

*Omissions and Causalism**

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I. Introduction

Omissions are puzzling, so puzzling that people tend to say puzzling things about them and give up otherwise attractive philosophical theories in order to accommodate them.¹ In this paper I suggest that omissions make trouble—serious trouble, and trouble of a new, *sui generis* kind—for “causalism,” the standard view or family of views of agency. In particular, I am interested in causalism as an attempt to explain what it is for an agent to behave intentionally. I will argue that causalism cannot accommodate intentional omissions—or, at least, it cannot account for them in the same way it accounts for (positive) actions. As a result, causalism is incomplete—or, at best, highly disjunctive—as a theory of what it is to behave intentionally.

I will bypass the question whether omissions can be, properly speaking, actions—“negative actions” or “active nondoings,” as they have been called (see, e.g., Kleinig 1976). For some people (notably, Thomson 1977), actions are a subclass of events, where events are particulars with specific spatio-temporal locations, intrinsic properties, etc. On this kind of view, it’s hard to count omissions as actions, for omissions don’t appear to have specific spatio-temporal locations, intrinsic properties, etc. Nevertheless, even if omissions aren’t actions, it seems that agents can still fail to do things intentionally, and it makes sense to ask under what conditions an agent’s not doing something is intentional (see, e.g., Ginet 2004). Thus, even if omissions aren’t actions, a theory of what it is to behave intentionally should be able to accommodate omissions. (Note that, if omissions aren’t actions, a theory of what it is to behave intentionally is not the same thing as a theory of what it is to perform an intentional *action*, and it might not even be the same thing as a theory of what it is to *act* intentionally.)²

Causalism, as a theory of what it is to behave intentionally, is the view that an agent behaves intentionally when certain events/states involving the agent's body (such as the agent's moving in a certain way) are appropriately caused (non-deviantly caused, or caused in the "normal" way) by certain mental events or states of the agent, in particular, the agent's intentions, belief and desire pairs, decisions, etc. The causal link between those mental events or states and the bodily events or states singles out the specific reasons for which the agent behaves in the relevant way from the possibly more inclusive set of reasons that he had for behaving in that way. Causalism is traditionally attributed to Davidson (Davidson 1963), and it is the most commonly held view of agency nowadays. Among the mental items that cause the relevant bodily movements/states, causalists seem to agree, intentions are special in that they play the most central role. For intentions are those mental states by which the agent settles on a particular course of action: they initiate and guide behavior.³ Hence my focus will be on intentions as the relevant mental items: I will take causalism to be the view that, when an agent behaves intentionally, the agent's intending to behave in a certain way, or the agent's forming an intention to behave in a certain way, appropriately causes the relevant bodily movement/state.

As noted, just like agents can do things intentionally (these are the agents' "positive" intentional actions), they can also *fail* to do things intentionally (these are the agents' intentional omissions). In fact, it seems that there are many things that we fail to do intentionally. This is so even though, as Ginet points out, there seems to be an important asymmetry between actions and omissions in that, whereas most things we do are things we do intentionally, most things we don't do are not things we don't do intentionally (Ginet 2004, p. 95); this is, presumably, because, for anything we do, there are several things we don't do). As a paradigm example of intentionally omitting to do something, consider the following case:

Drowning Child: A child is drowning in a nearby pond. I could jump in and save him. However, after deliberating about it for a bit, I choose not to jump in and to eat an ice cream instead.

In this case, I intentionally omit to jump into the water to save the drowning child. Hence causalism should tell us in virtue of what this is so. In general, causalism should tell us what makes an agent's omission intentional, when it is intentional.

Surprisingly, very little has been said about omissions in connection with causalism.⁴ Davidson, in particular, confesses to have omitted addressing this issue (presumably, intentionally!) in a reply to Vermazen—which I discuss briefly below (Davidson 1985, p. 217).⁵ It is particularly surprising that so little has been said about omissions and causalism, for the causal status of omissions and other absences is a highly debated issue in the metaphysics of causation. As I have pointed out, on a natural view of events, omissions

(and absences in general) are not events, but absences thereof. However, on a familiar view of causation, only events can be causes and effects.⁶ If so, it seems that causalism cannot account for intentional omissions, in particular, it cannot account for my omission in Drowning Child.

How can a causalist try to address this problem? Even if omissions aren't events, there at least three different things the causalist could say.

First, the causalist can say that other things besides events can be causes and effects—notably, *facts*—and that, moreover, causal talk involving facts is the most “primitive” kind of causal talk: any other kind of causal talk, such as causal talk involving events, is made true by causal talk involving facts.⁷ For example, an event can be said to cause another event because the fact that the first event occurred caused the fact that the second event occurred. On the basis of this view, a causalist could say that my failure to jump into the water in Drowning Child is an intentional omission because the fact that I formed the intention not to jump in appropriately caused the fact that I didn't jump in. More generally, a causalist could say that an agent intentionally omits to do something just in case the fact that he formed an intention with the relevant content appropriately caused the fact that his body didn't move in a certain way.

