16
Responsibility and the Metaphysics of Omissions

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1. Introduction

The metaphysics of omissions is a highly contested issue. If a selfish swimmer omits to save a child who is drowning right in front of him just because he doesn't want to be bothered, what does his omission to save the child amount to? Is it a special or negative kind of action (for example, an action involving a negative property—the non-saving of a child)? Or is it identical with an ordinary positive action, such as the swimmer's swimming away from the child at the time? Or is it, instead, not an action of any kind, but the absence of an action? These are difficult and highly controversial metaphysical questions. In this paper I will focus, not on those metaphysical questions themselves, but on the potential implications that questions of this kind might have for our moral responsibility (just "responsibility" hereafter). What kinds of consequences can we draw, if any, about our responsibility—and, in particular, about our responsibility for and in virtue of our non-doings—from the metaphysics of omissions?

One main way in which one might expect the metaphysics of omissions to be relevant concerns the role played by *causation* in grounding responsibility. Causation and responsibility seem to be importantly related. Imagine that Shooter aims his gun at Victim and shoots. A big storm had been building up, and as a result of the storm a sudden gust of wind deflects the bullet slightly and it never reaches Victim. Imagine that, at the same time, and also as a consequence of the storm, lightning strikes and kills Victim. In this case it seems clear that Shooter is not responsible for Victim's death because he didn't kill her (even if he tried); lightning did. And, surely, Shooter cannot be responsible for Victim's death if he didn't cause her death. In other words, responsibility for an event seems to require (among other things) having caused it.[1]

[1] Throughout this paper I will assume that agents can be responsible for outcomes in the world. Some people would reject this assumption on the grounds that it gives rise to unacceptable forms of moral luck. I will have to bypass this issue here.

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Now imagine that there was no storm, so Shooter (not lightning) causes Victim's death. Imagine, also, that there was another agent, Bystander, who could have easily stopped Shooter before he shot Victim and at no serious cost to himself, but failed to do so out of laziness. Bystander's contribution is an omission or a non-doing. As a result, in this case there is much disagreement about the underlying metaphysics, and, in particular, about how to understand Bystander's contribution. Some would say that Bystander is a cause of Victim's death, while others would say that Bystander's contribution is not causal.[2] Which of these views one is likely to embrace will depend on one's underlying metaphysics of omissions and on one's general views on causation. For example, if one thinks that causation is a relation between events, then whether one thinks that the relation between Bystander's omission and Victim's death is causal will depend on whether one thinks that omissions are events.

Now, regardless of which of these views one thinks is best, here is one argument that, I think, one *couldn't* plausibly make:

From lack of causal efficacy to lack of responsibility:

1. The true metaphysics of omissions and causation is one according to which omissions are never causes.
2. Responsibility for an outcome requires causing it.
3. Therefore, we can never be responsible for outcomes in virtue of our omissions.[3]

Why is this a bad argument? Because, even though both premises have some initial plausibility, it is still much clearer that 3 is false than that the conjunction of 1 and 2 is true. Surely, the selfish swimmer is responsible for the child's drowning and the lazy bystander is responsible for Victim's death (if we are ever responsible for anything that happens), and they are responsible in virtue of their omissions to act. In particular, compare Bystander's responsibility for Victim's death with his responsibility for the shooting of a second victim in a remote location (someone he didn't have the means to save). Clearly, there is a significant difference in that Bystander bears some responsibility in the former case but not in the latter. But, in order for this to be true, 3 must be false. Again, Bystander's responsibility for Victim's death doesn't seem negotiable.

[2] Views according to which omissions are causes include Mellor (1995), Thomson (2003), Lewis (2004), Schaffer (2004), and McGrath (2005). Views according to which omissions are not causes include Dowe (2001), Beebee (2004), Varzi (2007), and Bernstein (2014). For a survey of the main issues and views surrounding this topic, see Bernstein (2015).

