to problems that resemble the one I discussed when talking about principle \(N\). In any case, “absence” is a term that covers more than “omission”

\(^{29}\) However, note that Lewis’s causal statements about absences lead to similar problems to the one I discussed earlier about ontological commitment to omissions. In Lewis’s case, the problem applies to absences.
does.\textsuperscript{30} Randolph Clarke (2012) thinks of the phenomenon of absence in the same way that Lewis does and takes it that many instances of omitting involve there being no actions. For Clarke, omissions often turn out to be “bogus entities” as Lewis puts it. Because Clarke says “In many cases” and not “In all cases,” his eliminativism is local and not global.

Clarke’s eliminativism about omissions follows from his view of absences along with his view that in some cases omissions are simply absences of actions. Clarke’s view of absences partially \textit{informs} his view of omissions. We will see in later sections that having one’s view of absences inform one’s view of omissions is compatible with reductivist and realist accounts of omissions because one might be a realist or a reductivist about absences.

\textbf{Consequences of Eliminativism}

According to connection-style accounts of causation, causation is a relation between entities. But according to dependence-style accounts causation need not be a relation. If an eliminativist view of omissions is correct, then there are no entities which we could call omissions and “they” cannot be relata in a causal relation. That omissions are not located follows directly from the claim that there are no omissions. If there are no omissions, there is no place where “they” are located. So, if eliminativism is right, then the following is true:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{(OL):} There is no location L such that there is an omission O that is located at L.
\end{itemize}

OL is true if there are no omissions. Any place we point out will be a place where there is not an omission. But OL might be misleading in a way similar to the way in which OE is misleading. It might seem to suggest that there are no places where agents omit to do things. OL is compatible with the idea that the following claim is sometimes true:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{(AL):} There is at least one location L such that an agent A omitted to A at L.
\end{itemize}

That some agent omitted someplace is compatible with the claim that there is no place where the agent’s omission is located. According to certain views of causation, causes must be local to their effects, but more importantly, causes and effects both need to be located somewhere. If eliminativism is correct and causation is a relation, then omissions are never causes and effects. If eliminativism is true, then omissions never figure in relations, so they cannot figure in a causal

\textsuperscript{30} However, Lewis seems to use “omission” to apply to any case where an \textit{event} does not occur.
relation. That omissions cannot be relata in a causal relation follows from the claim that relata are entities.  

Eliminativism, however, does not rule out the possibility of true negative claims about agents. We can make claims about what an agent did and did not do. However, eliminativism does rule out that negative claims about what agents do and do not do ever have omissions as truthmakers. Even so, just because an omission cannot be a truthmaker for a negative claim about an agent does not mean that negative claims about agents have no truthmakers at all. Eliminativism makes no commitments concerning what the truthmakers for negative claims about agents are except that the truthmakers can never be omissions.

Insofar as eliminativism does not rule out the possibility of true negative claims it also does not rule out the possibility of true negative causal explanations. One can give a negative causal explanation explaining some occurrence by saying what did not cause it to happen. For example, if one were to explain that the plant life in a region died because rain did not come to that region, one is still giving a causal explanation for why the plant life in that region died. Eliminativism also does not rule out the possibility of negative claims about agents figuring in causal explanations. If one explains that a plant died because someone did not water the plant, and let’s suppose for simplicity’s sake that they were supposed to water the plant, then one has explained why the plant died by appealing to an agent failing to do something that would have caused the plant to live.

That the behavior of agents who omit may enter into genuine causal relations is also compatible with eliminativism. An agent may omit to do something, do something else instead, and it could easily turn out that the thing the agent did instead of doing what she omitted is a relatum in a causal relation. For example, Keisha may omit to reveal some bit of important information to Karen and reveal that same information to Sarah instead. In such a case, Keisha would be omitting and her behavior while omitting would certainly enter into a genuine causal relation. The eliminativist, however, must deny that whatever the agent did instead is an omission. Thus, Keisha’s giving the information to Sarah instead is not an omission.

31 “Entities” is a catch all term for whatever there is, and if eliminativism is correct, then omissions are not entities because there are no omissions.
Reductivism

According to reductivism, omissions are reducible to some other sort of non-problematic or ordinary entity. “Reducible” may be cashed out in several ways, but the following captures what I have in mind:

(R): If apparent X-type phenomena is reducible to Y-type phenomena, then apparent X-type phenomena can be identified with Y-type phenomena, where Y-type phenomena is prima facie less problematic or ordinary than apparent X-type phenomena.

Some of the most famous reductive views known to philosophers are those in the philosophy of mind. According to reductive physicalism, apparent mental phenomena are reducible to physical phenomena because they can be identified with one another, the physical phenomena being prima facie less problematic than apparent mental phenomena. So the reductive thesis about omissions can be stated as follows:

(OR): There are omissions, and they are reducible to ordinary entities.

In the case of omissions, the following two criteria will serve our purposes for what is required for a reductive account of omissions: First, a reductive account cannot be an eliminativist account. It must not entail that there are no omissions. Second, a reductive account must account for omissions in terms of entities that are ordinary. The notion of ordinariness is vague and subject to contentious disagreement as philosophers might disagree about which sorts of entities are ordinary, but I think the following example will make clear what I have in mind: Omissions cannot be reduced to non-existent objects but they can be reduced to positive actions. Non-existent objects are not ordinary, but actions like opening doors, intentionally watering flowers and the like are ordinary.

The Fischer-Ravizza View

Fischer and Ravizza make a distinction between simple and complex omissions. Simple omissions, or bodily omissions, in Fischer and Ravizza’s terminology “are fully constituted by”

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32 I use the “prima facie less problematic” clause to account for the asymmetry of reduction. The reason reductive physicalism is not reductive mentalism is because physical entities are taken to be less problematic than mental entities according to the reducer. Otherwise because mental states are the same as some physical states according to reductive physicalism, we could just as easily say that we’re reducing some physical states to mental states. I also do not claim that my way of characterizing reductivism is the most appropriate or useful for all aims, I am simply using the sort of characterization to account for my own aims.
the actual bodily state of an agent, while complex omissions are a relationship between an agent’s bodily state and an outcome in the world. The phrase “fully constitutes” comes from Harry Frankfurt, whom Fischer and Ravizza cite as saying this:

Failing to keep one's eyes straight ahead is exclusively a matter of what movements a person makes; it is constituted by what the person himself does, and what the person does is therefore both a sufficient and a necessary condition for it. It cannot be said, then, that Q's failure would have occurred no matter what he had done-i.e., regardless of what bodily movements he made. If he had not moved his eyes to the left at all he would not have failed (Frankfurt 1982)

It seems then, that Fischer and Ravizza mean by “fully constitutes” what Frankfurt does, which means that some sort of equivalence is required for one thing to fully constitute another. Thus, something like the following is true of what Fischer and Ravizza mean by “fully constitutes”:

(FC): If a bodily state B fully constitutes a simple omission O then the occurrence of B is necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of O.33

FC says that a bodily state fully constituting an omissions entails that the occurrence of the bodily state is being sufficient for the occurrence of the omission. If FC is true of the notion Fischer and Ravizza are after, then their view about simple omissions is close to a reductive view although they do not make an identity claim. Instead, FC says that some sort of equilavence between a bodily state and an omission is required for some bodily state to fully constitute an omission. The account Fischer and Ravizza give of simple omissions is that they are to be accounted for in terms of the bodily state of an agent. Since these bodily states of agents and the world itself are intended to be ordinary/non-problematic, so the Fischer-Ravizza account of complex omissions is a reductive one.

33 Note that Fischer and Ravizza are using “fully constitutes” as a technical term. “Fully constitutes” and my own use of “full constitution” has no direct relation to the philosophical literature on constitution and identity.
The Negative Description View

Donald Davidson (1967) gives semantics for event/action sentences where each particular is picked out by a singular term and is quantified over into conjunctive expressions that involve monadic and polyadic predicates.\textsuperscript{34} For example:

\textit{(Pre)}: Karen checked the mail outside.

Can be analyzed as:

\textit{(Post)}: There is an e such that e is a checking of mail, e is by Karen, and e is outside.

“x is a checking of mail,” “x is by Karen,” and “x is outside” are all predications of x. So an analysis of Post can be given as follows (let Mx = x is a checking of mail, Kx = x is by Karen, Ox = x is outside):

\textit{(Post-L)}: \((\exists e) \text{ M}_e \land \text{ K}_e \land \text{ O}_e\)

Post-L depends on the use of several simple monadic predicates, but the following is also an acceptable analysis of Pre:

\textit{(Post*)}: There is an e, y, z, and w such that y is mail, z is Karen, w is outside, and e is a checking of y by z at w.

Which can also be stated as follows (let Cxyzw = x is a checking of y by z at w, Mx = x is mail, x = k = x is Karen, and Ox = x is outside):

\textit{(Post-L*)}: \((\exists e)(\exists y)(\exists z) \text{ M}_y \land z = k \land \text{ O}_w \land \text{ C}_e_{yzw}\)

A consequence of the Davidsonsian semantics for event and action sentences is that actions and events can be given descriptions of many sorts, but these varying descriptions can all pick out a single action. So far we have no reason to infer that Post and Post* must be about different particulars. The view makes no exception for negative descriptions. For example, if we take:

\textit{(Post-L)}: Karen omitted to check the mail outside.

we can analyze it as:

\textit{(Post-)}: There is an e such that e is a non-checking of mail by Karen and e was outside.

(\textit{Post-}) is compatible with the denial of entities of a negative sort.

Bruce Vermazen accepts a version of the negative description view. He says:

\textsuperscript{34} My discussion will involve some switching between event-talk and action-talk. I think the paraphrases all come out the same for my purposes.
I shall argue that certain putative negative acts, namely unintentional omissions, failures, and neglecting-to-do, do not exist (or at least should not be counted as acts), but it also seems clear to me that there are some negative acts: if I intentionally pass up a chance to win at cards by laying down the ten of clubs, I have done something—performed an action—describable as not laying down the ten of clubs and as not bringing about my winning. (1985)

Vermazen says that some putative negative acts do not exist, which makes him an eliminativist about that class of putative negative acts. This much is clear. But what Vermazen says after that can be taken in many different ways. Vermazen could be saying that some ordinary positive acts can be given negative descriptions. This claim, taken in itself, is compatible with eliminativism (or at least some local variant of it) and reductivism. He could be saying that there are no omissions, only positive acts which we could describe negatively. This would be eliminativism. He also could be saying that the acts which can be described negatively simply are negative acts. This would be more like reductivism.

