

WHAT IS A CAUSAL THEORIST TO DO ABOUT OMISSIONS?

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Abstract: Most philosophers concede that one can properly be held morally responsible for intentionally omitting to do something. If one maintains that omissions are actions (negative actions, perhaps), then assuming the requisite conditions regarding voluntariness are met, one can tell a familiar story about how/why this is. In particular, causal theorists can explain the etiology of an intentional omission in causal terms. However, if one denies that omissions are actions of any kind, then the familiar story is no longer available. Some have suggested that this poses a special problem for causal theorists of action. I argue that it does not and, even more interestingly, that it renders a more nuanced understanding of voluntariness (since it no longer applies strictly to actions) and moral responsibility (since you might be to blame, but not for anything you've done).

It is widely accepted that one can properly be held morally responsible for intentionally omitting to do something. If my children are hungry and I decide to continue to write my paper, rather than feed them dinner, I am culpable for failing to provide them the nourishment they require despite its being well within my means to do so.

If one maintains that omissions are actions (negative actions, perhaps), then, assuming the requisite conditions regarding voluntariness (whatever they may be) are met, one can tell a familiar story about how this is so. In particular, causal theorists (whether event-causalist or agent-causalist) can explain the etiology of the intentional omission in causal terms since, being actions, omissions will be capable of entering into causal relations with the requisite items (mental events/states, in the case of causalism, or substances, in the case of agent-causalism). On an event-causalist picture, an omission will be the effect of some mental event (perhaps a belief-desire pair, or an intention of some sort) and on the agent-causal view, it will be an effect brought about by a substance (the agent). As effects of agents, or of events within agents, intentional omissions are the sorts of things for which one can be morally responsible since they will have been brought about by the agent, or by events originating in the agent.

In what follows, I will focus on Causalism—or, as I prefer, The Causal Theory of Action (CTA)—rather than on agent-causal theories. According to CTA, an event *e* is an (intentional) action if and only if *e* is caused (in the right way) by the appropriate (rationalizing) mental item(s). The first parenthetical

properly identifies the subject matter of CTA (i.e., intentional actions), the second is intended to rule out the well-known cases involving causal deviance.¹ And the third parenthetical articulates that the mental items doing the causing constitute the agent's reason(s) for doing what she did. Owing largely to the work of Donald Davidson, and to recent modifications offered by contemporary causal theorists, CTA is currently the received view in action theory.²

If one denies that omissions are actions (of any kind), then it is questionable whether CTA can be correct since it will fail to account for them.³ Indeed, it has been suggested that intentional omissions pose a special problem for CTA (Sartorio 2009). In this paper, I argue that CTA cannot and need not account for intentional omissions and, even more interestingly, that denying that omissions are actions renders a more nuanced understanding of voluntariness (since it no longer applies strictly to actions) and moral responsibility (since you might be to blame, but not for anything you've done).⁴

1 OMISSIONS: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Suppose that I am standing on the shore of a small pond when I see a young child drowning nearby. I am in a position to jump in and save the child and I deliberate about whether or not to do so. However, I do not jump in and the child drowns. On the face of it, the omission is intentional. However, the causal relation posited by CTA is one predominantly understood to obtain between events (and only events). Indeed, the action-event is sometimes thought to be a very particular type of event, namely, a bodily movement (e.g., Davidson 2001). Omissions can hardly be construed as bodily movements since what one's body is doing is not relevant, in the typical case, to the person's omitting to *x*. When I fail to jump into the pond and instead do yoga on the shore, the particular movement(s) of my body does not constitute my failing to jump in since I could instead have been throwing a frisbee or petting a dog. Even if we take a more liberal stance with respect to what can count as an action (and don't restrict actions to bodily movements), it remains unclear whether CTA can

¹ Perhaps the most famous case is considered by Davidson in his 1973 paper, "Freedom to Act," in which a climber wants to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope and he knows that by loosening his grip on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and desire then so unnerve him that he loosens his hold. And yet, as Davidson puts it, "[I]t might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally" (Davidson 2001, 79).