Second, a causalist could claim that other things besides events can be causes and effects but causal talk involving events is still the most basic kind of causal talk. In particular, causal talk involving omissions and other absences can be true, but it is made true, ultimately, by causal talk involving events. This is Vermazen's suggestion in his (1985), which Davidson explicitly embraces in his reply to Vermazen (Davidson 1985). How can a causalist do this? Roughly, Vermazen's idea is the following. Imagine that I am tempted to eat some fattening morsels, but I refrain. Then my passing on the morsels is an intentional omission because the relevant mental states/events (pro-attitudes, intentions, etc.) cause my not eating the morsels, and this is, in turn, because, had those mental states been absent, then some other mental states/events (competing pro-attitudes, intentions, etc.) *would have caused* my eating the morsels. In other words, actual causal talk involving omissions is made true by counterfactual causal talk involving positive occurrences or events.

Third, a causalist can claim that there are two (or maybe more) concepts of causation, and that omissions and other absences can only be causes and effects in the sense captured by only one (or some) of those concepts. For example, it could be argued that there is a “productive” concept of cause and a “counterfactual” concept of cause (as in Hall 2004), and that omissions can be causes and effects in the counterfactual sense but not in the productive sense. Still, to the extent that both concepts are genuine concepts of *causation*, it is open to the causalist to say that an agent behaves intentionally when his moving in a certain way, or his not moving in a certain way, is caused by the agent's intentions in the normal way.

On any of these views, then, what makes an omission intentional is similar to what makes an action (a “positive” action) intentional: it’s the fact that a relevant piece of behavior (positive or negative) is caused by the agent’s intentions in the normal way. For example, my failure to jump into the water in Drowning Child is an intentional omission because I formed the relevant intention not to jump in and such intention caused my not jumping in, in the normal way. This is parallel to the way in which, if I *had* intentionally jumped into the water to save the child, my forming the opposite intention (the intention to jump in), would have caused the bodily movement consisting in my jumping in, in the normal way. As we have seen, there are different ways in which a causalist can resolve the issue of how omissions can be causes and effects. But, to the extent that omissions *can* be causes and effects, it might seem that causalism has the resources to account for intentional omissions in basically the same way it accounts for intentional (positive) actions.⁸

In what follows I argue that omissions pose a *recalcitrant* problem for causalism, that is to say, a problem that persists even under the assumption that omissions can be causes and effects in any of the ways outlined above. Interestingly, it is a problem that bears some similarities to what can be construed as a different challenge to the view: the challenge of the causal exclusion of the mental by the physical (Kim 1993). This is because the recalcitrant problem of omissions can be seen as an *exclusion* problem.⁹ Briefly, the exclusion problem for the mental and the physical is this. According to non-reductive physicalism, a widely held view in the philosophy of mind, mental states are realized by, but not identical to, physical states. For any piece of behavior that a mental state allegedly causes, there is an alternative explanation that appeals only to the underlying physical state. We want to say that the physical world is “causally closed” and thus, that the physical state is a cause of the behavior. Hence, it is tempting to conclude that the mental states don’t really do any causal work. And, if so, causalism doesn’t seem to get off the ground. Many people think that this problem is not intractable.¹⁰ But what I will suggest is that the problem that omissions pose for causalism is an exclusion problem of its own: one that doesn’t threaten to show that mental states in general are causally inefficacious, but only that, in the specific case of omissions, the relevant mental states (in particular, intentions) cannot do the causal work that the causalist would want them to do. For there is an alternative, and arguably better, explanation that doesn’t appeal to those mental states, even if mental states in general are causally efficacious, and even if omissions in general are causes and effects.

II. The Exclusion Problem for Omissions

As we have seen, in Drowning Child, the causalist seems to be committed to (roughly) the truth of the following claim:

(Claim 1) My forming the intention not to jump in causes my failure to jump in.

I say “roughly” because many causalists would reject the idea that intentionally φ -ing requires forming an intention *to* φ . Still, the consensus is that a closely related intention is required.¹¹ For simplicity’s sake, I will assume that the intention in question is the intention not to jump in.

At first sight (again, assuming that there is no problem with absences being causes and effects, or with mental events and states in general being causes and effects), Claim 1 seems very plausible: it seems natural to say that I didn’t jump into the water because I formed the intention not to do so. On the face of it, intentions (and other mental events or states) can cause people not to do things just as they can cause them to do things. For instance, it seems that my abstaining from voting in an election can be the result of a careful process of deliberation ending in my forming the intention not to vote, just like my voting for a certain candidate can be the result of a careful process of deliberation ending in my forming the intention to vote for that particular candidate. Thus it might seem that, once we resolve the issue of how omissions can be causes and effects, and the issue of how mental events and states can be causes and effects, the claim that causalism can account for intentional omissions in the same way it accounts for (positive) actions is very plausible. I will argue, however, that this view is misguided and that Claim 1 should be rejected.