In any case Davidson was convinced by Vermazen, and says similarly ambiguous things such as the following:

Sometimes there is, and in some of the cases where there is the negative action can, as Vermazen proposes, be identified with the positive action so that the negative action does not exist. Thus if it is my intention to avoid causing a draught, and I accomplish this by rapidly closing the door behind me, then my not causing a draught just is my rapidly closing the door behind me. What the example makes clear is that even when a negative act exists, being negative is not a characteristic of the act but of the characterization of the act. (1985)

This can be taken in an eliminative and in a reductive way in the same way as Vermazen’s claims. It could be that a negative act simply is an act that can be described negatively or that some ordinary positive acts can be given negative descriptions. The distinction Davidson makes between “characteristics” and “characterization” gives us a hint as to what he has in mind. A characteristic seems like a genuine property term while “characterization” seems like a description term. So Davidson seems to be saying that the “negative” in “negative act” is a matter of a description, not a matter of what the nature of the act comes to. But that in itself
seems not to lead to any clear conclusions concerning whether Davidson is taking a reductive or an eliminative route.

Varzi starts with an ontology of unrepeatable event-particulars which occupy spatiotemporal regions and makes the addition that events can described negatively. He says referring terms in negative descriptions of events pick out events, and he also makes the identity claim that negative events “simply are” positive events under negative descriptions in a way similar to Davidson. According to this view, when we talk about Janet’s non-checking of her mail, assuming we succeed in referring to something, we are referring to whatever it was that Karen actually did and giving it a negative description. If Karen watched television, for example, then we are referring to the e which is a watching of television by Karen. In Varzi’s case, if there is no available ordinary positive event to be the referent of the negative description, then we have said something false but which has a true paraphrase available. On the eliminativist reading of Varzi’s proposal, Varzi says that there are no omissions, but only ordinary positive actions and events which can be picked out by negative descriptions.

Davidson, Vermazen, and Varzi are engaged in a project concerning the semantics of negative act sentences, not the ontology of them. Thus, it seems that the difference between eliminativism and reductivism, as I have defined the notions, may not be one that they are required to make a commitment on. Even so, all of them seem to take the negativity in so called “negative acts” to be more about descriptions we use when we pick out the particulars than the nature of the particulars themselves. Varzi seems the clearest on this point. He puts it as follows in “Failures, Omissions, and Negative Descriptions”

…in many cases, “negative” events are just ordinary “positive” events under a negative description. (Varzi 2008)

The scare quotes are helpful here. Varzi seems to take it that the distinction between negative and positive events is not genuine and identifies “negative” events with ordinary events. Negative description accounts of omissions can be thought of as reductive accounts.

**Consequences of Reductivism**

If some forms of reductivism are correct, then omissions exist and there are many candidate locations for omissions. On the Fischer-Ravizza account, in the case of simple omissions when an agent S omits to A, the agent’s omission is located where S is located. The
causal relata in causal relations involving omissions on the Fischer-Ravizza account are bodily states.

The negative description view is based on treating actions as concrete particulars that can be given negative descriptions. For this reason, omissions on the negative description view are paradigmatic examples of entities that have locations and are causally efficacious. In fact, concrete particulars are sometimes defined as entities that have locations and which are causally efficacious. On the negative description view, negative truths about agents can have omissions as truthmakers, but the truthmakers would be ordinary entities, not entities of any negative sort.

A reductivist account could also have it that S’s not Aing is located where S would have been located if S had Aed. This is a logical possibility, but no view I discuss entails that omissions are located where the agent would have acted had she done so. However, in the next chapter I discuss some of the locality problems that can arise from such a view.

Realism

Realists, or non-reductive realists, take omissions to be entities in their own right. A realist is not an eliminativist and not a reductivist. If realism is correct, then there are omissions and omissions cannot be accounted for in terms of anything ordinary. In this section I will start with the various ways in which realist views of omissions can derive from realist views of absences, and then I consider some positions that appear in the philosophical literature

Negative Acts

Walton (1980) and Brand (Brand 1971) characterize omissions as negative acts. Their primary focus seems to be acts of forbearance and refraining. Agents forbear and refrain when they prevent themselves from performing an action of some sort in the right way.

This type of view is subject to some counterexamples. Clarke (2012) gives one where an agent sees a painted fence and a sign that says “Don’t touch.” The agent refrains from touching the paint, but she has no desire to do so and thus does not prevent herself from touching the paint.

In addition to being subject to counterexamples, Walton and Brand’s respective views seem to only discuss a small subset of omissions. To be clear, this is not a fault in their respective views, as they do not seem to be trying to give an account of omissions in general. My interest, however, is in omissions in general. So the Walton/Brand negative acts view is of
limited interest for the purposes of this dissertation. Because of the limited scope of their accounts, it is not clear whether or not their views count as versions of realism or reductivism.

Realism about Absences

Clarke discusses several possible realist views of absences that one can take. The realist may take absences to be facts, negative states of affairs, possibilia, or sui generis entities. Clarke gives criticisms of all of these proposals, but my aim for now is just to say what these proposals come to.

Facts

The term “fact” is ambiguous between true proposition and obtaining states of affairs. Clarke seems to be taking fact in the true proposition way, so I will follow him in this regard. A proposition is typically thought of as a bearer of truth values. For example, the proposition that Karen checked her mail can have the truth value of true or false (or it can have an indeterminate or third if we consider non-bivalent logics). If the proposition Karen checked her mail has the value true, then the proposition that Karen checked her mail is a true proposition. So when the proposition that Karen is not in the house has the value true, it is a fact that Karen is not in the house. According to the fact view of absences, Karen’s absence from the house is just the fact that Karen is not in the house. There are many possible accounts of what propositions are. Propositions might be abstract objects or sets of possible worlds.

Negative States of Affairs

First order states of affairs consist in objects instantiating properties or standing in relations to one another. There are many different views that one can have about objects, properties, and the nature of instantiation. Objects are supposed to be substances in the context of states of affairs. Properties could be immanent or transcendent universals. Instantiation is often taken as a primitive. Moreover, a state of affairs is a non-mereologically complex entity which consists in a property being instantiated in the object or which consists in an object standing in a relation to at least one other object, States of affairs can also be thought of as nominalistically friendly entities such as resembling particulars.35

States of affairs are often taken to be candidate truthmakers for true propositions. For example, where we have the proposition <Karen checked her mail> we have a state of affairs which consists in some genuine property (it need not be the property of checking her mail but

whatever genuine property is needed) instantiated by Karen. When we take the negative proposition <Karen is not sleepy>, there are four ways in which the absence of Karen’s sleepiness might be understood in terms of states of affairs. First, it could be that Karen is instantiating the negative property of non-sleepiness. Second, it could be that Karen is negatively instantiating the property of sleepiness. Third, it could be that Karen simply does not instantiate the property of being sleepy, which would not yield a negative state of affairs at all. Fourth, it could be that the state of affairs of Karen not being sleepy is just the state of affairs of Karen being sleepy with negative polarity as a constituent.

**Possibilia**

Absences might also be possibilia.\(^{36}\) The possibilia which count as absences according to this sort of view are non-actual entities that correspond to possibilities about this world. I am not a plumber, but I could have been a plumber. Therefore, if there are possibilia, and it is true that I could have been a plumber, then there is an entity which is me (or a counterpart of me) as a plumber. I am not a plumber, but the possibile me being a plumber is me as a plumber. Possibilia occupy other possible worlds that are causally and spatiotemporally isolated from our actual world.

**Consequences of Realism**

The negative act views of Walton and Brand are narrow and do not cover omissions in general, but there are consequences of the view worth exploring. If an agent omits to act by preventing herself from performing an action, then the location of the Walton/Brand-style negative act will be where the agent is located when she prevents herself from performing the action. Also, the Walton/Brand style negative acts will have causal consequences similar to ordinary actions and mental actions. For example, if I stop myself from touching some wet paint not by merely refraining but by intentionally holding my hand in place, then the causal consequences will be similar, if not identical to, the ordinary action of me holding my hand in place. In any case, as I said before the Walton/Brand types of views are subject to counterexamples and focus on too narrow a range of cases of omissions for my purposes in this dissertation.

If negative facts are absences and are therefore true propositions, then their location depends on one’s view about what propositions are. If propositions are abstract objects, and

\(^{36}\) Bernstein (2014) defends a possibilist view of omissions and accepts that omissions are causally inefficacious.
abstract objects are causally inert entities with no spatiotemporal location, then propositions have no location at all and cannot be causes or effects at all. Abstract objects are often characterized as entities which are causally inefficacious.\textsuperscript{37} If propositions are sets of possible worlds, then propositions have no location at all and cannot be causes and effects at all. If sets are abstract objects, then sets of possible worlds cannot have causes for the same reason as other abstract objects. If sets are reducible to their members, then sets of possible worlds cannot be causally efficacious unless there is transworld causation.

If absences are negative states of affairs, then their location depends on the right account of negative states of affairs. The consequences are quite varied. Transcendent universals have no location, but immanent universals are wholly present wherever they are instantiated. But where are negative immanent universals located? They are wholly present wherever they are instantiated, but where is that? Where is the instantiation of not checking one’s mail when it is instantiated by Karen? Is it located where Karen is? Is it located where Karen is not? Is it nowhere? Similar questions apply to negative tropes or particular properties.

Consider the negative polarity view, according to which a negative state of affairs is a state of affairs with negative polarity and take the state of affairs of Karen checking the mail. If it has positive polarity, perhaps it is located where Karen is located and wherever the genuine properties Karen instantiates are located. Now suppose it has negative polarity. This means Karen is no longer checking the mail. If the state of affairs of Karen checking the mail was located where Karen was, then it was located in spacetime. Is such a state of affairs located in spacetime when it is negative? How could Karen’s checking the mail be located in spacetime and then not located in spacetime by a mere change in polarity? These are not objections to the state of affairs view.\textsuperscript{38} I only bring them up to say that it is not clear where negative states of affairs are located.

\textsuperscript{37} David Lewis (1986) discusses the Way of Negation as one of many different ways to characterize abstract objects. According to the way of negation, one defines abstract objects in terms of them lacking causal efficacy and spatiotemporal location.

\textsuperscript{38} There’s nothing intrinsically paradoxical about a change in polarity making such a significant difference. A change from positive to negative can make a difference between a millionaire’s bank account and a mountain of debt or the difference between extreme heat and extreme cold.
If absences are possibilia, then they have no location in our actual world, which means that they have no actual location. Similarly to sets of possible worlds where sets are reducible to their members, possibilia are causally ineffacious if there is no transworld causation.  