² E.g., Davidson (2001), Bishop (1989), Mele (1992, 2003).

³ It is important to note that denying that omissions are actions does not straightforwardly imply that a causal theory cannot account for them. After all, omissions could still be events of some kind (i.e., negative events), or else they might be facts or some other sort of item which (on some views) would make them eligible for entering into causal relations in the way causalism implies. Of course, if they are not actions, then, as Sartorio points out, "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" (2009, 513). It is an important question just what sort of theory causalism is (i.e., What is it a theory *about*?).

⁴ While the ideas expressed in this paper developed independently, much (though not all) of what I say here is in agreement with Randolph Clarke's fine work on this topic. (See especially Clarke (2010a, 2010b, 2011, forthcoming).)

count omissions among the things one *does*. According to CTA, every action is an effect of mental events. If, then, something is to count as an action, it must be the sort of thing capable of entering in causal relations. And the sorts of things capable of doing so are events.⁵

Immediately we may see that if omissions are indeed a kind of event—a “negative event”—they may after all be capable of entering into causal relations, and CTA may thereby countenance them among the class of actions. But I am doubtful that much sense can be made of the notion of a negative event. Achille Varzi (2006) argues that it makes little more sense to speak of non-occurring (or “negative”) events than it does to speak of non-existing objects. Of course, we do commonly speak as though there really are such things, and in some cases we seem to intend that our speech be taken quite seriously. The following are familiar sorts of cases:

- (A) Alice saw Susan not leave.
- (B) Alice often doesn’t go jogging.
- (C) Susan’s failing to water the plant caused it to die.

Despite appearances, these statements do not challenge the view that “the only events to be seriously countenanced are the positive ones—those that feature in the actual history of the world” (Varzi 2006, 132). That’s because in every case of a statement of the sort (A), (B), or (C), one of two things is true: Either (1) it is a case of a positive event being given a negative description—as in the case of Susan where her not leaving just is a staying, or (2) what is said is strictly and literally false (though in a way that admits of true paraphrases).

Consider:

- (D) Jill did not thank Greg for the gift.

Some have taken such statements to provide evidence for the existence of negative events—in this case, a “non-thanking” by Jill (de Swart 1996, 229). But why should we understand (D) this way? After all, (D) is consistent with the following scenario: there was some positive occurrence—what exactly it was, we’re not told; perhaps Jill ate her dinner without saying a word, or talked incessantly with her friend Martha, or . . . —whatever it was, it was not a thanking of Greg by Jill. There are contexts in which (D) is a perfectly satisfactory explanation of what occurred, even though it notably lacks information that would be useful in other contexts. But if we want to know why Greg is sulking, (D) will be a more satisfying explanation than one which gives all of the details about what Jill was in fact doing. The point is that statements like (D) shouldn’t convince us that there are such things as negative occurrences. Rather, a single occurrence can be given different descriptions, some of which may be negative.

⁵ This claim is, of course, controversial. But I am going to put to one side arguments suggesting that items other than events are capable of entering into causal relations (e.g., facts, aspects, and so on.). CTA is typically construed in a way that understands causal relations in terms of (and only in terms of) events. And in any case, even if, say, aspects can feature in causal relations, it doesn’t of course follow that omissions can do the same.

Which description is appropriate will depend on the context—on what information is relevant to the sort of understanding being sought (Varzi 2006).