I said that I would bypass the question of whether omissions should be regarded as actions in their own right, on a par with “positive” actions. By this I meant the question of whether we should take non-doings of certain sorts to be actions (“negative” actions). But what I *have* been assuming so far is that omissions are not just *identical to* positive actions. In other words, I have been assuming that, even if omissions were actions, they wouldn’t be actions because non-doings just are doings of certain kinds (rather, because certain kinds of non-doings are *also* actions). Of course, if omissions were simply identical with positive actions, then the question of whether omissions can be causes and effects wouldn’t arise: it would be uncontroversially true that they can, for positive actions are positive occurrences and positive occurrences can clearly be causes and effects. In what follows, I reserve the word “action” for *positive* actions.

The assumption that omissions are not identical to actions requires, in particular, that we distinguish an agent’s omission from anything that the agent might have done instead of the action omitted. For instance, in Drown-*ing Child*, my failing to jump in should be distinguished from my eating ice cream on the shore at the time when I could have been jumping in to save the child. On the face of it, this is a reasonable assumption: at least generally, my failing to do something doesn’t seem to be identical to my doing something. In particular, although I failed to jump in *by* eating ice cream, my failure

to jump in *isn't* my eating ice cream.¹² In support of this idea, note that it seems that I could have failed to jump in by doing something other than eating ice cream on the shore, e.g., by reading a book. This is a reason not to identify the omission with the action. Another reason not to identify them is that they seem to have different causal powers. For instance, it seems that my failure to jump in didn't cause my stomachache later that day, but my eating ice cream did. Finally, sometimes there seems to be no action with which to identify the omission—or, in general, no positive occurrence with which to identify an absence that appears to be causally efficacious. In those cases it seems that the causal story would be incomplete without reference to an omission, or an absence of some sort. Imagine that the zookeeper promised to get an elephant for the local zoo but he failed. This made Jimmy sad. It seems that there isn't anything that the zookeeper did or anything that actually happened that made Jimmy sad. We don't want to say, for instance, that, when Jimmy visited the zoo, the presence of a rhinoceros made him sad. The presence of a rhinoceros didn't make him sad, the absence of an elephant did!¹³ At any rate, this will be an assumption of this paper: that omissions aren't identical with actions, or at least not generally. In particular, my omitting to jump in is not identical with my action of eating ice cream on the shore in *Drowning Child*.¹⁴

Now, it seems that, if we should distinguish between my eating ice cream and my omitting to jump in, then we should also distinguish between *my forming the intention not to jump in* and *my omitting to form the opposite intention (the intention to jump in)*. In other words, just as there is something I did and something I didn't do at the level of overt or bodily acts (I ate ice cream, and I omitted to jump in), there is also something I did and something I didn't do mentally (I formed the intention not to jump in, and I omitted to form the intention to jump in). Call my forming the intention not to jump in 'A1', my omitting to form the intention to jump in 'O1', and my omitting to jump in 'O2'. As we have seen, the causalist would want to suggest that A1 causes O2 (this was Claim 1). But consider, as an alternative:

(Claim 2) O1 causes O2.

Whereas Claim 1 says that the cause of O2 is what I did (mentally), Claim 2 says that it is what I omitted to do (mentally). Which one is more likely to be true? Or can both of them be true simultaneously? In the next section I argue for the truth of Claim 2 and for the idea that Claim 2's truth threatens to undermine Claim 1's truth. I will call this thesis the thesis of "Causal Exclusion for Omissions" (CEO).

III. Argument for CEO

Start by focusing on bodily actions and omissions. As I have pointed out, it is natural to draw a distinction between O1 (my omitting to jump into

the water, a bodily omission) and what I did instead of jumping in, e.g., my eating ice cream on the shore (a bodily action, call it 'A2'). But then consider the question: What caused *the child's death*? Did O1 cause it? Did A2 cause it? On the assumption that omissions can be causes and effects, it seems clear that O2 was a cause of the child's death: the child died because I omitted to jump into the water to save him. Should we think that A2 also caused it? Presumably not. For, intuitively, the child died because of what I didn't do, not because of what I did in its place. It seems, in fact, irrelevant that I was eating ice cream on the shore (as opposed to, say, reading a book, or doing anything else but jumping in): all that matters is that I failed to jump in to save him.

In other words, consider the following claims:

(Claim 3) A2 caused the child's death.

(Claim 4) O2 caused the child's death.

The first premise of the argument reads:

(P1) Claim 4 is true and its truth undermines the truth of Claim 3.

Now, the argument continues, if the truth of Claim 4 is enough to cast doubt on Claim 3, then, by the same token, the truth of Claim 2 should be enough to cast doubt on Claim 1. For, again, on the assumption that omissions can be causes, Claim 2 seems clearly true: O1 caused O2. I omitted to jump in because I omitted to intend to jump in. And it seems that we shouldn't say that A1 (my forming the intention not to jump in) also caused O2. For, again, I failed to jump in because of what I omitted to intend to do, not because of what I intended to do. It seems, in fact, irrelevant that I actually formed the opposite intention: all that seems relevant is that I omitted to form the intention to jump in.¹⁵

Thus the second premise of the argument reads:

(P2) If P1, then Claim 2 is true and its truth undermines the truth of Claim 1.