**Conclusion**

We have considered eliminative, reductive, and realist views of omissions. In the case of eliminative views, omissions have no locations and cannot enter into causal relations. In the case of reductive views, omissions have locations and they can enter into causal relations. In the case of realist views, omissions may or may not have locations. Some realist views may unequivocally rule out the possibility of being causes and effects at all because absences would have to be causally isolated or causally inert and others seemingly allow for absences entering into causal relations. So far, I have only vaguely gestured at which theories of causation I have in mind. I have said enough about these theories to make clear that omissions either create problems or make no special problems for certain accounts of causation, but in the next chapter I will get more specific about the interplay between omissions and causation.

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39 I do not think that there is any such thing as transworld causation and that seems to be the standard view in the philosophical literature, but Garcia-Ramirez (2012) argues that the view can be made to make sense. I know of no one who argues in favor of accepting transworld causation.
CHAPTER 3

CONNECTION AND DEPENDENCE

Introductory Section

I said before that Frankfurt cases show that there can be a morally salient causal relationship between an agent and what the agent did even if the agent is unable to do otherwise. But what is a morally salient causal relationship? It will be difficult to say, because there is a gulf in the causal literature between connection-based causal notions and dependence-based causal notions. In this chapter, I will be as conciliatory as possible about this gulf. My aim is not to give the correct theory of causation, but to supply some causal notions that will be useful to a theorist working outside of the literature on causation. I hope to synthesize the connection-based notions and the dependence-based notions. All of the work in this chapter will go towards a notion of what I call “genuine causal relevance.” I will give no analysis or necessary and sufficient conditions for genuine causal relevance, but I will explicate what I take to be possible signs of genuine causal relevance.

Production and Dependence

Ned Hall’s “Two Concepts of Causation” is an especially salient example of a pluralist view. According to Hall, the two concepts of causation are that of production and dependence. Hall says that production is a local, intrinsic, and transitive relation. That production is local says that producers are connected to their products by means of spatiotemporally continuous sequences of causal intermediates. That production is transitive says that if c produced d and d produced e, then c produced e. That production is intrinsic says that whether or not a process is productive depends on intrinsic features of the process (plus the laws of nature). This means that if c produces e, then making changes to factors extrinsic to the sequence going from c to e and holding the laws fix will not change the causal status of the sequence. Dependence, on the other hand, is simply the thesis that counterfactual dependence is sufficient for causation. To say that e counterfactually depends on c is to say that if c had not occurred, e would not have occurred. Hall,

There are many interesting differences between production and dependence, but the most important difference for my purposes is the following: Production, roughly, is hostile to
causation by omission while dependence is relatively friendly to causation by omission. That
counterfactual dependence is sufficient for causation allows for causation by omissions. The
claim that production is causation creates several problems for causation by omission.

I will start by explaining why dependence is friendly to causation by omission. All it
takes for some omission to do y to depend on x is for it to be the case that had x not occurred, y
would have occurred. For example, all it takes for Keisha’s not going to the party to depend on
Karen’s going to the party will be for it to be the case that had Karen not gone to the party
Keisha would have gone to the party. Moreover, all it takes for some y to depend on some
omission to do x is for it to be the case that had x had been done, y would not have occurred. For
example, all it takes for Karen’s going to the party to depend on Keisha’s omitting to go to the
party is for it to be true that if Keisha had gone to the party, Karen would not have gone to the
party. Furthermore, all it takes for some omission to do y to depend on some omission to do x is
for it to be the cause that if x had been done, y would have been done. For example, all it takes
for Karen’s not going to the party to depend on Keisha’s not going to the party is for it to be the
case that if Keisha had gone to the party, Karen would have gone to the party. The question of
how omissions can enter into patterns of counterfactual dependence seems to be an entirely
straightforward matter.

Production is another story. First consider locality. Suppose Janet omits to check her mail
and her mailbox fills up as a result. If Janet had checked her mail, then the mailbox would not
have filled up, so the mailbox filling up depended on Janet’s not checking it. However, because
of locality, we cannot say that the Janet’s omission to check the mail is local to the filling up of
the mailbox. If there is no entity which is Janet’s omission, then there is no spatiotemporal
location such that it is where Janet’s omission is located, and there are no spatiotemporally
continuous processes connecting Janet’s omission to the filling up of the mailbox. If Janet’s
omission is something and is located where Janet is, then Janet could be nowhere near the
mailbox. If Janet’s omission is something and is located where the mailbox is, then we have
another problem: Suppose Janet’s omission depends on a decision Janet made, then Janet’s
decision will be a mental action located wherever Janet is and Janet’s omission will be located
where the mailbox is. No matter where we try to locate omissions, there is a problem for locality. ⁴⁰

Consider intrinsicality. The relationship between Janet’s omitting to check the mail and the mailbox filling up is not an intrinsic one, because assuming omissions are causes, making extrinsic changes to the situation changes the relationship involved in the ordered pair 〈Janet omits to check her mailbox, the mailbox fills up〉. If we wanted, we could add a guard who would refuse to let Janet remove mail from the mailbox and hold all of the laws of nature fixed. The addition of the guard is completely extrinsic to Janet’s omission and the mailbox filling up, but Janet’s omission no longer holds the same relationship to the mailbox filling up. So, once again, Janet’s failure to check her mailbox does not produce the occurrence of the mailbox filling up.

Consider transitivity. Suppose Janet’s roommate goes out to check the mail daily, which leads to Janet to not check the mail (Janet assumes her roommate will take care of it). However, one day when Janet’s roommate goes outside, she alerts a dog, who chases her down the street, the commotion of which leads Janet’s roommate to forget all about the mail. This goes on for a couple of weeks and Janet’s mailbox fills up. Suppose that causation by omission is possible, suppose that Janet’s roommate going out to check the mail causes Janet not to check the mail, and suppose that Janet’s not checking the mail causes the mailbox to fill up (let’s say that the dog loves Janet and would not have chased her). It is still clear that Janet’s roommate did not cause the mailbox to fill up by going out to check the mail. The roommate’s going out to check the mail promotes the mail being checked instead of being a threat to it. The omissions-friendly relationship between the roommate’s failure the check the mail, and the mailbox filling, whatever it is, is not a transitive one.

**Causation and Quasi-Causation**

There are other distinctions in the causation literature that seem to correspond roughly to what Hall has in mind. For example, Phil Dowe makes a distinction between causation and

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⁴⁰“Locality” is a term used by Dowe (2009) and Hall (2004). Dowe’s use of the term is not the same as Hall’s. Dowe uses it to refer to the principle of the theory of relativity which says that a cause cannot occur outside of the backwards lightcone of an effect. Interestingly, Dowe uses the examples I appealed to above in arguing that accepting causation by omission leads to violations of this principle.
quasi-causation, where causation is taken as a primitive. Causation is primitive within Dowe’s account of quasi-causation, but Dowe does have his own account of causation:

\( (CQ1) \): A causal process is the world line of an object which possesses a conserved quantity.

\( (CQ2) \): A causal interaction is an intersection of world lines which involves an exchange of conserved quantities.

Dowe’s analysis of causation says that causation is a sort of physical connection, and quasi-causation, for Dowe, can be accounted for in terms of counterfactuals about causation (note that these are sufficient but not necessary conditions):

\( (QC1) \): c quasi-caused not-e, if c occurred, e did not, and there occurred an x such that there is a causal interaction between c and a causal process due to x and if c had not occurred x would have caused e.

\( (QC2) \): Not-c quasi-caused e, if c did not occur, e occurred, and there occurred an x such that x caused e and if c had occurred c would have quasi-caused the absence of e by interacting with x.

\( (QC3) \): Not-c quasi-caused not-e, if c did not occur, e did not occur, and if c had occurred, e would have occurred.

Dowe’s quasi-causation is not the same as what Hall calls dependence, but they both appeal to counterfactuals, the primary difference is that Dowe takes counterfactuals about causation to be a derivative notion while Hall takes dependence to be simply counterfactual dependence between distinct events. In any case, Dowe’s notion of quasi-causation is friendly to omissions (almost by definition) while Dowe’s conserved quantity theory of causation is generally hostile to omissions.

Dowe’s quasi-causation paraphrases seemingly true claims of absence causation. For example, according to QC2, Janet’s omitting to check the mail quasi-caused the mailbox to fill up because Janet did not check the mail, the mailbox filled up, and there occurred an event (a mail carrier putting mail in the box) such that if Janet had checked the mail she would have interacted with a process due to the mail carrier putting mail in the box and quasi-caused the mailbox not to be filled up.

Thus, if Janet did check her mail we would have the following by QC1: Janet checked her mail, the mailbox did not fill up, and there occurred an event of the mail carrier putting mail
in the box. Janet interacted with the process due to the mail carrier putting the mail in the box such that if Janet had not checked the mail, the mailbox would have filled up.

The conserved quantity theory problematizes omissions because omissions do not seem to possess or be involved in exchanges of conserved quantity if they are nothing at all. Reductive and realist views carry a risk as well. Consider the following extension of the principle of locality (call it locality+):

\[(L+): A \text{ cause must occur inside the backward light cone of its effect.}\]

If we return to the mailbox example from before, we can have it turn out that the occurrence of Janet’s omission to check the mail obtained outside of the backward lightcone of the mailbox filling up (if the omission is located where Janet is). We can also have it turn out that the occurrence of Janet’s decision not to check the mail obtained outside of the backward lightcone of Janet’s omission to check the mail (if the omission is located where the mailbox is).

It is a constraint on Dowe’s theory, insofar as he seeks an empirical analysis of causation, that causes do not occur outside of the backward light cones of their effects because such an occurrence would violate a law of nature and allow causal signals to travel faster than the speed of light.

**Causation and Causal Explanation**

Beebee makes a distinction between relationist and non-relationist accounts of causation, one between causation and causal explanation, one between program and process explanation, and still another between adequate and inadequate causal explanations. According to relationist accounts of causation, causation is a relation between events, and according to non-relationist accounts causation need not be a relation between events. Beebee takes causation as a primitive and, following Lewis, takes a causal explanation to be a description of an event’s causal history. Process explanations appeal to the actual causal processes involved while program explanations deal with dispositional and modal descriptions of the causal processes involved.

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41 The purpose of L+ is to ensure that there are no faster than light causal signals, as a lightcone is just a spatiotemporal region that covers the farthest distances that light can travel in a certain amount of time. If a cause could occur outside the lightcone of its effect, then signal from the cause somehow “reach” its effect before light could.