[3] An argument of this kind was offered by Elazar Weinryb: "[O]missions have no consequences, since they lack the required causal efficacy. My argument sheds grave doubts on the appropriateness of holding someone responsible for the harm he omits to prevent." (Weinryb 1980: 3; here Weinryb seems to have in mind both moral and legal responsibility). Weinryb then concludes that any moral criticism towards agents' omissions or the apparent consequences of omissions should be directed instead towards the thoughts, and in particular the wants, of those agents who omitted to act (Weinryb 1980: 18).

In other words, we can be reasonably sure that the argument fails, even if we may not know which premise is false. For we know that Bystander is responsible (again, if anybody is ever responsible for anything that happens), even if we may not be sure about how to account for his responsibility: if in terms of causation or in other terms. This suggests that our responsibility involving omissions doesn't directly *hinge* on the metaphysics of omissions and causation by omissions. A certain metaphysics being true or false is not the kind of thing that could render us incapable of being responsible by omission. Our responsibility is, instead, "resilient" in that it would survive the discovery that a given metaphysics is true or false.

Note that this is in stark contrast with other metaphysical truths which could, at least potentially, have significant implications for our responsibility. Consider, for example, the truth of causal determinism (the thesis that our acts are determined by the state of the world in the remote past and the laws of nature). On some popular views of free will, whether determinism is true is something that can have significant implications for our free will and thus our moral responsibility. On libertarian views of free will, for example, we could only have free will and be responsible for our behavior and the consequences of our behavior if our acts were not causally determined. Of course, there are other views of free will according to which the truth of determinism is irrelevant to our free will and responsibility; in fact, many compatibilist views have this implication. But the point is that it is at least an *open question* (and one that has been intensely debated in the free will literature) whether the truth of determinism would undermine our responsibility. The situation is different with the metaphysics of omissions: it is less clear what implications, if any, the metaphysics of omissions could even potentially have for our responsibility.

The goal of this paper is to make some progress in addressing this difficult issue. I will focus on issues of the following kind: When faced with questions about our responsibility concerning omissions, is it at all appropriate to look into the metaphysics of omissions and omission-involving causation for an answer? When is it appropriate and when is it not? And why? Aside for a few exceptions, these questions have largely been ignored in the literature. But they are important questions with potentially significant implications for our theorizing about responsibility.

2. The Question about Causal Powers

Let us start by looking more closely into why our responsibility appears to be immune to the discovery that omissions cannot be causes. Here it is relevant to note that those who have argued that omissions cannot be causes have suggested other ways in which omissions can make us responsible. These other ways appeal to concepts that are broader than causation and that as a result can accommodate

omissions. Interestingly, however, those alternative proposals typically end up appealing to causation in some way or other—just not to causation *by omission*.

For example, Phil Dowe's view is that omissions cannot be causes because only positive events enter in causal relations and omissions are not positive events. However, Dowe suggests that omissions can be "quasi-causes" (Dowe 2001). Quasi-causation is a concept that appeals partly to causal processes that obtain, not in the actual world, but in merely possible or counterfactual worlds. On Dowe's view, for example, the selfish swimmer's omission doesn't cause the child's drowning in the actual world but it quasi-causes it, and this is partly in virtue of the fact that, in some relevant possible world where the omission *doesn't* obtain (some world in which the swimmer acts selflessly and attempts a rescue), this starts a causal process that ends in the child's being rescued. So, on this view, one can say that the responsibility that the swimmer bears to the child's death is grounded, at least partly, in that quasi-causal connection and thus on the relevant counterfactual causal process. The same goes for the lazy bystander and his responsibility for Victim's death.