From which the conclusion follows:

(C) CEO is true.

In other words, the argument suggests that the best way of conceiving my relationship to the outcome of the child's death is as a negative relationship *throughout* the causal chain. This includes my mental behavior: the child died because of what I omitted to do, including what I omitted to *intend* to do. Even if I also formed a positive intention not to be involved in certain

ways, the fact that I formed that intention seems causally irrelevant; all that was causally relevant is the fact that I omitted to intend to be involved in certain ways. The argument relies heavily on an analogy between bodily acts and mental acts. The main claim is that, if what accounts for the outcome of the child's death is what I didn't do "extra-mentally," then what accounts for what I didn't do extra-mentally is, in turn, what I didn't do—this time, mentally.

An important clarification is in order. I don't mean to suggest that omissions can only have other omissions as causes—or, in general, that absences can only be caused by other absences. All I want to suggest is that this is true of the type of situation that is our focus here. It is certainly possible for omissions—and for absences in general—to have positive occurrences as causes. Imagine that, besides not jumping in myself, I talked the lifeguard into thinking that it is not worth risking one's own life to save other people's lives and, as a result, the lifeguard also failed to jump in. In this case my talking to the lifeguard (an action) caused his omission. Or imagine that yesterday I wrote a note to myself reminding me how much I hate water. Had I not seen the note today, I would have decided to jump in to save the child, but seeing the note today stopped me from doing that. In this case my writing the note (an action) caused my omission.

Why is it that in these versions of the drowning child case, but not in the original version, an omission is caused by a positive occurrence or an action? The answer is that in these versions of the case a positive intervention is needed to "counteract" the current train of events. In the lifeguard version, the lifeguard would not have intentionally omitted to save the child had it not been for what I said to him: what I failed to do isn't sufficient to account for his failure to jump in. And, in the self-addressed note version, I would not have intentionally omitted to jump in had it not been for the note: again, what I failed to do isn't sufficient to account for my failure to jump in. By contrast, in the original version of Drowning Child (and, more generally, in paradigmatic or "ordinary" omission cases) the agent's omission simply seems to "flow from" other things the agent omits to do—in a similar way, I take it, that the absence of elephants from a room at a given time is accounted for by the absence of elephants from the room an instant earlier. So it is certainly possible for an omission to be caused by something other than an omission; all I am claiming is that this is not true of, e.g., Drowning Child and other paradigmatic cases of intentional omission.¹⁶

If the argument is sound, then the causalist faces an exclusion problem for omissions. An enlightening way to put the problem is the following. Whereas, in Drowning Child, the causalist would want to say that my omitting to jump in stems from my forming certain *malevolent* (or otherwise morally deficient) intentions, I have argued that we should regard it as flowing from my omitting to form certain *benevolent* (or otherwise morally virtuous) intentions. Importantly, there is no similar problem for actions, on the face of

it. Whereas my forming the malevolent intention and my omitting to form the benevolent intention seem to compete for their causal role in the case of my omission, there is no such competition in the case of an ordinary action. Suppose I form the intention to shoot my enemy and this leads me to pulling the trigger. Here, clearly, my forming the malevolent intention plays a key role: what I do extra-mentally flows from what I do mentally.

In what sense is the problem for omissions an *exclusion* problem? In the sense that, once one recognizes the distinction between actions and omissions and everything that it entails, the mental items singled out by the causalist as causes of the relevant bodily states (i.e. the relevant intentions) are excluded by other items. Those other items are better suited to play the relevant causal role than the candidates identified by the causalist. Now, crucially, the problem for omissions doesn't rest on a general "exclusion principle" according to which no phenomenon can have more than one sufficient cause, or on the claim that there is no widespread overdetermination, or on any other claim in the vicinity. In this sense the exclusion problem for omissions is very much unlike the traditional exclusion problem for the mental and the physical, as it is typically laid out in the literature.¹⁷

What does the argument for CEO rely on, if not a general exclusion principle? As I pointed out, it relies on an important *analogy* between bodily and mental items. The claim is that, given what we want to say about the causal powers of the bodily items, we should say something similar about the causal powers of the mental items. In particular, given that my eating ice cream isn't a cause of the death (my failing to jump in is), my intending not to jump in also isn't a cause of my omitting to jump in (my omitting to intend to jump in is). This is so even if, at first sight, the claim that the intention had those causal powers seemed plausible.

Now, what justifies the claim about the causal powers of the *bodily* items, to begin with? That is, what justifies the claim that my eating ice cream didn't cause the child's death, but, instead, my failure to jump in did? There are several things one could say to answer this question. But, on the face of it, it seems enough to point out that, on the assumption that omissions can be causes, the view that my failure to jump in is a cause of the death and my eating ice cream isn't is very intuitively plausible (as suggested above). Again, on the face of it, there are certain things that I cause in virtue of eating ice cream and there are other things that I cause in virtue of not jumping into the water. Perhaps there are also other things that I cause in virtue of *both* eating ice cream and failing to jump in (maybe my remaining above my ideal weight, if I would have weighed less by dieting *or* exercising?). But certainly not everything I cause in virtue of eating ice cream is something that I cause in virtue of failing to jump in, or vice versa. In particular, just as it seems that I cause myself to feel sick to my stomach by eating ice cream, and not by failing to jump in, conversely, it seems that I cause the child to die by failing to jump in, and not by eating ice cream. Again, this is not motivated

by a general exclusion principle of any sort: it's just a claim that seems very plausible on its own.¹⁸ (More on the causal powers of bodily actions and omissions in section V.)