42 Note that one need not identify causes in giving an event’s causal history. One can talk about what causal processes did not obtain or what causal processes would have obtained. Or one could give a general description of the causal processes involved without specifically identifying any causes.
Just as one can explain an event by appealing to causal processes did not take place, one can explain an event by appealing to causal processes that could have taken place or which have a tendency or disposition to take place. Note the similarity between Dowe’s quasi-causation, Hall’s dependence, and Beebee’s program explanation. If one were to give a causal explanation by appealing to what Dowe calls quasi-causes, or by appealing to what Hall calls dependence, then it seems that one would be giving a program explanation of some phenomena. The adequacy of an explanation depends on which norms are involved in the context of explanation. It seems to depend on what sorts of information that the explainer is seeking to provide.

For Beebee there is no causation by omission but there are true claims of negative causal explanation and there can still be true causal explanatory claims about omissions. Beebee follows Lewis in taking causal explanation to be “information about the causal history of an event.” They cannot be process explanations, but they can be program explanations. Even if there is no absence causation, the following sorts of claims could be true:

(CE1): e did not occur because c occurred.
(CE2): e occurred because c did not occur.
(CE3): e did not occur because c did not occur.

For example, returning to the mailbox example again, by CE2 one can say that the mailbox filled up because Janet did not check it. If Janet did check the mail, it would be the case that the mailbox did not fill up because Janet did check it by CE1. Explaining the filling up of the mailbox by appealing to the locution in CE2 is providing negative information about the causal history of the event.

Beebee thinks that causation is a relation but that omissions are nothing at all. Because relations require relata, omissions cannot be causes and effects. However, even if omissions are nothing at all, there can still be true causal explanations which involve (seeming) reference to omissions. Beebee’s suggestion is that we make a distinction between program and process explanation. A process explanation picks out actual causal processes while a program explanation can express modal facts about such a process. For example, modal facts about what causal relationships would obtain under counterfactual conditions could figure in a program explanation even if it does not pick out a genuine causal relationship.

43 They can express other sorts of facts as well, but modal facts are the sort which concern us here.
Causation and Biff

David Lewis takes causation to be a counterfactual notion and biff to be an intrinsic probabilistic counterfactual dependence relation between events. Because Lewis does not take causation to be a relation and he takes absences to be bogus entities, Lewis takes causation to be friendly to absence causation and biff to be hostile to it. Lewis is a long advocate of counterfactual-based theories of causation, so he thinks that absences can be causes because there are certain counterfactual truths about absences. Lewis argues that a conceptual analysis of causation yields an omissions-friendly notion while the actual relation in the world that can be described as causation is omissions-hostile. For Lewis, biff may tell us about causation in the actual world, but only a counterfactual account of causation can tell us about causation, as a matter of conceptual necessity, in all possible worlds (Lewis, 287).

Connection and Dependence

We see that Hall, Dowe, Beebee, and Lewis all distinguish causal notions but draw different conclusions from the distinctions they make. Hall (though he has changed his mind since) argues that there are two separate concepts of causation. Beebee and Dowe argue that genuine causation is omissions-hostile while a derivative causal notion is omissions-friendly. Lewis argues that a conceptual analysis of causation yields a omissions-friendly notion while the actual relation in the world that can be described as causation is omissions-hostile. The approach I take in what follows is heavily influenced by the approaches taken by these previous authors. Even if omissions cannot be causes, I think that they can still be causally relevant. 44 I will make a rough distinction between physical connection and whether/whether dependence and attempt to synthesize the two notions in order to obtain an adequate account. First dependence and connection:

\( (D) \): e whether/whether depends on c iff whether e occurs depends on whether c occurs, that is:

\( (a) \): if c had not occurred, e would not have occurred, and
\( (b) \): if c had occurred, e would have occurred. 45

44 Boris Kukso (2004) appeals to the concept of causal relevance when discussing negative causation but says very little about what causal relevance is other than to distinguish it from causal operation. I will give an account of what I take causal relevance to be later in this chapter.
45 Note that whether/whether dependence need not be any sort of relation. If a rematch between boxers depends on whether one of the boxers feels like it, then there need not be any event of the appropriate boxer feeling like it or a rematch.
(PC): e is physically connected to c iff there is a series of causal processes and interactions going from c to e.

An agent can also be physically connected to something and whether something happens can also depend on an agent:

(AC): Agent A is physically connected to x iff there is a series of causal processes and interactions going from A to x.

(AD): x depends on an agent A iff whether or not x obtains depends on A.

An agent can be physically connected to her mental and her overt actions and the outcomes of her mental and overt actions. Mental actions are connected to an agent in the sense that mental actions involve neurophysiological processes which occur within an agent. An agent can be physically connected to her overt actions in the sense that mental events, which occur within her, are physically connected to her overt actions. An agent’s actions can be physically connected to outcomes in the world. I think that the distinctions between agent-involving events, and agents themselves entering into relationships of physical connection is wholly non-problematic. In either case the agent is physically connected.

Whether or not an event occurs can depend on another event, but I contend that it can depend on an agent as well. Prima facie, the idea of an occurrence depending on an agent instead of an event seems incoherent. Whether/whether dependence before we add agents is just counterfactual dependence. Take whether/whether dependence between x and y: if it is construed as counterfactual dependence, it requires that if some event x had not occurred, then some event y would not have occurred. But there is no such thing as an agent occurring or not occurring. We can say that they exist or do not exist (or that there are or are not agents) but it makes no sense to say that they occur. When we say that whether an occurrence takes place depends on the agent, we do not mean that if the agent did not exist (or if there were no such agent), then the occurrence would not have taken place. It did not depend on me whether or not I fell down the stairs this morning, but if I did not exist, I would not have fallen down the stairs. This clearly does not capture the relevant notion of what it takes for an occurrence to depend on an agent.

One strategy is to substitute “it depends on something about the agent” for “it depends on the agent.” An occurrence might depend on what an agent does, or on some of an agent’s properties. But sometimes occurrences depend on what an agent does but do not depend on the agent. For example, if Kevin is locked outside of his apartment and his ice sculpture inside is
melting, whether the ice sculpture melted might depend on whether or not he enters the house, because if he had entered the house he would have thrown the ice sculpture in the freezer, but it still does not depend on Kevin whether or not the ice sculpture melted. Moreover, an occurrence can depend on an agent’s properties without depending on the agent. For example, an agent might be captured and brainwashed into being a cold-blooded killer and resultantly kill someone in cold blood. In this case, whether she committed the killing certainly depended on whether she had cold-blooded killer properties, but it did not depend on her whether or not she committed the killing. An occurrence might depend on an agent’s decision. But sometimes occurrences depend on what an agent decides but do not depend on the agent. Many Frankfurt-style cases show exactly this. Below is case based on one Clarke (1993) proposes (it differs in what I take to be unimportant details).

_Babysitter:_ You promise to babysit a child and forget to do so because it slips your mind. Unbeknownst to you, however, an anti-babysitting neuroscientist would have seen to it that you forgot to babysit the child and ended up not doing so if it started to look it you would remember to babysit the child.

Clarke (1993) contends about a case like that that you are responsible for not babysitting the child because if you had intended to babysit the child and tried to carry out your intention, you would have babysat the child. It is irrelevant that you could not have remembered to babysit the child because the child’s not being babysat depended on your not remembering to babysit the child. I think Clarke is correct to focus on dependence in his proposal, but I have a notion of dependence that I apply slightly differently. Although it depends on your forgetting whether or not the child is babysat because if you had not forgotten you would have babysat the child, it does not depend on you whether or not you babysat the child. I would rather avoid attempting to give any further account of agential-dependence, but if it is required, then I propose the following:

_(AD*):_ the occurrence of x whether/whether depended on an agent A iff either (i) x did not obtain, if the agent had decided to make it the case that x obtained, x would have obtained, and the agent was able to make it the case that x obtained, or (ii) x did obtain, if the agent had decided to make it the case that x did not obtain, x would not have obtained, and the agent was able to make it the case that x did not obtain.
I think that Frankfurt cases show that an agent can be morally responsible for an outcome even if the agent is unable to do otherwise because they are able to show that a morally salient causal relationship is compatible with an inability to do otherwise. These observations lead to the following necessary condition for moral responsibility:

\[ \text{MR}: \text{If A is morally responsible for x, then A is causally relevant to the occurrence of} \ x. \]

This commits me to the view that any attempted Frankfurt case where the agent is not causally relevant to the outcome will fail to show that an agent can be responsible for an action, omission, or outcome even though the agent was unable to do otherwise. I will further elaborate upon what sort of causal relationship I have in mind in the next sections.\(^{46}\)

Causal Relationships Broadly Construed

Given the previous discussion, the thought of simply making a disjunction out of physical connection and counterfactual dependence is a tempting one, but we will see in this section that such a move leaves several problems unsolved and would more or less make it pointless to apply such a disjunction to Frankfurt style cases. To remedy these sorts of worries, I will develop three notions: (1) direct causal relevance, (2) causal relevance, and (3) salient causal relevance.

Dependence Failure

Causes do not always depend on their effects. One type of case where causes fail to depend on their effects are cases of preemption like the following:

Typical Preemption: Keisha throws a rock at a window. Karen throws a rock right after Keisha throws hers. Keisha’s rock hits the window and the window shatters.

If Keisha had not thrown her rock, Karen’s rock would have hit the window and the window still would have broken. Keisha’s throw caused the window to break, but whether the window broke did not depend on Keisha’s throw. Dependence theorists have appealed to a very large number of strategies to deal with preemption, but adequately tackling them here will take us too far afield. Physical connection theories, on the other hand, do very well with preemption cases (so long as they are not preemption cases that involve absences, but more on this later). In the case above, Keisha’s throw is physically connected to the shattering of the window, so physical connection

\(^{46}\) As it stands, the failure to babysit does not depend on the agent and whether or not the agent is physically connected to the agent’s forgetting depends on the metaphysical status of the omission in question. I discuss the question of whether the agent in babysitter is responsible for failing to babysit the child in Chapter 4.
cases give the correct verdict in Typical Preemption. In any case, Keisha’s throw is clearly causally relevant to the breaking of the window.