Helen Beebee developed a view that is similar in some important respects (Beebee 2004). Beebee suggests that omissions can never be causes but they can still be explanatorily relevant, for they can play a role in causal explanations of events. On Beebee's view, for example, Victim died partly *because* of the lazy bystander's omission, even if the omission wasn't a cause of Victim's death. According to Beebee, when we learn of this explanatory connection, we learn at least something minimal about the causal history of Victim's death—namely, that it did not include an event of Bystander's intervening. But we also learn something about the causal structure of some nearby possible worlds: we learn that in some worlds where Bystander does intervene, his intervention does not cause Victim's death; in fact, it causes Victim's survival. Note that, again, just like in Dowe's view, the full account of Bystander's contribution ends up appealing to the existence of causal processes in counterfactual worlds (Beebee 2004: 305–6).

As these two examples suggest, causation is likely to play *some* important role in an account of the responsibility of agents in these cases, regardless of which metaphysics of omissions is true. If omissions are causes, the responsibility of agents will be simply grounded in actual causal processes. But, if omissions are not causes, the responsibility of agents can still be grounded in a combination of actual causal facts and counterfactual causal facts. In other words, the connection between responsibility and causation for omissions could be broadly characterized as follows:

Causation as grounds for responsibility:

When agents are responsible by omission, their responsibility is partly grounded in causal facts that obtain in the relevant possible world(s) (the actual world and/or some relevantly similar counterfactual world(s)).

Given this, it is not surprising that responsibility is immune to discoveries about the metaphysical nature of omissions. Even if the thought that responsibility requires causation (of the actual kind) is initially plausible, there is a readily available "fallback" option in case it ends up being misguided. And it is one that is not too far removed from the initial thought to count as a significant departure from it.

Now, one might think that the introduction of merely possible causal connections carries with it a commitment to certain views of responsibility as opposed to others, and as a result it fails to be as neutral as I am advertising it to be. In particular, there is a recently popular family of views about responsibility, sometimes called *actual-sequence* views, according to which, roughly, the responsibility of agents is exclusively grounded in actually explanatory sequences of events.[4] These are views that are inspired by Harry Frankfurt's arguments against the traditional model of responsibility in terms of alternative possibilities and by his suggestion that responsibility is just a function of the actually explanatory factors (Frankfurt 1969). So, aren't these actual-sequence views of responsibility at odds with the suggestion that the responsibility of agents by omission can be grounded in causal connections that take place in alternative possible worlds?

I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere,[5] but the short answer is 'no.' Actual-sequence views are in fact compatible with the claim that some counterfactual scenarios (and, in particular, causal processes obtaining in counterfactual scenarios) are relevant to our responsibility. What those views typically deny is the relevance of *alternative possibilities of action* for responsibility. However, alternative possibilities are not just any old possibilities, since they are supposed to involve robust abilities to engage in alternative behaviors (roughly, having the right kind of "access" to the relevant possibilities). Thus, actual-sequence views needn't differ from alternative possibilities views as far as the relevance of some counterfactual facts. The essence of the disagreement concerns, instead, the relevance of *robust alternatives*.

Imagine, for example, that Beebee's view is right and that omissions can be part of causal explanations but they can never themselves be causes. In that case, an actual-sequence view will have to account for the responsibility of agents by omission by appeal to factors that are actually explanatory, in Beebee's sense. And recall that, on Beebee's view, this carries with it a commitment to the relevance of some counterfactual causal processes. But, again, the mere existence of those counterfactual causal processes is not the same thing as the agent's having robust alternatives.

Another way to see that actual-sequence views can consistently accept the relevance of some counterfactual facts is this. The most natural way (although,

[4] See e.g. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) and Sartorio (2016).
[5] See Sartorio (2016, ch. 1) and Sartorio (forthcoming).

again, not the only possible way) to understand actual sequences is as causal sequences. But notice that many accounts of causation are *counterfactual* accounts—that is, they analyze or ground causation itself in terms of, among other things, some counterfactual facts.[6] This suggests that the very idea that responsibility is grounded in actual sequences, when understood as causal sequences, can potentially carry with it a commitment to the relevance of some counterfactual facts (those facts that help ground the relevant causal facts). So, again, there is no inconsistency in embracing an actual-sequence view of responsibility and accepting the relevance of some counterfactual facts.