This concludes my discussion of the argument for CEO. Now, how could the causalist try to respond to the argument? In the following sections I discuss two possible responses by the causalist. The first response is an attempt to disarm the analogy between bodily and mental acts; the second response is an attack on the claim about bodily acts.

IV. First Response: Cause Essentialism

First, the causalist might want to reply in the following way. An event consisting in my arm moving is not an action if it was the result of someone else's grabbing my arm and making it move in a certain way; in that case it is a "non-actional" event, a mere bodily movement (something that merely "happens" to the agent, as opposed to something that the agent does). To borrow an analogy by Mele,¹⁹ an intrinsic duplicate of a US dollar bill fails to be a genuine bill if it is not the output of a certain causal process involving the US Treasury Department (e.g., if it is counterfeit); similarly, an event fails to be an action if it is not the output of a causal process involving mental items of a particular kind. In particular, the causalist would want to say, it is not an action unless it is the output of a causal process involving *intentions* of the relevant kind. And the same goes for (intentional) omissions, the causalist might claim: my failing to jump into the water in Drowning Child would not be intentional unless it were caused by a relevant intention in the relevant way. Imagine that I didn't jump in because someone restrained me when I was about to do so. In that case, the causalist would say, I didn't intentionally fail to jump in. Although it is true that I didn't jump in, my not jumping in isn't an intentional omission but a non-actional state (a mere "bodily state", something that "happens" to me, but not something I intentionally omit to do).

In other words, the objection is that the analogy on which the argument for CEO rests breaks down: although we don't have reason to believe that my eating ice cream causes the child's death (all the work is plausibly done by my failing to jump in), we *do* have reason to believe that an intention with a relevant content causes my failure to jump in. For this failure is not any failure: it is an intentional failure, and it would not have been intentional unless it was caused by a relevant intention in the relevant way.

However, this objection fails. I agree that my not jumping in wouldn't have been intentional if someone had been restraining me the whole time, just like I wouldn't have intentionally raised my arm if someone had forced my arm upwards. But this isn't enough to show that I wouldn't have intentionally failed to jump in unless A1 (my forming the intention not to jump in), or

my forming a similar intention, had caused it. Why not? Because it is very plausible to think that my failure to jump *would* be intentional if O1 (my omitting to intend to jump in) caused it. For O1 is *itself* an intentional omission: I voluntarily failed to form that intention, after deliberating about whether to do so, after considering reasons for and against doing so, etc. And if I fail to jump in as a result of my *intentionally* omitting to intend to jump in, then, presumably, my failing to jump in is intentional too. In other words, if I am right and O1 causes my failure to jump in, then this *by itself* helps explain why that failure was intentional; we don't need to say, *in addition*, that my intention not to jump in caused it.

Now, the causalist could protest that this isn't a satisfying answer. For he could say that the same question arises in connection with O1: what makes *it* intentional, if not the presence of an intention?

In response, note that there are two different claims that the causalist wants to make in the case of intentional omissions. First, the causalist wants to say that some intention has to exist in order for an agent to omit to do something intentionally (call this the *existential* claim). Second, the causalist wants to say that such an intention has to cause the relevant bodily non-movement (call this the *causal* claim). Clearly, unless the existential claim is true, the causal claim cannot be true. But the existential claim can be true and the causal claim still fail to be true. The argument for CEO from the last section is an argument against the causal claim only. For all the argument says, it might be that the existential claim is true: perhaps some intention needs to *exist* in order for my omission to jump in to be intentional.²⁰ Imagine, for instance, that my failure to intend to jump in would not be intentional unless I actually formed the opposite intention, the intention not to jump in. If that were so, then I would claim that, although the relevant intention needs to exist for my omission to be intentional, the argument still shows that it doesn't do the causal work that the causalist says it does. There might still be a sense in which it would be true to say, in that case, that the relevant intention is part of what "makes" my omission to jump in intentional. But this wouldn't be because the intention *causes* the non-movement, as the causalist claims; only because the non-movement wouldn't have been intentional in the absence of such an intention.²¹

I conclude that the objection fails to establish that an omission is intentional unless it is caused by an intention. It seems, in fact, plausible that an intention could be intentional even if it were not caused by an intention. The question of whether an intention with the relevant content needs to *exist* in order for an omission to be intentional is a separate question, which we may set aside here. Naturally, if no such intention were even needed, then this would be an independent problem for causalism. But, even if an intention of that type had to exist, it still wouldn't follow that it causes the non-movement, as the causalist claims.²²

V. Second Response: Happy Coexistence

Alternatively, the causalist might want to object to the claim about bodily acts on which the argument for CEO rests: the claim that my eating ice cream (A2) isn't a cause of the child's death. One way in which the causalist could try to make this reply is this. As I have suggested, the child died because I didn't jump in to save him. However, I didn't jump in to save him, in turn, because I was eating ice cream on the shore (since, given that I was eating ice cream on the shore, I couldn't have been jumping in). Therefore, by transitivity, the child died because I was eating ice cream on the shore.