**Connection Failure**

Physical connection theories tend to be hostile to absence causation, so they do poorly with cases like the following:

*Typical Absence Causation: Keisha promises to water Karen’s plants while she is out of town. Keisha watches TV instead and the plants die.*

Physical connection theories are not problematic in identifying a cause of the plants dying. Instead, the problem is capturing the relevance of Keisha’s failing to water the plants to the event. According to physical connection theories, Keisha’s failure to water the plants does not cause the plants to die because, prima facie, there is no physical connection between Keisha’s failure and the death of the plants. Dependence-based theories do well with cases like Typical Absence Causation. Keisha’s failure to water the plants made a difference to whether or not the plants died. In any case, Keisha’s failure is at least causally relevant to the plant’s dying.

**Weakening Causal Relevance**

So we have given a case where dependence-based theories do poorly but physical connection cases do well and a case where physical connection theories do poorly but dependence-based theories do well. Is anything present in both cases? Well, certainly a disjunction between physical connection and dependence! Here is a first pass at the notion:

\[(DCR): c \text{ is directly causally relevant to } e \text{ iff either } e \text{ depends on } c \text{ or } c \text{ is physically connected to } e.\]

With DCR we are able to capture why Keisha’s throw is causally relevant in Typical Preemption and why Keisha’s failure is relevant to the death of the plants in Typical Absence Causation. However, DCR is subject to a problem: mixed chains of causal relevance. Suppose c is physically connected to d (but d does not depend on c), and e depends on d (with no physical connection between d and e). It could also be the other way around. In either case it could turn out that c is neither physically connected to nor a different maker for e, but is still causally relevant to e. Here’s an example:

*Preemptive Disconnection:* Two sharpshooters, Sharp and Shooter, take aim at a rope holding up an anvil. Sharp’s sharp, so Sharp shoots first. Shooter’s not as sharp, so Shooter

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47 Schaffer gives cases with this structure in his (2001).
shoots second. Sharp’s bullet pierces the rope first, Shooter’s bullet flies to the spot where the rope would have been, and the anvil falls to the ground.

There is a physical connection between Sharp’s firing and the piercing of the rope. But Sharp’s firing is not a difference maker for the piercing of the rope because Shooter’s bullet would have pierced the rope if Sharp’s bullet had not. There is no physical connection between the piercing of the rope and the falling of the weight. The weight fell because the rope was no longer in place. But the piercing of the rope made a difference to whether or not the weight fell. Neither simple dependence nor simple physical connection theories do well with preemptive disconnection cases. In any case, Sharp’s firing is surely at least causally relevant to the anvil’s falling to the ground.

Direct causal relevance is too stringent. This situation is remedied by the following addition:

(\textbf{CR}): \(c\) is causally relevant to \(e\) iff either \(c\) is directly causally relevant to \(e\), or there is a set of entities \(d_1, d_2, d_3, \ldots, d_n\) such that \(c\) is directly causally relevant to \(d_1\), \(d_1\) is directly causally relevant to \(d_2\), \(d_2\) is directly causally relevant to \(d_3\), \(d_3\) is directly causally relevant to \(d_4\), \ldots, \(d_n\), and \(d_n\) is directly causally relevant to \(e\).

This formulation has the following result:

(\textbf{CR-Result}): If \(c\) is directly causally relevant to \(d\) and \(d\) is directly causally relevant to \(e\), then \(c\) is causally relevant to \(e\).

Causal relevance, then, is the ancestral of direct causal relevance. CR requires direct causal relevance at each step of the causal chain. Now we have the right verdict for the Preemptive Disconnection case. Sharp’s firing is either physically connected to or a difference maker for the piercing of the rope and the piercing of the rope is either physically connect to or a difference maker for the falling of the anvil.\(^{48}\)

We still have problems. Misconnection cases are those where some \(c\) is physically connected to some \(e\), but where \(c\) did not cause \(e\). Here’s an example:

\textit{Typical Misconnection:}\(^{49}\) Keisha throws a rock at a window. Karen shines a laser pointer and the light from it hits the rock before the rock hits and shatters the window.

\(^{48}\) Note that I am using “\(c\) is a difference maker for \(e\)” and “\(e\) depends on \(c\)” synonymously.

\(^{49}\) Adapted from (Dowe 2004).
The light from Karen’s laser pointer is physically connected to the shattering of the window, but the light from Karen’s laser pointer did not cause the window to break. Difference making theories do very well in misconnection cases. If we consider Typical Misconnection, we find that the light from Karen’s laser pointer failed to make a difference to whether or not the window shattered. But this observation will not help us here because our account appeals to a disjunction between difference making and physical connection. Every case that shows difference making not to be sufficient for causation will be a problem for our account as well as every case that shows physical connection not to be sufficient for causation.

Moreover, difference making theories allow absences to be causes, so they do well with cases like Typical Absence Causation but poorly with cases like the following:

**Profligate Absence Causation:** Keisha promised to water Karen’s plants while Karen was out of town. Keisha doesn’t water the plants and Karen’s plants die while Phylicia Rashad relaxes at home.

Physical connection theories tend to be absence-hostile, so they do very well with cases like these. There is no physical connection between Phylicia Rashad’s not watering the plants and the death of the plants. Once again, since our account is a disjunction between difference making and physical connection, every case that shows difference making not to be sufficient causation will be a problem for our account as well every case that shows physical connection not to be sufficient for causation.\(^{50}\) Because the death of the plants depends on Phylicia Rashad’s failure to water the plants, it is true that either the death of the plants depends on Phylicia Rashad’s failure or the death of the plants is physically connected to Phylicia Rashad’s failure.

I think that Misconnection and Profligacy are instances of the problem of selection. We find that there are many minor causal contributors to any given outcome, but we only select some of them. Phylicia Rashad’s failure is surely causally relevant. It is a causal fact about Phylicia Rashad that she would have prevented the death of the plants had she not failed to water it. It is simply a fact that does not matter much. The firing of the laser pointer is also surely causally relevant to the breaking of the window. There are physical interactions involved in the breaking that specifically occur as a result of the laser pointer. They are simply minor interactions that do not matter a great deal.

\(^{50}\) It is also worth noting that Dowe and Beebee’s accounts have corresponding problems of profligate quasi-causation and profligate causal explanation.
This is not a problem for my account of causal relevance because profligacy and misconnection both involve occurrences that are causally relevant but which do not stand out in virtue of any norms. What CR captures seems to be a sort of minimal causal relevance. However, is of little help to us when trying to determine what is necessary for moral responsibility. Causal relevance seems too common a relationship. What we need, then, is a condition which allows us to select among causally relevant alternatives. The following will do so:

\[ \text{(SCR): } \text{c is saliently causally relevant to e iff} \]
\[ \begin{align*}
(1): & \text{ c is causally relevant to e, and} \\
(2): & \text{ c is salient.}
\end{align*} \]

A cause c is salient if c stands out in virtue of moral, legal, or epistemic norms. We find that misconnection and profligate absence causation both involve genuine causal relevance but nonsalience.

This still does not solve all of our problems. There is the problem of preemptive prevention:

\[ \text{Typical Preemptive Prevention:}^{51} \text{ Guard A deprives a prisoner of water and Guard C deprives a prisoner of food. The prisoner dies.} \]

Are Guards A and C causally relevant to the death of the prisoner? My proposal says no. Neither A nor C is physically connected to the death of the prison, and neither makes a difference to the prisoner’s death.\(^{52}\) The guards are causally relevant to the manner and time in which the prisoner died, but not whether or not the prisoner died. If A had not deprived the prisoner of water, the prisoner would have died of starvation. If C had not deprived the prisoner of food, the prisoner would have died of dehydration (presumably earlier than if he died of starvation). There is a dependence concerning when and how the prisoner died, but none about whether the prisoner died, hence it appears that neither is causally relevant to the death of the prisoner, directly or indirectly.

We resolved typical preemption cases by appealing to the notion of physical connection, but now we have a preemption case where there is no physical connection. Neither A nor C is physically connected to the death of the prisoner.

\(^{51}\) Adapted from (Thomson 2003).
\(^{52}\) Perhaps a death from dehydration is a different death than a death from starvation. Even so, I will assume that the prisoner’s death is modally robust.
I will treat these cases of preemptive prevention all in the same way. My account is compatible with the view that A and C’s failures together are causally relevant to the prisoner’s death but neither is on its own. After all A and C’s failures together make a difference to whether the prisoner dies but neither does on its own. This sort of response has not been well-received by philosophers of causation. Consider what L.A. Paul says about this approach:

This result is bizarre. How can the mereological sum of A and C be a cause of E while neither A nor C alone is a cause, joint or otherwise? It is unclear why the presence of C makes A unable to be a cause without being a member of the mereological sum of A and C, and likewise unclear why the presence of A makes C unable to be a cause without being a member of the mereological sum of A and C. (2009, 181)

The answer to this concern becomes clear when we distinguish dependence from physical connection. It is indeed mysterious how the mereological sum of A and C can be physically connected to some E where neither A nor C is physically connected to C. If the sum of A and C are physically connected to E, then at least one of A and C must be physically connected to E. However, it is not mysterious at all how the mereological sum of A and C can be a difference-maker where neither A nor C alone is a difference maker. A can fail to be a difference-maker to E precisely because the presence of C ensures that E will happen anyway and vice-versa. This is a basic fact about difference-making. So the strategy I have adopted does not yield a bizarre result in this respect.

A consequence of CR is that causal relevance is transitive, but many have proposed counterexamples to the transitivity of causation, and these counterexamples may carry over to causal relevance.

**Typical Counterexample to Transitivity 1:** Suzy falls and breaks her right wrist during a game of basketball. When she gets home she writes her monthly letter to her pen pal with her left hand. Suzy’s pen pal gets the letter and is very happy.

**Typical Counterexample to Transitivity 2:** Chuck is walking along a mountain path when a huge boulder starts rolling in his direction. The commotion from the rolling boulder causes Chuck to hear and eventually see the boulder rolling towards him. Seeing the boulder rolling towards him causes him to duck and as a result he manages to survive the ordeal.

53 Adapted from (Paul, Aspect Causation 2000).
54 Adapted from (Hall 2000).
Transitivity 1 depends on coarse-grained event individuation. Suzy’s breaking her right wrist causes the left-handed writing of her letter (= the writing of the letter) and the writing of the letter (= the left-handed writing of the letter) caused her pen pal to become very happy, but Suzy’s breaking her right wrist does not cause Suzy’s pen pal to become very happy (Suzy’s accident did not inspire her letter writing). But if causation is transitive, then Suzy’s accident did cause Suzy’s pen pal to become happy. In Transitivity 2, the boulder’s rolling made some commotion and caused Chuck to duck and Chuck’s ducking caused his survival. The case also requires that we take for granted that the boulder rolling towards Chuck did not cause Chuck to survive. That the boulder rolling did not cause Chuck survive can be motivated by the observation that the rolling boulder is a threat to Chuck’s survival.