So far, I have argued that the metaphysics of omissions doesn't directly bear on our responsibility in a way that would justify excusing us of responsibility in omission cases if it turned out that omissions are causally inefficacious. If the metaphysics of omissions is relevant to our responsibility, it is not in this most obvious kind of way. In the sections below I look at other possibilities.

3. Symmetric Overdetermination

The next natural step is to think about cases with a more complex structure. If the metaphysics of causation involving omissions is to have a bearing on the moral responsibility of agents, it is natural to expect to see this in cases with puzzling causal structures such as those involving the contributions of multiple factors, or multiple agents, and some form of overdetermination or redundancy. Imagine, for example, that two agents have to do their part in order to save the victim's life; say, two swimmers are needed to bring the drowning child back to the shore. Imagine that the swimmers independently and simultaneously decide to stay put and not do their part, in each case for purely selfish reasons, and the child dies as a result. This is a case of what is commonly known as overdetermination: what each swimmer does (or fails to do) is on its own sufficient for the child's drowning. Overdetermination cases are notably trickier because their causal or metaphysical structure is less than fully clear: even if one accepts that omissions can be causes, overdetermination cases raise special challenges and there is much debate about how to make sense of them. In particular, on some views overdeterminers are causes but on other views they are not.[7] So, the question I will focus on next is: Could one's metaphysical views on overdetermination, and in particular on overdetermination by omission, have any consequences for the responsibility of agents in those cases?

[6] For examples of views in this tradition, see the essays collected in Collins, Hall, and Paul (2004).

[7] For a defense of the idea that overdeterminers are causes, see e.g. Schaffer (2003). For a discussion of a view according to which overdeterminers are not causes, see e.g. Lewis (1986: 212).

Although things are considerably less clear in this case, I think that here, too, there are certain inferences that one could *not* plausibly make. Here is one such inference:

From lack of causal efficacy and difference-making to lack of responsibility:

1. The true metaphysics of omissions and causation is one according to which omissions are never causes.

2. There is no other way to ground the responsibility of agents for outcomes in overdetermination cases involving omissions. In particular, in those cases there is a lack of difference-making: each omission makes no difference to the outcome, given the other omission. (In terms of counterfactual dependence: the outcome doesn't counterfactually depend on either of the omissions, for it would still have occurred if only one of the agents had acted.)

3. Therefore, agents are not morally responsible for the outcome in overdetermination cases involving omissions.[8]

This argument would get the two selfish swimmers off the hook for the child's death in the case where their omissions overdetermine his death. But this seems clearly wrong. Each of the swimmers failed to do what they should have done and, had they both done what they should, the child would have been saved, and in the expected way. Moreover, they had no excuse for what they did (or failed to do). So, again, the responsibility of the swimmers seems to be non-negotiable: it is clearer that the conclusion of the argument is false than that the conjunction of the premises is true. As a result, even if it might not be clear which premise is false, the argument still doesn't get off the ground.

In the previous section I noted that the link between responsibility and causation would survive the discovery or realization that omissions cannot be causes—for, even if responsibility by omission couldn't then be grounded in actual causation, it could still be grounded in causation that takes place in the relevant possible worlds. An extension of the same reasoning could be offered here too. Imagine that we couldn't ground the responsibility of the two swimmers in actual causation—either because there is no causation by omission in general, or because overdetermining omissions cannot be causes. We could still partly ground their responsibility in causal connections that obtain in other possible worlds. In this case, given that it is an overdetermination case, the relevant possible worlds would arguably have to be worlds where not just one but *both* of the swimmers act (in whichever way is required to save the child). In those possible worlds, the

[8] Michael Moore argues in this way in his 2009, chapter 18. Moore thinks omissions cannot be causes because only positive events can be causes. Although he thinks that counterfactual dependence is an alternative ground for responsibility that applies to many omission cases, overdetermination cases exhibit a lack of counterfactual dependence. As a result, Moore thinks that agents cannot be responsible in overdetermination omission cases.

swimmers start a causal process that ends in the child's being saved. Even if the details would have to be worked out, it seems clear that, at least in principle, one could potentially ground the swimmers' responsibility for the child's death partly in those counterfactual causal processes.