Now, the main problem with this suggestion is that, even if all of this were right, it still wouldn't follow that A2 caused the child's death. For consider the claim that I didn't jump in to save the child (at *t*) because I was eating ice cream on the shore (at *t*). If this claim is true, there is an explanatory connection between A2 and O2.²³ But this explanatory connection is non-causal. (For one thing, A2 and O2 obtain simultaneously, whereas it is generally thought that causes precede their effects.) So, even if it were true that the child died because I was eating ice cream on the shore, it still wouldn't follow that A2 caused the child's death.

Alternatively, the causalist might want to suggest that A2 caused the child's death, although it did so "directly" (i.e. not by way of causing O2). However, I find this reply unmotivated. Anscombe dismissed a similar view in a two-sentence paper.²⁴ But I am going to try to do (a bit) more to convince you that this view is not very plausible.

Why would anyone be tempted by this view? One might think that there is some intuitive support for it. Imagine that Jim spent the night previous to the exam partying instead of studying, and then he flunked the exam on the following day. We are tempted to say: "*Jim's partying the night before the exam* caused him to flunk it" (instead of, in my view, the more appropriate claim: "*His failing to study the night before the exam* caused him to flunk it"). But, should we take this literally? Should we think, on this basis, that Jim's partying was also a cause of his flunking the exam? Or should we think that we are speaking loosely in claiming that it was?

Here is an argument that we should think the latter. As I am imagining the example, to the extent that we judge that Jim's partying caused his flunking the exam, it's because he was partying instead of studying (not because, say, too much partying impaired his writing or thinking capacities, which were a necessary requirement for doing well on the exam). But then, by the same token, anything else that he could have done instead of studying would be a cause too, in the corresponding scenario. In particular, had Jim been caring for convalescent Grandma all night long instead of partying, his caring for Grandma would have caused him to flunk the exam. Also, had he been reading a book on how to pass exams, his reading such a book would have caused him to flunk the exam. Etcetera. But these results are

implausible (again, unless the book's advice was really bad!). Instead, it seems preferable to hold that it wasn't really Jim's partying, but what that *entailed* (namely, the fact that he didn't touch the books), that caused him to flunk the exam.

Why does it seem so appealing, then, to mention Jim's partying in connection with his flunking the exam? Presumably, because it's a vivid way of implicating that he didn't study for the exam, when he should have been studying for the exam. We mention his partying because it is a more colorful way to describe what happened, not because the partying is a cause of the flunking of the exam *per se*. Again, unless there was something about the partying itself that accounts for Jim's doing badly on the exam, it seems that he flunked because he didn't study, not because of what he did instead of studying.²⁵

Finally, the causalist might want to argue that, although O2 was the "main" cause of the child's death in Drowning Child, A2 still played a causal role in some "secondary" or "derivative" sense. Consider an example by Yablo (1992): a pigeon, Sophie, is conditioned to peck at (all and only) red objects; one day she is presented with a scarlet triangle and she pecks. According to Yablo, although the triangle's being red plays the major causal role (it plays the role of being the *cause* of Sophie's pecking, in Yablo's terminology), the triangle's being scarlet (a determinate of the determinable red) is still causally *relevant* to Sophie's pecking. The idea, I take it, is this: something's being scarlet is *a way* of being red; thus the triangle is red, on this occasion, *by* being scarlet. So on this occasion the triangle has the causal powers that it has, in some sense, thanks to its being scarlet. This role is "derivative" or "secondary" in that being scarlet only gets to play that role in virtue of the causal powers that being *red* has; however, one might argue that it still is an important role. Similarly, the causalist could say, although O2 plays the major causal role in the drowning child case, A2 is still causally relevant to the child's death. For my eating ice cream on the shore is, also, *a way* of failing to jump in (I fail to jump in, on this occasion, *by* eating ice cream).

Now, imagine that this were right, i.e., imagine that it were right to say that A2 played a derivative causal role with respect to the child's death. Then the causalist could say that A1 plays a similar derivative role: one that depends on the role played by O1. Would this help the causalist? I don't think so. For, presumably, the causalist wants to say that mental items like intentions play a *primary* role in giving rise to intentional acts, not one that is parasitic on the role that something else plays. At least, this is what the causalist wants to say about intentional actions. So, if intentions played a primary role in the case of actions but not omissions, this would still make for an important asymmetry between actions and omissions, and thus it would present a problem for causalism as a general theory of intentional behavior.²⁶

VI. Conclusion

I conclude that omissions pose a serious problem for causalism. Briefly, the problem is that, whereas omissions can be intentional, causalism cannot account for them in the same way that it accounts for intentional actions. This is not so because omissions cannot be causes and effects, for it is quite plausible to think that they can. The problem is, rather, that omissions are not caused (at least ordinarily) by those mental items that the causalist identifies as causes in the case of actions. As a result, causalism, conceived as a theory of what it is for agents to behave intentionally, threatens to be an either incomplete or highly disjunctive theory.