I have some qualms about the second case. I actually have the view that the rolling boulder did cause Chuck’s survival despite being a threat to his survival. I find nothing counterintuitive in the idea that an event can be both a threat to an outcome while simultaneously causing the outcome. If we assume for the sake of argument that the rolling boulder did not cause Chuck’s survival. I can offer that causal relevance itself is transitive, but salient causal relevance is not. Salient causal relevance between c and e is when c is causally relevant to e and c is salient. I think these two observations can contribute to a resolution of many of the problems that arise because of transitivity. I call it the fading salience hypothesis:

\[(FS)\]: If c is causally relevant to e, causal intermediates between c and e potentially diminish the salience of c.\(^{55}\)

Consider that the events that took place early in the history of the universe are rarely regarded as salient causes for particular events that took place millions and billions of years later despite being causally relevant to their occurrence and that more immediate causes are often taken to be more salient. In any case, this concludes my account of causal relevance. I will be using the notions I have developed here to test for causal relevance in scenarios relevant to moral responsibility.

\(^{55}\) FS is compatible with the claim that salient causal relevance is not transitive, but I am not committed to that thesis. It could be that salient causal relevance is transitive and that salience continues to diminish ad infinitum while never being completely eliminated or it could be that salient causal relevance is not transitive and salience is eventually eliminated. I also take no stand on whether or not salience fades in a particular way. There may be causal sequences with very many intermediates where the first cause remains very salient and there may be causal sequences that very little intermediates where the first cause is not salient at all.
**Conclusion**

To complete this chapter, I need to introduce the notion of genuine causal relevance. I will not give an account of genuine causal relevance, but I will take it to be the highest form of causal relevance that can be discovered in any given situation. I have engineered some “tests” for causal relevance, but I have said very little about how they are to be used. I think the following guidelines will be most helpful.

*(G1):* Connection *and* dependence together are more indicative of genuine causal relevance than either alone.

*(G2):* Direct causal relevance is a stronger indicator for genuine causal relevance than causal relevance alone.\(^{56}\)

*(G3):* Salient causal relevance is a stronger indicator of genuine causal relevance than causal relevance alone.

With these guidelines in mind, and our considerations about the metaphysics of omissions from the previous chapter, we have the resources needed to continue our investigation. In the next chapter I will apply these notions to Frankfurt-style omissions cases.

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\(^{56}\) Note the similarities between G2 and FS.
CHAPTER 4

OMISSION RESPONSIBLE

Introductory Section

In the first chapter I explained what I take to be the challenge that Frankfurt-style cases involving ordinary actions pose to the principle of alternative possibilities: they show that a morally significant causal relationship can obtain between an agent and what an agent does even if the agent is unable to do otherwise. I also considered that in light of this challenge a worthwhile question is that of whether or not a Frankfurt-style case involving omissions could be similarly successful. In the second and third chapters I noted that there are controversies concerning the metaphysics of omissions and the metaphysics of causation. Such controversies have mutual implications. The metaphysics of omissions has implications which concern the metaphysics of causation and vice-versa. Two salient examples: (1) I pointed out that according to eliminativism, there are no omissions at all, and (2) that according to David Lewis’s view of causation, there can be causation by omission even if there are no omissions at all. In this chapter, I apply the work from the previous chapters to Frankfurt-style omission cases. Since I argued that Frankfurt-style cases demonstrate that certain sorts of causal relationships can obtain between agents, actions, outcomes, and the like, despite the agent’s inability to do otherwise, determining the prospects for Frankfurt-style omission cases is a simple matter of considering what the prospects are for Frankfurt-style cases involving omissions assuming that particular accounts of causation and particular accounts of omissions are correct.

Causal Relationships

Consider the following possibilities:

i. Direct causal relevance, both connection and dependence, with moral salience
ii. Direct causal relevance with moral salience
iii. Direct causal relevance without moral salience
iv. Indirect causal relevance with moral salience
v. Indirect causal relevance without moral salience
vi. Neither direct nor indirect causal relevance.
My principles from the previous chapter rank the possible outcomes with i being the strongest indicator of genuine causal relevance and vi being the weakest indicator.

Consider an instance of iii that is not a Frankfurt-style case and which does not involve omissions:

*A Clear Case of Causation:* Kahari throws a baseball at a window, the ball hits the window, and the window shatters.

In this case consider the relationship between Kahari’s throwing the baseball and the window shattering. If Kahari had not thrown the baseball, the window would not have shattered (it is not a case of preemption, there is no one standing by waiting to shatter the window). There’s a physical connection between Kahari’s throwing the baseball and the window shattering. Moreover, among all of the factors causally relevant to the window’s shattering, such as the window’s molecular structure and the fact that there was no brick wall between Kahari and the window, Kahari’s throw is clearly salient, although it is not necessarily morally salient given the way that I have described the case. Kahari’s throw is directly causally relevant and is salient to the window’s shattering. This seems to be a clear case of causation. Now consider an instance of i:

*Typical Case:* A undergoes rational, sane deliberation and decides to kill B based on her deliberation. She takes her gun and kills B by shooting her.

In *Typical Case*, there is a physical connection between A and B’s being shot. It depends on A whether or not B is shot, and insofar as A has undergone rational, sane deliberation and shot B as a result of her decision to shoot B, A stands out among other cause factors like the availability of the gun, A’s harsh upbringing, B’s inability to repel bullets, and the like. Moreover, there are minimal causal intermediates between A and B’s being shot. It seems that *Typical Case* is a clear case of an agent being morally responsible. I say this to point out that how well potential Frankfurt-style omissions cases fare will depend on how close they can come to genuine causal relevance.

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57 In fact, I suspect that there can be no case of direct causal relevance with some sort of salience that does not appear to be a case of causation. If c is physically connected to e and e would not have occurred had c not occurred and c is salient, then c caused e.
Eliminativism

If an eliminative account of omissions is correct, then there are no omissions. Eliminative views of omissions problematize Frankfurt-style cases involving agents omitting to act. In order to show that an agent is responsible for an omission, such a case would have to show that the agent is somehow causally relevant to the omission, but it is difficult to ascertain how an agent is causally relevant to an omission if there are no omissions.

There can be no case which describes an agent which is physically connected to an omission given eliminativism. Recall my principle from Chapter 2:

\[(AC): \text{Agent A is physically connected to } x \text { iff there is a series of causal processes and interactions going from A to } x.\]

According to such a principle a physical connection between an agent A and an entity x is a kind of relation between the agent A and the entity x. But if there are no omissions at all, then there is no entity x for an agent A to be physically connected to. Recall Typical Frankfurt-style Omission from Chapter 1:

Typical Frankfurt-style Omission: A sees B drowning in the ocean at the beach. Being a good swimmer and believing herself capable of saving B, after rational sane deliberation, A does not reach a decision to save B and does not save B. Unbeknownst to A, C, an evil neuroscientist, would have seen to it she never reached a decision to save B and did not save B if it had started to look like A was going to decide to save B, and would have done so by manipulating A’s brain states. In any case, C never needed to get involved.

In Typical Frankfurt-style Omission, there is no physical connection between the agent and her failure to save B, assuming that there are no omissions. After all, there is no entity x which is identical to A’s failure to save B, so there cannot be a relation of physical connection between A and A’s failure to save B. A’s failure to save B cannot serve as a relatum in a relation of physical connection.

Moreover, if an eliminative account of omissions is correct, then no Frankfurt-style case can describe a scenario where an agent’s omission depends on an agent. In this case, the problem

\[58\] Note that I discuss the different ways of accounting for the nature of causal processes in chapter 2.
\[59\] There is arguably a physical connection between the agent and her decision not to save B, but her decision to save B is not an omission.
is not eliminative accounts of omissions. After all, if there are no omissions at all, it may depend on an agent whether or not she omits. This takes place in cases like the following:

**Typical Omission:** A sees B drowning in the ocean at the beach. Being an excellent and capable swimmer and believing herself capable of saving B, after rational sane deliberation, A decides not to save B and does not save B.

In Typical Omission there are no malicious potential interveners and it is certainly possible that it depends on A whether or not she saves B even if there is no entity x such that x is identical to A’s failure to save B. If whether or not x obtains depends on an agent A, there need not be an entity y such that y is identical to x’s failure to obtain in the case where the agent fails to bring it about that x obtains. The problem when we are considering Frankfurt-style cases is the dependence-undermining nature of Frankfurt-style cases. Frankfurt-style cases are designed so that outcomes, actions, and the like do not depend on the agent involved. Note that in **Typical Frankfurt-style Omission**, it does not depend on A whether or not she saves B because C the evil neuroscientist ensures that it does not depend on A whether or not she does so. This is not a peculiar feature of **Typical Frankfurt-style Omission**. Frankfurt-style cases in general require that whether or not the agent acts does not depend on the agent. Frankfurt style cases, if they are going to be successful in describing cases where an agent is responsible for an omission, need to be dependence-undermining because if they are not, then they fail to describe a case where an agent is responsible for whatever it is she did or her failure to act but where the agent still lacks the ability to do otherwise.  

In previous chapters I described direct causal relevance as involving either physical connection or agential dependence. I described indirect causal relevance as the ancestral of direct causal relevance. Agents in Frankfurt-style omission cases cannot be directly causally relevant to their omitting to act assuming that there are no omissions at all, but I still have not shown that it is impossible for agents to be indirectly causally relevant to their omission. If we were to modify **Typical Frankfurt-style Omission**, so that the agent decides not to save the child, you could conclude the agent is indeed indirectly causally relevant to the omission. If we stipulate

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Note that Frankfurt-style omission cases do not undermine dependence in general. There are Frankfurt style cases where it might depend on whether or not an agent makes some decision whether or not an agent acts or fails to act, but in such cases it will not depend on the agent whether or not the agent acts or fails to act. In fact, in such cases it never depends on the agent whether or not she makes the decision at all. It needs to depend on the agent and not just on a decision of the agent because of cases like the Phylicia Rashad case in chapter 1.
that A would have saved B had A decided to do so, then it is easy to see why: the case would describe a scenario where an agent is physically connected to a decision, a decision which the agent’s failure to save B depended upon. The agent is physically connected to the decision, as there are causal processes and interactions linking the agent to her decision, and whether or not the agent acted to save B depended on whether or not she made the appropriate decision. Given that A should have at least tried to save B, it seems clear that A’s being indirectly causally relevant to whether or not she saved B is also morally salient. Because she should have tried to save B, there is a moral norm which applies to the scenario and which makes her failure to act stand out among other things she failed to do, such as her failure to dance the cupid shuffle.