Let me clarify what I think it is, exactly, that is non-negotiable in these cases. It is the basic fact that the swimmers bear *some* responsibility for the child's death: it is sufficiently clear that they are each responsible, *to some degree*, for the child's death. "Two wrongs don't make a right," we think, and for good reason. Under the proper understanding, the slogan seems clearly true, and it explains why we think that the swimmers cannot be off the hook for the child's death.[9] On the other hand, what I think may be negotiable is *how* responsible each of the swimmers is, or the extent of their responsibility—assuming responsibility is a concept that comes in degrees. (Although, given that the case is intended to be perfectly symmetrical, it is clear that each of the swimmers must bear the same amount of responsibility, whatever that amount may be.) If responsibility comes in degrees, it is an open question whether the existence of overdetermination lessens the responsibility that each agent bears for the outcome. It might be, for example, that when two agents overdetermine an outcome, each agent only bears half of the responsibility (or, in any case, less responsibility than if they had been the only agent involved).[10]

Even then, I think that it would probably be misguided to expect the metaphysics of omission-involving causation *itself* to have any bearing on the degree of the responsibility of agents in overdetermination cases. For whether we think that an agent is less than fully responsible in these cases will depend on more general considerations having to do with the right way to apportion responsibility when more than one agent is responsible (and especially in cases where each agent's contribution is independently sufficient for the outcome), instead of on considerations concerning the metaphysical status of omissions or of causation by omission.

In many cases, it would also be a mistake to expect that the extent of the agents' responsibility in scenarios of this kind will hinge on the right views on *overdetermination* and causation. For the issue of whether overdeterminers are causes is usually seen as depending on more general theoretical considerations that seem to have nothing to do with the grounds for responsibility. To illustrate, consider David Lewis's views on this. Lewis famously discussed the difficulties involved in accepting that overdeterminers can be causes given the framework of a

[9] I have discussed the proper understanding of the slogan in Sartorio (2012). Briefly, the main thought is that the only way in which two wrongs could make a right would be if the two agents' contributions ended up interfering with each other in a way that neutralized them both. (Picture two evil assassins whose bullets intercept and cancel each other in mid-flight.) The two swimmers case does not seem to be like this, and this is why we think that the swimmers cannot be off the hook for the child's death.

[10] For discussion of this issue, see e.g. Cohen (1981), Zimmermann (1985), Bernstein (2016; 2017), and Sartorio (2020).

counterfactual approach to causation (his preferred account).[11] Counterfactual views have trouble with overdetermination cases precisely because of the lack of counterfactual dependence between the individual overdetermining events and the outcome: How can we account for the causal structure of these cases in counterfactual terms if the outcome's occurrence does not counterfactually depend on the overdetermining events? Such lack of counterfactual dependence would appear to leave us with unexplained outcomes: outcomes that don't have any causes, which seems contrary to what we want to say about those cases. Part of Lewis's solution was to suggest that, even if counterfactual views don't seem to have the resources to analyze individual overdeterminers as causes due to the lack of counterfactual dependence (and in this sense they may have to be left as "spoils to the victor"), the event that is the *mereological sum* of the overdetermining events would still come out as a cause (because the outcome does counterfactually depend on that event, Lewis thought). This, he argued, would be enough to fill any causal "gaps" that might need filling. Presumably, Lewis was thinking that this way of filling in the causal gaps would also be enough to ground the moral responsibility of any agents involved.[12]

As this example suggests, it would be implausible to argue that the very same kinds of considerations that motivate the idea that overdeterminers aren't causes *also* motivate a reduction of the responsibility of agents whose behaviors overdetermine the effect. For they are considerations of a quite different type, in that they track theoretical issues about the best way to accommodate certain causal judgments within one's general theory of causation, about the best way to fill in the causally explanatory gaps, etc. And these kinds of issues don't seem to have any obvious implications for the responsibility of agents involved.