Notes

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¹ For example, omissions were responsible for Lewis's claiming that causation is not a relation (Lewis 2004), and for Thomson and McGrath's claiming that it is a normative notion (Thomson 2003, McGrath 2005). My focus here is also omissions and causation, in particular, the question whether omissions can be accommodated by causal theories of agency.

² On this point, see Vermazen (1985), p. 104, and also Mele (2003), p. 151.

³ Different philosophers have different views of intentions: some believe that they are reducible to belief/desire pairs, others believe that they are irreducible mental states. But causalists seem to agree about the key role that intentions play in the etiology of intentional action.

⁴ Alvarez notes this in her (2005).

⁵ In Davidson's original work, there are only two brief references to omissions: Davidson (1963), n. 2, and Davidson (1971), p. 49. In those places Davidson seems to want to make room for omissions, but he is not very explicit about how.

⁶ See, e.g., Dowe (2000) and Beebe (2004). Davidson's own view of causation in his (1967) appears to be of this kind (although he seems to take it back in his discussion of Vermazen's proposal, which I discuss below).

⁷ See, e.g., Bennett (1988) and Mellor (1995).

⁸ There are several questions that I'll bypass here. For example, if we think that there are two concepts of causation, what makes them both concepts of *causation*, as opposed to concepts of something else? The two-concepts proposal only helps the causalist to the extent that the non-productive concept is genuinely a concept of causation. Also, about Vermazen's proposal: it's unclear that the proposal explains why my failure in Drowning Child is intentional. Imagine that, had I not formed the intention not to jump in, I would have remained undecided. In that case it's not true that, had I not formed the intention not to jump in, I would have formed the opposite intention, which would have caused my jumping into the water. So, then, in what sense did my forming the intention not to jump in cause my not jumping in?

⁹ However, as I will note in due course, there are also very important differences between the two challenges. Notably, the strongest formulation of the problem of omissions doesn't appeal to a general exclusion principle. To my mind, this makes the problem of omissions much more powerful than the traditional exclusion problem (more on this later).

¹⁰ There are two main options: to insist that mental states are still causally efficacious, or to restate causalism as the claim that the physical realizers of mental states are the causes of actions.

¹¹ See Mele (1992) and Mele and Moser (1994). For arguments that intentionally φ -ing doesn't require an intention to φ , see Harman (1976) and Bratman (1984).

¹² Davidson famously embraced a coarse-grained conception of events according to which some "by-statements" involving events are identity-statements. For example, if I flip the switch by moving my finger in a certain way, then my flipping the switch is my moving my finger (Davidson (1971)). On this view, the only actions that exist are "primitive" or "basic" actions, or mere bodily movements (the actions that take place "inside the agent's skin"). Now, the sense in which I flip the switch *by* moving my finger is not the same sense in which I fail to jump in *by* eating ice cream. I flip the switch by moving my finger because the moving of my finger *causes* the switch to be flipped; by contrast, I don't fail to jump in by eating ice cream in this sense: the eating of my ice cream doesn't *cause* my not being in the water (more on this later). The class of omissions that is of interest to us is that of primitive bodily *non*-movements (see Vermazen (1985), pp. 102–103). Davidson acknowledges this in his reply to Vermazen (Davidson (1985)).

¹³ Or consider Ginet's example (in Ginet 2004, p. 105): S intentionally did not mow the grass in her backyard this summer because she wanted it to revert to a wild state. As Ginet claims, it would be very implausible to suggest that there is something S intended to *do* this summer in virtue of which she intentionally did not mow the grass. For related arguments, see Weinryb (1980), Higginbotham (2000), and Vihvelin and Tomkow (2005).

¹⁴ Note that this assumption is consistent with different views of omissions. In particular, it's consistent with views according to which some, but not all, omissions are identical with actions.

¹⁵ Note that my omission to intend to jump in is also an intentional omission (this will play a key role in my response to an objection in section IV below). I argued for a similar claim, although in a different context, in my (2005), pp. 464–465. However, I then (unintentionally) failed to draw attention to the significance of the fact that my failure to form the relevant intention was also intentional.

¹⁶ By calling these cases "ordinary" and "paradigmatic" I do not mean to suggest that there aren't many cases of intentional omission of a different sort, say, cases where the agent has to take active measures to counteract an existing trend or habit. All I mean to imply is that the cases that are my focus here are the ones with the simplest structure, given that the non-movement simply flows from another omission. Thanks to Richard Holton for discussion of this point.

¹⁷ Kim famously grounded his exclusion argument in a general exclusion principle. For discussion of this principle, see Kim (1989).