For those sympathetic to a coarse-grained theory of the individuation of events, the foregoing (Davidsonian) account of statements like (D) will be a palatable one.⁶ Whether the move is available on a fine-grained account of events will, of course, depend on the particular account and, more pointedly, on whether it can accommodate a single event's being subject to multiple descriptions. Jaegwon Kim claims of his property-exemplification account of events, according to which events are "exemplifications by substances of properties at a time" (Kim 1976), that it permits some redescription of events. That is, while "Brutus's stabbing Caesar" is not, on Kim's view, the same event as "Brutus's killing Caesar," "Sebastian's leisurely stroll" is a redescription of the event, "Sebastian's stroll." That's because Kim denies that strolling leisurely is itself a generic event. Instead, "leisurely" does not modify "strolling," but indicates a property of "the individual event which arises from the exemplification of the generic event designated by 'strolling'" (Kim 1976, 169). The strategy here is to construe predicate modifiers which indicate means-manner-methods (that is, modifiers like "leisurely") in such a way that they indicate properties of the individual events (and not as introducing additional events to those that they modify). Kim acknowledges that the strategy introduces certain apparent obstacles to the property-exemplification view, specifically regarding causation and explanation (Kim 1976, 169). And for this reason, he goes on to offer a second strategy which he identifies as the "official line of the property-exemplification account." According to the official line, Sebastian's stroll and his leisurely stroll are different, though not entirely distinct, events. The qualification is appropriate since the latter event (Sebastian's leisurely stroll) *includes* the former event (Sebastian's stroll). Whatever the relation of inclusion ultimately amounts to, the idea is that the two events are related in some particular way and that relation accounts for the intuition behind the claim that the one event is a redescription of the other.

But the "official line" aside, it no doubt remains an important question whether the sort of redescription permitted by Kim's first strategy is adequate. That is, is it acceptable that Sebastian's leisurely stroll count as a redescription Sebastian's stroll, while Brutus's stabbing of Caesar is altogether distinct from his killing Caesar? Isn't Brutus's stabbing a redescription of his killing (one which offers additional details about Brutus's action)? In any case, while restricting events to "positive occurrences" is perhaps more clearly amenable to a course-grained view of events, it may not rule out fine-grained accounts of events *tout court*.⁷

Recall that Varzi's claim is that statements like (D) which allegedly imply the existence of negative events may in fact be positive events that are negatively

⁶ The nature of events is, of course, the subject of rich debate in the literature and the particular claims I make here are contested.

⁷ If correct, this is a desirable result since it means the approach to omissions that I favor doesn't require a particular view of events. That said, I am willing to assume a coarse-grained account of events in what follows, if necessary.

described. We can extend this to causal claims involving omissions in a natural way. Jonathan Schaffer claims that the case of a trigger pulling which causes a bullet to fire involves “negative causation.” He says:

[T]rigger pullings only cause bullet firings by negative causation: pulling the trigger . . . causes the removal of the sear from the path of the spring . . . , which causes the spring to uncoil, thereby compressing the gunpowder and causing an explosion, which causes the bullet to fire. (Schaffer 2004, 199)

Of course, the pulling of the trigger, and the spring’s compressing of the gunpowder are not instances of negative causation. But consider a step in the causal sequence that clearly alleges to be—the step at which the removal of the sear causes the spring to uncoil. Schaffer’s point in this example is that negative causation is prolific, arguably occurring in most causal sequences. But several of his examples—this one included—are such that it’s not at all clear that there isn’t some positive event (or a series of positive events, perhaps) with which, say, the removal of the sear is identical that is itself the cause of the spring’s uncoiling. The removal of the sear counts as a cause, we might say, only insofar as it is identical with some positive event (or process) which causes the spring to uncoil.

Even so, not every case involving an omission is simply one that involves a positive event negatively described. Some statements that seem to imply the existence of negative events are strictly speaking false. Varzi argues that this is true of statements like (C) above which, we’ll recall, reports Susan’s failure to water the plant. It says:

(C) Susan’s failing to water caused the plant to die.

According to Varzi, (C) is false (or in any case, not true) because “Susan’s failing to water” has no referent. This is not true of statements describing positive occurrences, as in “Bob’s turning on the light caused the room to be illuminated.” But in the case of (C) where no positive occurrence is described (even negatively), there is nothing for the phrase, “Susan’s failing to water” to refer to—nothing which *happens*.