There is one way in which the metaphysics of causation could potentially ground the claim that the responsibility of agents is reduced in overdetermination cases: this is if one held the view that causation comes in degrees, and that the existence of overdetermination in general reduces the extent of one's causal contribution.[13] In that case one could argue that overdetermination makes agents less responsible because agents in overdetermination scenarios make a lesser contribution. But, again, note that this is a quite general proposal that doesn't rely on any specific metaphysical feature of *omissions*, or of omission-involving causation. For similar reasons, then, I don't think this shows that the metaphysics of omissions has any bearing on the responsibility of agents.[14]

[11] Lewis (1986), postscript E.

[12] Lewis (1986: 212). Note that this is another way in which responsibility could be grounded in causation without being grounded in actual individual causation; in this case, it would be grounded in actual "collective" causation. I make a similar point about cases involving overdetermination by omissions in Sartorio (2004; 2017). See also the discussion in section 4 below.

[13] See, for example, Chockler and Halpern (2004).

[14] What if the lesser degree of causal contribution were due to the fact that a behavior is an omission (instead of a positive action)? This view combines the idea that causal contributions come in degrees with

4. Asymmetric Overdetermination

So far, we haven't been able to find any clear examples where the metaphysics of omissions bears on our responsibility as agents. But the main reason for this, I think, is that we have focused exclusively on cases where our responsibility judgments (at least the most basic or fundamental judgments concerning our responsibility) are already quite clear. In those cases, as we have seen, the responsibility of agents seems to be resistant to metaphysical discoveries concerning what causes what, or what kinds of things can and cannot be causes. This suggests that we should look, instead, at cases where our responsibility judgments are not initially clear.

What could those cases be? I think the most promising candidates are *asymmetric* cases of redundancy involving omissions—that is, omission-involving cases that include overdetermination of a certain kind but where the overdeterminers are not otherwise "on a par", and in this respect they differ from those scenarios discussed in the preceding section. The reason these examples are better candidates is that it is unclear, in at least some of those cases, which of the agents is responsible for the outcome, and why. Moreover, this is due to the intriguing and unique nature of omissions. As a result, this is an issue that could potentially be decided by metaphysical truths about omissions or about omission-involving causation.

Probably the most famous example of this kind is the "desert traveler" puzzle discussed, for instance, in the classical work on causation in the law by Hart and Honoré (1985).[15] On one variant of the case, a traveler is planning to take a trip into the desert with his water canteen. He has two enemies who want him dead. The two enemies don't know about each other, and so they each independently come up with an evil plan for the traveler to die in the desert. At time T1, the first enemy secretly empties the water from the canteen, and refills it with sand so that the man won't notice the difference in weight. Next, at T2, the second enemy steals the canteen from the man (thinking that it contains water). The man dies from thirst in the desert, at some later time, T3. It is clear that the traveler died, in some sense, because of what the two enemies did. Thus, it is clear that we want to blame someone for the traveler's death—either the first enemy, or the second enemy, or perhaps both. But it is hard to say who killed him, for it is not clear how either one

the claim that omissions make less significant contributions than actions. I don't think this view is very plausible, for two reasons. One is that I don't think it's plausible in general to think that causal contributions come in degrees (I argue for this in Sartorio 2020). But the other is that, to the extent that we can make sense of the idea of causal contributions coming in degrees, it also doesn't seem plausible to argue that *generally* omissions make less significant contributions than actions. Consider, for example, someone's omission to feed their own child and the contribution that this would make to the child's death.