Therefore, in the case of eliminativism there is no possibility for direct causal relevance, but there is a possibility for causal relevance and salient indirect causal relevance. Given my principles from the end of the previous chapter, this is not ideal because it would be better for a proponent of Frankfurt-style omission cases to establish direct causal relevance, but we are able to conclude here that if eliminativism about omissions is correct, then there can indeed be a morally significant (indirect) causal relationship between the agent and her failure to act. This is still not a satisfactory result for a proponent of Frankfurt-style cases involving omissions who is also an eliminativist about omissions.

If an agent is causally relevant to some action, omission, or outcome in virtue of iv, it is simply not very clear whether or not the agent will turn out to be intuitively responsible. There will be cases where the agent will appear to be responsible and other cases where the agent will appear not to be responsible. Consider Babysitter again:

**Babysitter:** You promise to babysit a child and forget to do so because it slips your mind. Unbeknownst to you, however, an anti-babysitting neuroscientist would have seen to it that you forgot to babysit the child and ended up not doing so if it started to look it you would remember to babysit the child.

In Chapter 3, I mentioned that the failure to babysit does not depend on the agent in this case and that whether the agent is physically connected to the failure to babysit depends on the metaphysical status of the agent’s forgetting to babysit. There is no possibility of a physical connection between the agent in the babysitting case and the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child if there is no entity that is identical to the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child. If there is no entity that is identical to the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child, then the agent in this case
is wholly causally irrelevant to the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child and there is no morally
significant causal relationship between the agent and the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child. If
there is no morally significant causal relationship, this combination of views requires us to
conclude that the agent is not morally responsible for forgetting to babysit the child. In order to
preserve the judgment that the agent is morally responsible, one would need to discount my
account of causal relevance, find an entity that is identical to the agent’s omissions and/or
maintain that there is an entity which is identical to the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child.

**Reductivism**

If a reductive account of omissions is correct, then Frankfurt-style omission cases might
allow a physical connection between an agent and the omission, depending on what omissions
are reduced to. If it turns out that an agent’s omission to act is reducible to her bodily state, then
it is possible to show that there is a physical connection between the agent and the relevant
bodily state and consequently a physically connection between the agent and her omission. It
also may turn out that the agent’s bodily state depends on her.

Suppose that in Typical Frankfurt-style Omission, A’s failure is identical to her bodily
state. Suppose she is twiddling her thumbs instead of saving the child. It is certainly true that
there is a physical connection between A and the A’s twiddling of her thumbs. It also may turn
out that whether or not the agent twiddles her thumbs depends on her. The agent is able to do
otherwise than twiddle her thumbs and if she wanted to, she would not have twiddled her
thumbs. Thus, if certain reductive accounts of omissions are correct, then one can easily make an
argument that agents are directly causally relevant to omissions even in Frankfurt-style cases
involving omissions. Fischer and Ravizza’s distinction between a complex omission and a
simple omission seems relevant here. For Fischer and Ravizza, a simple omission is not identical
to but is fully constituted by the bodily state of the agent, but a complex omission is a bodily
state combined with its relationship to what they call a “consequence universal.” Whereas a
consequence-particular is the particular thing that happened as a result of the omission, a
consequence-universal is a kind of thing that happened as a result of the omission. The question
for Fischer-Ravizza in Typical Frankfurt Style Omission is whether or not the omission
constituted by A’s bodily state has the right sort of relationship between the agent A and the
consequence universal of B’s not being saved by A. If we set aside worries about what “fully
constitutes” comes to, another problem that seems to arise from this point is that it seems that
there is a difference between claiming a person is responsible for twiddling her thumbs and claiming a person is responsible for failing to do whatever she should have been doing instead. In general, even when \( a = b \), it can happen that an agent is responsible for \( a \) but not responsible for \( b \). To take a classic example from Davidson: if my flicking of a light switch is identical to my alerting a burglar, then I might be responsible for flicking the switch but not for alerting the burglar, for suppose I was unaware that a burglar was in the vicinity at all.\(^{61}\) If we take the same case and substitute “fully constitutes” for “is identical to,” then a very similar puzzle seems to arise. This puzzle seems to arise because of problems having to do with the fact that claims about moral responsibility are referentially opaque, and although an adequate discussion of referential opacity and intensional contexts falls beyond the scope of my dissertation,\(^{62}\) questions of referential opacity and other problems similar to it seem to have significant consequences for reductive accounts of omissions and Frankfurt-style omission cases.

The Davidson/Varmanzen/Varzi account, or the negative description view, seems to fare equally well when it comes to Frankfurt-style cases involving omissions. I noted before that the negative description view can be interpreted as a reductive or mixed view.\(^{63}\) If their view is taken to be reductive, then my remarks about reductive accounts in general seem to apply. If an omission is just some ordinary action described negatively, such as A’s twiddling her thumbs, then she might be responsible for twiddling her thumbs but not for her failure to act. The point about referential opacity seems to carry over as well.

In previous chapters I discussed the negative act views of Walton and Brand and concluded that their views would only apply to Frankfurt-style cases which specifically involving refraining, forbearing and the like. In fact, Typical Frankfurt Style Omission is the sort of case that the views of Walton and Brand would apply to if we stipulate that A refrained from saving B by preventing herself from acting in the appropriate way. As I mentioned before, these views have limited value given that they only give an account for a subset of omissions.

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\(^{61}\) Example taken from (Davidson 1963).

\(^{62}\) In the case I gave, there’s a question of whether my flicking the switch is identical at all to my alerting the burglar, and there is a general underlying concern about attributions of responsibility in intensional contexts.

\(^{63}\) It might even be that the account is fairly non-committal as it only applies to the semantics of omissions discourse and is both compatible with both eliminative and reductive accounts of omissions. Even given this, it seems unlikely that the account is compatible with a realist account of omissions.
Thus, in the case of reductivism applied to Typical Frankfurt-style Omission, there can be direct causal relevance, which clearly entails causal relevance, but the moral salience of the causal relationship is potentially obscured by puzzles involving referential opacity.

Realism

If a realist account of omissions is correct, then Frankfurt style cases might allow a physical connection between the agent and the omission. Whether or not this is possible depends on what an omission is. Unfortunately, the sort of entity an omission would have to be on a realist account might be mysterious. In particular, I mean that such an entity might not occupy spacetime and might not be causally efficacious.\(^{64}\)

If omissions cannot figure in causal relations on a realist account because omissions end up being the sorts of entities that are causally inefficacious by their very nature, then that obviously settles the matter. However, even if they could figure in causal relations of some sort, it would be difficult to determine how an omission can be causally connected to an agent when the omission does not occupy spacetime while the agent does occupy spacetime. This would amount to being an “interaction problem” for agents and omissions. Both of these factors would be problems in general, but they would especially be problems for any kind of purported Frankfurt-style case involving omissions.

Of course, if omissions are characterized as some sort of actual physical entity, then I think remarks similar to the ones I made about reductive accounts apply equally well. This is especially so if we are considering realist accounts of omissions according to which omissions are identical to bodily states. Such views are basically the same as the reductive accounts I consider earlier. But the sort of realist accounts of omissions I am considering here are non-reductive realist accounts of omissions.

I previously discussed possible proposals brought up by Randolph Clarke. I think that the negative fact account Clarke mentioned is subject to what I called an “interaction problem” for omissions, as negative facts of the sort that Clarke described are either abstract objects or sets of possible worlds. The negative states of affairs sorts of accounts that Clarke mentioned are

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\(^{64}\) I am not using the term “mysterious” in a very precise way. I acknowledge that many might not find disembodied minds and abstract objects mysterious at all.
varied, and many of the consequences for Frankfurt-style omissions cases will depend on the
details of the account in question.65

If omissions are characterized as non-actual possibilia which are somehow causally
efficacious, then there is a problem concerning how exactly to characterize the causal
relationship between actual agents and non-actual possibilia which are taken to be identical to
omissions. Non-actual possibilia are standardly considered to be causally isolated from the actual
world, which makes it even more difficult to determine how non-actual possibilia can be
physically connected to actual entities.66 It is also not clear how these non-actual entities might
depend on other entities.

In general, realist accounts of omissions do not seem to give us the sort of entities that are
physically connected to agents because of the prima-facie mysteriousness of negative entities on
many accounts. This is not to say that it is impossible for such an account to exist, but only that it
is not always clear what omissions are on realist accounts and how exactly they behave in causal
contexts.

**Conclusion**

Frankfurt-style cases involving omissions are problematic in very significant ways. When
we consider the particular details of different accounts of omissions and of causation, we find it
very difficult to demonstrate conclusively or even convincingly that there can be successful
Frankfurt-style omission cases that describe an agent being causally relevant to an omission in a
morally significant way. Eliminative accounts disallow physical connection because physical
connection is a relation that requires relata. Reductive accounts are subject to certain referential
opacity concerns. Realist accounts are very varied but seem to often describe the sorts of entities
that cannot be physically connected to physical beings in the actual world because of their
nature. In the case of realism, reductivism, and eliminativism, the omissions will not depend on
the agent because Frankfurt-style cases in general are designed to be dependence undermining,
and although there can be indirect causal relevance by means of a chain of causally dependent
entities, I have proposed that causal intermediaries can diminish the salience of causal factors via
my Fading Salience Hypothesis. For these reasons I think there are significant obstacles to

65 See my discussion in earlier sections.
66 Of course, possibilia are actual from their own perspective according to the indexical account of actuality.
generating Frankfurt-style omission cases that describe an agent being causally relevant to an omission in a morally significant way.
CHAPTER 5
MORAL SALIENCE

Introductory Section
I appeal to the notion of moral salience or moral significance at various points in this
dissertation, but I never give any sort of characterization of what moral salience is. Here I give a
characterization of moral significance. Moral salience, in general, is a more specific version of
the notion of salience that often occurs in the literature on causation. Philosophers of causation
take for granted that whenever anything takes place in the world that are many causes and factors
that are causally relevant to its occurrence and that we often ignore or remove from consideration
some of these causal factors and causes.