If indeed every statement expressing an omission is subject either to (1) or (2), then it is incorrect to understand omissions as a distinct species of event.⁸ Now, if omissions turn out not to be events of any kind, then they’re not actions. But Carolina Sartorio’s objection to CTA is not that omissions cannot, by CTA’s own criteria, count as actions. Rather, she says, “even if omissions aren’t actions, a theory of what it is to behave intentionally should be able to accommodate omissions” (Sartorio 2009, 513). Intentional omissions (like my failing to jump in the pond) should fall within the scope of CTA given that they are a variety of intentional behavior. CTA should tell us why certain behaviors are intentional when they are intentional. That is, CTA is not just a view about

⁸ Though they may, as we’ve said, be positive events negatively described.

actions, but rather a view—more broadly—about intentional behavior, about “agency.” Now, I should say that if omissions are not events, then just as they are not actions, they are arguably not behaviors either. So, reframing the issue in terms of behavior (rather than action) is not going to assist with the foregoing consideration. But there may nevertheless be something to Sartorio’s suggestion here. After all, there are things I omit to do because I’m sleeping or because I’m daydreaming, or because I form the intention to do it, but promptly forget the intention due to the intervention of a neuroscientist. Indeed, my failing to jump in to save the child *could* have been like this. But as it turns out, it wasn’t. I deliberated about what to do, and in the end I didn’t jump in. My failure to save the child in this case seems properly understood as an instance of my exercising my agency. The case might be described as one in which I allow the child to drown.⁹

In this way, omissions appear to be exemplifications of agency much in the way positive actions or commissions are. Because it was deliberate, my failing to jump in the pond demonstrates my status as an agent as well, we might think, as do the various positive actions I perform. And so, a theory about what it is to behave intentionally should account for deliberate omissions. For the moment, let’s grant that CTA is best construed in the way Sartorio suggests, namely, as a view about intentional behavior broadly rather than more narrowly as a view about intentional *action*. We have yet to see precisely how omissions are supposed to cause trouble for CTA. It is to this objection that I now turn.

1.1 AN EXCLUSION PROBLEM FOR CTA

Since CTA upholds the view that actions are caused (in the right way) by the appropriate mental item(s), a causal reading of the case involving my failure to jump in the pond (hereafter “*Pond*”) would seem to go as follows:

*Pond*_{CTA}: My intending not to jump in the pond caused my not jumping in the pond.

Notice that my intention not to jump in is not the only possible candidate for being the mental cause of my not jumping in. That’s because though we sometimes refrain from acting because we have decided not to so act, we also sometimes refrain from acting because we have made no decision whatever.

Suppose I deliberate for some time about what to do and before my deliberation is concluded, the child drowns. *Pond*_{CTA} now appears to be false. My omission was caused not by a decision of mine, but rather by the lack of a decision. This raises an important question about which of the two mental candidates is the cause of my not jumping in. That is, was my failure to jump in caused by an intention not to jump in or by a failure to form an intention? If it was the former, then we get the picture given in *Pond*_{CTA}. But a second possibility now seems to be:

⁹ Though it needn’t be so described, as not all cases of omission are cases of allowing (as opposed to doing). In other words, the action/omission distinction is not just the doing/allowing distinction since (perhaps among other reasons) the latter has primarily to do with the consequences of an agent’s action or inaction. In the case in which I omit to jump in the pond, however, it does seem correct to say that by omitting to jump in the pond, I allow the child to drown.

Pond_{CTA'} My failure to decide to jump in the pond caused my not jumping in the pond.