[15] The puzzle is originally from McLaughlin (1925).

could have made a contribution, given what the other one did. How can draining the water from the canteen be relevant to the man's death, if that canteen was going to be miles away from the man when he needed it (because the second enemy was going to steal it)? And, how can stealing a canteen that wasn't filled with water (but with sand, as a result of the first enemy's intervention) be relevant to the man's death from thirst? Hence the puzzle.

At least on the face of it, this is a case where the metaphysics of omissions (and, more generally, of non-occurrences or absences) could potentially be relevant. This isn't because the wrongful behaviors by the two enemies are themselves omissions (they aren't; they are positive actions), but, rather, because their behaviors are only potentially relevant to the outcome of the traveler's death given that they result in non-occurrences or absences that are, themselves, potentially relevant to the traveler's death. Thus, the first enemy's action of draining the water from the canteen results in the *absence* of water in the canteen at T1, and the second enemy's action of stealing the canteen results in the *absence* of the canteen from the traveler's location at T2. If either enemy can be said to have contributed to the traveler's death, it must be because of the contribution that one of these non-occurrences or absences made to it.

Thus, the question "Which of those absences made a contribution to the traveler's death?" becomes at least potentially relevant. Finding out what the right answer to that question is could then help us solve the puzzle about responsibility. And, in looking for an answer to that question, one could hope to get help from the metaphysics of omissions, or of omission-involving causation.

The desert traveler case is different from the *symmetric* overdetermination cases discussed in the previous section in some important respects. As noted above, in the symmetric cases it seems clear that somebody is to blame for the outcome, but, given the symmetry, it also seems clear that both agents are to blame, and to the same extent. The desert traveler case is different in that one agent acts *before* the other, and everything else that that entails. This means, for example, that the first enemy is the *first* to guarantee that the traveler will die in the desert, which could be seen as potentially significant in a way that emphasizes the contribution of the first enemy. On the other hand, it also means that the second enemy is the *last* to act before the traveler dies, and this could be seen as potentially significant in a way that emphasizes the contribution of the second enemy. As a result, in this case it is not at all obvious that both agents are responsible for the outcome, or that they are both responsible to the same extent. All that I think is clear is that *someone* is to blame (either the first enemy or the second or both), but nothing more than that. This is what opens the door to the metaphysical truths being relevant in these cases.

Imagine, for example, that the right metaphysical view entails that one enemy is a cause of the traveler's death but the other is not (in other words, it is a case of what is commonly known as "preemption": one enemy causally preempts the

other). In that case, we would have good reason for thinking that one enemy is responsible for the traveler's death and the other is not. Or imagine that the right metaphysical view entails that both enemies are causes. In that case we would have good reason for thinking that both enemies are responsible for the man's death.

In retrospect, I think this is probably why the desert traveler case, as well as other similar examples,[16] have been discussed by responsibility theorists and metaphysicians alike. For in those cases it is natural to think that the answer to the metaphysical question (the question of who makes an actual contribution to the outcome) is key, in that the question of who is responsible for that outcome hinges on it. As a result, if we had reason to believe that one of those metaphysical views is true, this could help us solve the puzzle about responsibility.

Now, I think that neither of those metaphysical views is, *in fact*, right: the desert traveler scenario is not a case of preemption (or a case where one of the agents is a cause and the other one isn't), and it is also not a case where both of the agents are causes. The right thing to say, I believe, is that *neither* agent makes an individual causal contribution.

Let me add that my reason for thinking this is not that I believe omissions or non-occurrences cannot be causes in general. I actually remain neutral on this issue. Also, this wouldn't get to the heart of the puzzle because the same kinds of questions would arise if the right way to think about omissions and other non-occurrences were not in terms of causation but in terms of, say, explanation. For one could reformulate the desert traveler puzzle as a puzzle about explanation: What explains why the traveler died? Is it what the first enemy did, or what the second enemy did, or a combination of both? These questions are just as puzzling as the questions about causation.