¹⁸ In particular, note that this claim is consistent with the existence of cases where both an agent's action and an omission by the same agent are sufficient causes of an outcome. Imagine that a sick patient will die at T unless his doctor gives him a certain drug before that time. Imagine that, besides not giving him the drug, he injects him with a poisonous drug that takes effect at T. In that case, arguably, both the doctor's failure to inject the patient with the medicine and his poisoning him cause the patient's death. Now, I think it is clear that the Drowning Child case doesn't have a relevantly similar structure: whereas here there is a good reason to think that both the action and the omission are causes, there isn't such a reason in Drowning Child. Thanks to an anonymous referee for discussion of this point.

¹⁹ Mele (1997), pp. 3–4.

²⁰ Zimmerman (1981), Ginet (2004), and Clarke (forthcoming) believe this. But, what if I had remained undecided about what to do until the child died? In that case, you'd still want to blame me for not jumping in, I was aware of the presence of the child in the water, I knew that I could save him, etc. Could one argue that my omission is still intentional in this case, even if I don't form an intention one way or the other? I think that the causalist can plausibly argue that my omission isn't intentional in this case. Maybe it's not *unintentional* either. But even if it's not unintentional, some philosophers see a middle ground between intentional and unintentional

behavior (see, e.g., Mele 1994), and it is plausible to suggest that my omission in this case falls in that middle ground. Another potential counterexample to the claim that intentionally failing to jump in requires an intention with the relevant content is this: a neuroscientist has been closely monitoring my brain; he lets me fail to intend to jump in (which I do intentionally), but he prevents me from forming the intention not to jump in (or any other intention with a similar content). Is this scenario possible? I don't know; fortunately, we don't need to decide this issue here.

²¹ The following objection might be raised: if I couldn't intentionally omit to intend to jump in without forming the intention not to jump in, then it is plausible to think that the following counterfactual holds: had A1 not occurred, O2 wouldn't have occurred. But counterfactual dependence is sufficient for causation. Therefore, it follows that A1 causes O2. In response, I think that counterfactual dependence *isn't* sufficient for causation, and it is illuminating to see why. Change the Drowning Child case slightly: imagine that the two things I most love in the world are eating ice cream and swimming. In that case, we may suppose, had I not eaten ice cream, I would have jumped into the water and I would have rescued the child. So the child's death would counterfactually depend on my eating ice cream. Still, my eating ice cream would not cause the child's death. For, again, the child dies because of what I don't do, not because of what I do; this is so even if, hadn't I done what I did, the child would have lived. By the same token, it seems to me that A1 still wouldn't cause O2, even if O2 counterfactually depended on A1.

²² Another potential challenge that I have chosen to set aside is the challenge that negative intentions are impossible. According to some views of intentions, forming an intention requires settling on a plan of action (Bratman 1984, Mele 1992, Enç 2003). This view creates some pressure to reject negative intentions. For it's hard to say what the plan might be in the case of omissions (for an argument that omissions don't involve "plans," or "methods," see Thomson 1996).

²³ Although, is it really true that I didn't jump in because I was eating ice cream? Let's assume that, if I was eating ice cream on the shore, then I couldn't have been jumping into the water at the same time, maybe in the sense that it was physically impossible for me to do both at once. Does this mean that A2 *explains* O2? Compare: I couldn't have been a professional philosopher *and* a professional basketball player. Now, does my being a philosopher explain my not being a basketball player? Or is this explained by my lacking the relevant qualities for being a basketball player?

²⁴ That's right: a *two-sentence paper* (in *Analysis*). Here is the full text of the paper: "The nerve of Mr. Bennett's argument is that if A results from your not doing B, then A results from whatever you do instead of B. While there may be much to be said for this view, still it does not seem right on the face of it." (Anscombe 1966).

²⁵ It might be argued that our judgments whether Jim's partying caused his flunking the exam depend on the contrast class with respect to which we are making the assertion: whereas it's not the case that his partying rather than his caring for Grandma caused him to flunk, his partying rather than studying did cause him to flunk. (For a recent defense of a contrastive view of causation, see Schaffer 2005.) If causation were a contrastive relation instead of a two-place relation, maybe the causalist could make a similar claim about the intention not to jump in: whereas it's not the case that my intending not to jump in rather than my merely omitting to intend to jump in caused my omitting to jump in, my intending not to jump in rather than my intending to jump in did cause my omitting to jump in. I cannot do full justice to this view here. But let me just note two things. First, causalism would have to be revised accordingly, as the claim that intentions of a certain type *rather than intentions of another type* cause the relevant bodily states in the relevant way. Second, whereas the claim that explanation is not a two-place relation (but a three-place relation or, even, a four-place relation) bears some initial plausibility, the corresponding claim about causation is very counterintuitive.

²⁶ On similar grounds, Kim argues that the non-reductive physicalist shouldn't settle for the claim that the mental is causally efficacious but the causal powers of the mental are parasitic on the causal powers of the physical (Kim 1998, 45).

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