The Significance of Causes
Lewis puts the point this way:

We sometimes single out one among all the causes of some event and call it “the” cause,
as if there were no others. Or we single out a few of the “causes,” calling the rest mere
“causal factors” or “causal conditions.” Or we speak of the “decisive” or “real” or
“principal” cause. We may select the abnormal or extraordinary causes, or those under
human control, or those we deem good or bad, or just those we want to talk about.

Dowe puts it this way in the context of the misconnection puzzles I discussed in Chapter
3:

That this is counterintuitive can be handled straightforwardly in line with the Mill
tradition on partial causes. On the conserved quantity theory, all contributions count as
causes, however small. It is not necessary for the theory to explain why we intuitively
count some partial causes as causes and not others, but the ‘pragmatics’ no doubt will tell
us to ignore negligible contributions.

67 Note that Lewis is discussing the selection of causes where I would typically discuss the salience of causal
relationships. This is a genuine distinction, but it is a distinction that does not make a difference for my purposes.
Causes, causal relationships, and effects can all be salient in virtue of some relevant norms.
68 (Lewis 1973), 558-559
69 (Dowe 2004), 929
Lewis, who has endorsed various difference-making accounts throughout the years holding that causes make a when/whether/how differences to their effects, makes very similar points about absence causation:

One reason for an aversion to causation by absences is that if there is any of it at all, there is a lot of it—far more of it than we would normally want to mention.70

Lewis however, does not find profligate absence causation to be a problem in itself, as he continues:

There are ever so many reasons why it might be inappropriate to say something true. It might be irrelevant to the conversation, it might convey a false hint, it might be known already to all concerned, and so on.71

In essence, Lewis is inclined to accept that there is profligate absence causation but is inclined to say that it is often inappropriate to talk about instances of it. Lewis cites Grice’s paper on the rules of conversation and more or less leaves it at that. Helen Beebee argues that a similar point applies to causal explanation. However, Sarah McGrath argues convincingly that this gesture towards pragmatics is incomplete in the case of absence causation. She criticizes Lewis’ and Beebee’s proposal on two counts. First, she argues that we not only refuse to assert certain claims about absences, but we also are inclined to deny then. The lines Lewis and Beebee take, as they are, do not explain this inclination. Second, she argues that our inclination to deny certain claims is not just a question of our verbal behavior but also a question of what we actually believe.

In discussing Lewis’ gesture towards pragmatics, Collins, Hall, and Paul also point out a further problem:

…it’s one thing to wave one’s hands toward some pragmatic account—as Lewis does here—and quite another to provide the specifics (including an account of exactly which of the many principles governing the pragmatics of communication should be appealed to.72

They continue:

70 (Lewis 2000), 196
71 (Lewis 2000), 196
72 (Collins, Hall and Paul 2004), 36
We say that unless they are provided—or unless it is fairly clear how they can be provided—the reader deserves to be suspicious of such appeals.\textsuperscript{73}

The pragmatics of causation by omission is everybody’s problem. Consider the following:

**Profligate Absence Causation:** *Keisha promised to water Karen’s plants while she was out of town. Keisha doesn’t water the plants and Karen’s plants die while Phylicia Rashad relaxes at home.*

McGrath’s remarks about absence causation entail that there’s a dilemma here. In fact, I say it is a trilemma: the denier of causation by omission must deny that Keisha’s failure caused the plants to die, and if people are inclined to say that she did, then we need to account for that. This is Beebee’s route. The egalitarian believer in causation by omission must accept that Phylicia Rashad’s omission caused the plants to die, and if people are inclined to say that she did not, then we need pragmatics to account for that. This is Lewis’s route. The inegalitarian who says Keisha’s omission caused the plants to die and Phylicia Rashad’s omission did not cause the plants to die is apparently committed to the thesis that causation by omission is a normative phenomenon, and they need an account of which norms allow us to distinguish Phylicia Rashad’s omission and Keisha’s omission. This is McGrath’s route.

Collins, Hall, and Paul say that we need a clear account, but I do not think this is necessary. David Lewis’s remarks on the notion of similarity seem to provide some insight:

‘Unclear’ is unclear: does it mean ‘ill-understood’ or does it mean ‘vague’? Ill-understood notions are bad primitives because an analysis by means of them will be an ill-understood analysis. (It may yet be better than no analysis at all.) But comparative overall similarity is not ill-understood. It is vague—very vague—in a well-understood way. Therefore, it is just the sort of primitive that we must use to give a correct analysis of something that is itself undeniably vague.\textsuperscript{74}

I apply Lewis’ remarks here to the characterization of the norms relevant to distinguish Keisha and Rashad’s omissions. I think McGrath’s account is a step in the right direction:

\textsuperscript{73} (Collins, Hall and Paul 2004), 36
\textsuperscript{74} (Lewis 1973), 92
o causes e if o occurs, e occurs, and either C_o is a normal would-be preventer of e, or there is some event e* such that e* causes e, and C_o is a normal would-be preventer of e*.  

What is normal is just what is supposed to happen according to some actual standard. McGrath makes gestures towards statistical, biological, and moral norms, but she does not try to get more systematic about what norms are supposed to come to. Lewis’ point about similarity might apply here. The notions of normalcy and standards may very well be vague, and it may well be a vague matter when norms are relevant or irrelevant. In any case, I think McGrath’s account gives us one of the best ways available to distinguish salient and non-salient causal relationships. Her proposal is more developed than those of Lewis and Beebee. Another point worth mentioning is that McGrath’s account can be modified to the benefit of egalitarians who accept causation by omission, inegalitarians who accept causation by omission, and by those who deny causation by omission. For the egalitarian who accepts causation by omission, McGrath’s account can be modified to tell us why some causes seem to be causes and others seem not to be. For the inegalitarian who accepts causation by omission, McGrath’s account can be left as it is. For the denier of causation by omission, McGrath’s account can tell us the difference between salient quasi-causes and non-salient quasi-causes.

One problem with appealing to McGrath’s account for my purposes is that I need to count morally good, morally bad, and supererogatory actions/omissions to all be morally significant. In chapter 1, I mentioned that bad and supererogatory acts violate our moral norms and expectations. The sorts of norms that are violated when one performs bad actions or fails to perform good actions are different from the sorts of moral expectations that are violated when one performs supererogatory actions. Yet it is not clear what sort of moral norms or expectations are violated when it comes to good but non-supererogatory actions/omissions. Similarly, it is not clear what norms are violated when one fails to perform bad actions, as there is nothing particularly notable about failing to do bad things, especially egregiously bad things. Plainly, actions and omissions that are good are morally significant because they satisfy moral norms and expectations, not because they violate them. Even morally neutral actions and omissions yield similar difficulties as they would appear to neither satisfy nor violate any moral norms and

75 (McGrath 2005), 142. Also, McGrath uses ‘Co’ to pick out event types.
expectations. For these reasons, my account of moral salience cannot say that moral salience is a matter of violating moral norm. Instead I propose that moral salience is a matter of factors and entities standing out in virtue of moral norms.

I think a great deal of the literature on moral responsibility indicates what sorts of norms might be relevant. There seems to be a consensus that accounts of moral responsibility will involve an epistemic condition and a control condition. A natural move is to propose that epistemic norms and norms having to do with control are the ones relevant to moral responsibility. I think that in the case of agential dependence, whether a particular agent knowingly allowed something to transpire will be strongly relevant to whether or not the causal relationship in question is morally significant. Moreover, in the case of physical connection, whether a particular agent brought about the physical connection in a non-deviant way will be strongly relevant to whether or not the causal relationship is morally significant. For example, once we take an ordinary case of an agent acting:

**Typical Case:** A undergoes rational, sane deliberation and decides to kill B based on her deliberation. She takes her gun and kills B by shooting her.

B’s being alive and A’s action are both causally relevant to B’s death. But we are able to note in Typical Case that A performed an action of moral significance, A underwent rational and sane deliberation, and in fact seems to have freely shot B. This is what allows us to make a distinction between A’s action and B’s being alive, or to make a distinction between actions performed by agents and mere events that are not performed by agents at all. We can make similar distinctions when we consider not only Frankfurt style cases, but Frankfurt style cases involving omissions. I think that causal relationships between entities in the world will be more or less significant depending on whether or not agents are involved, and whether or not the agents involved have certain degrees of knowledge and are actually free or have control over what transpires. Causal relationships with less moral significance than the relationships that exist in Frankfurt-style cases might be those that do not involve agents at all or which involve agents who are acting out of pure reflex or who non-culpably lack knowledge relevant to the situation that they are involved in. Take another case that I have discussed in this dissertation:

**Babysitter:** You promise to babysit a child and forget to do so because it slips your mind. Unbeknownst to you, however, an anti-babysitting neuroscientist would have seen to it that you
forgot to babysit the child and ended up not doing so if it started to look like you would remember to babysit the child.

In Babysitter, the agent’s promise to babysit the child introduces a moral dimension to the case because the agent will either end up keeping a promise or failing to keep a promise, and failing to keep a promise is a violation of the moral norm that one should generally keep one’s promises. Even if it is not clear whether the agent is responsible for forgetting to babysit the child, it seems that the fact that the agent promised allows that the failure to remember could be morally significant. I mentioned in Chapter 4 that there is a possibility of a causal relationship between the agent and the failure to babysit the child if there is a physical entity identical to the agent’s failure to babysit the child. My discussion of moral salience adds a new dimension to this point. Assuming a reductive account of omissions, it may very well turn out that the relationship between the agent and the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child is morally significant. It would depend on what sort of entity one might identify the forgetting with and how the agent is causally related to the entity in question. If there is some sort of entity that can be identified with the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child, and if there is a sort of physical connection between the agent and agent’s forgetting, then it may very well turn out that there is a morally significant causal relationship between the agent and the agent’s forgetting to babysit the child. Although it is possible, it seems implausible to take this route because the babysitter case involves the task of babysitting slipping the agent’s mind, which suggests that the agent did not actively bring it about. So even under a reductive account of omissions, there are obstacles to constructing a successful style Frankfurt-style omission case because of the requirement of moral significance.

**Conclusion**

Moral salience or significance is a subset of salience in general as it occurs in the literature on causation. Morally significant causal relationships, as discussed in my dissertation, are causal relationships which are salient or significant in virtue of norms relevant to ascriptions of moral responsibility, and norms relevant to moral responsibility concern the degree of control and knowledge a present agent has in any given situation. If there are no omissions, then there are significant challenges to constructing successful Frankfurt-style omission cases because of the causal relevance requirement. If omissions can be identified with entities of some sort, there are significant challenges to constructing successful Frankfurt-style omission cases because of the moral salience requirement.
REFERENCES


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