My reason for thinking that neither of the views described above is the right metaphysics is, rather, that I think that the desert traveler case is a case of *mutual causal cancellation*, one where the causal powers (or explanatory powers, if omissions cannot be causes) of the two agents' contributions cancel each other out and this results in neither agent being a cause. I have defended this view elsewhere[17] and I won't rehash it here. But, roughly, the thought is that the mutual causal cancellation takes place at the level of individual causes (thus neither enemy is individually a cause of the traveler's death); still, there is causation at the collective level (a collective cause that combines the contributions of the two agents). I also argued that it follows from this that the responsibility question remains an open question, for in order to figure out who is responsible we would

[16] Examples with a similar structure include the two catchers example discussed in Collins (2000) and the planted sharks examples discussed in Sartorio (2017) and Clarke (2014, ch. 6).

[17] Sartorio (2015).

first have to figure out who is responsible for the collective cause, and this question lacks an obvious answer.[18]

At any rate, note that what we were doing at that point (before discussing the implications for responsibility) was straight metaphysics. We were trying to figure out what the best way to model the structure of these cases is, in metaphysical terms, in order to then examine the potential implications for the responsibility of agents. In other words, we clearly saw the metaphysical structure of these cases as at least *potentially* mattering. Even if my own view ends up being that the metaphysical structure of these cases is not enough to settle the responsibility question, I recognize that there are other (sensible) metaphysical views that deny this.[19]

In section 1 above I mentioned the example of causal determinism as a metaphysical thesis that is widely regarded as potentially bearing on our responsibility. As it happens, my take on determinism is quite similar: I am a compatibilist, so I don't actually think that the truth of determinism ultimately matters for our responsibility. But, of course, I recognize that there are sensible views (some incompatibilist views of freedom) on which it does. And until we figure out which view of freedom is true, we won't be able to agree on whether the truth of determinism is relevant to our responsibility. Based just on what we agree on, all we can say is that it is *potentially* relevant. The same goes, I think, for the metaphysics of omissions and of omission-involving causation in the kinds of scenarios discussed in this section.

5. Conclusion

The question of whether and how the metaphysics of omissions is relevant to responsibility is, as we have seen, a difficult one to answer. Responsibility judgments are quite resilient in that they would resist the discovery of most metaphysical truths concerning omissions. I have argued, in particular, that the central metaphysical question of whether omissions have causal powers is of this kind: our responsibility does not hinge, in any clear way, on the right answer to that question. As we have seen, this is partly because our judgments concerning the potential grounds for responsibility are, in comparison, quite flexible.

On the other hand, we have seen that there are other metaphysical truths concerning the causal (or otherwise quasi-causal or explanatory) powers of

[18] Although I did provide a tentative answer to that question (one according to which only the first enemy ends up being responsible). But, again, I cannot get into it here.

[19] By a "sensible" view I mean a view that has at least some plausibility, even if it may be false. In contrast, as suggested above, I don't think it's sensible to argue that the right answer to the question of whether omissions have *causal powers* can help with the responsibility question. For similar questions arise if omissions have causal powers or if they don't.

omissions in more complex kinds of situations that can, at least potentially, bear on our responsibility as agents. These are situations where our responsibility judgments are less clear to start with, and where the metaphysical and responsibility questions are as a result more closely tied together. In those cases, it is more natural to expect the metaphysical truths to bear on our responsibility in significant ways.

I conclude that, as with other kinds of theorizing, theorizing about responsibility should draw on the metaphysics to the extent that it is recommended by an exercise of a sensible process of reflective equilibrium. In cases where our responsibility judgments are very resilient, the responsibility questions will predictably "float free" from the metaphysics. However, in other cases where our responsibility judgments are more uncertain, the metaphysics can be expected to play a more significant role.

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