As will be argued in section 2, it is false that every omission is identical with whatever positive action (bodily movement) the agent was performing when she wasn't doing that which she omitted to do (e.g., when she wasn't jumping in the pond). Sartorio suggests that in cases of omission wherein the agent, at the time of omitting, performs a positive action, the fact that the omission and the action are not identical should lead us to ask which of the two does the causal work. The question is whether it is my failure to jump in, or my doing yoga on the shore that causes the child to drown (assuming a causal understanding of the case). She concludes that my doing yoga is largely irrelevant to the child's drowning since it seems wrong to say that my reading a book, or going for a run caused his death. Sartorio says, "intuitively, the child died because of what I didn't do, not because of what I did in its place" (Sartorio 2009, 519).

Such is the case when the omission is the cause of some further event. But the same line of thinking can be applied to the causal antecedents of omissions. In the original case we were choosing between an omission, on the one hand, and a positive action, on the other. Now we must choose between two mental items: a mental act (intending) and a mental omission (failing to form an intention).¹⁰ Which mental item—the action or the omission—is best suited to play the role of cause of my omission (i.e., my failure to jump in the pond)?

The thing to consider, according to Sartorio, is which of the two candidates appears to do more causal work. We'll recall that in the case of *Pond*, the action I actually performed (doing yoga) was one, among several, possible actions I might have performed at the time I otherwise would have been jumping in the pond. There are numerous alternative actions, any of which could have been performed, and which, had I performed them, would have had the consequence that I omitted to jump in. Indeed, the action I in fact performed hardly seems relevant to the child's drowning *except* that it happens to be what I was doing at the time that I was not jumping in.¹¹ So it is my failing to jump in (i.e., my omission) that is relevant to the child's drowning. It is because I didn't jump in that the child drowned. The correct answer to our question about which thing—the action or the omission—does more causal work in the case of *Pond* is that it is my failing to jump in, rather than my doing yoga, that causes the child's drowning.¹²

Sartorio contends that something analogous can be said about the mental case. My deciding not to jump in is incidental to my failing to jump in. Indeed, it is relevant only to the extent that deciding not to jump in is a mental action

¹⁰ Note that I can fail to form an intention intentionally or not.

¹¹ This is somewhat misleading. My doing yoga is, we are supposing, what I was actually doing at the relevant time. So, it is not irrelevant. The point is that it is unintuitive to suggest that my doing yoga was a cause of the child's death, when what the numerous possible actions I might have performed all have in common is that they are instances of failing to jump in. What's important about all these possibilities, including my doing yoga, is that no matter which positive action I perform, that action is relevant to the child's drowning only if by performing it, I omit to jump in.

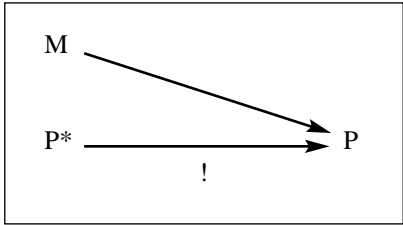
¹² That is, assuming that indeed one of the two causes the child's drowning. This is an assumption I will later deny.

one might perform while failing to decide to jump in. As it turns out, there are numerous additional ways to fail to decide to jump in the pond. I might have continued to deliberate, or become involved in some other task, or otherwise mentally distracted myself in such a way that had the consequence that I refrained from making the decision I in fact made. Had any of these mental activities occurred, it would still be true that I failed to make the decision to jump in. And it's in virtue of this—so the thinking goes—that my mental omission, rather than my mental action, is the cause of my (extra-mental) omission.

Sartorio believes that all of this gives rise to an exclusion argument for CTA. Once the mental omission is granted causal efficacy in bringing about the extra-mental omission, we are forced to wonder what causal work is left for the mental action (in this case, the intention not to jump in) to do. To what extent is the problem characterized here an *exclusion* argument? To answer this, consider Jaegwon Kim's well-known exclusion argument against nonreductive physicalism, after which Sartorio's own exclusion argument is fashioned (or, in any case, inspired). In Kim's argument, the causal closure of the physical guarantees a physical cause (which yields a complete causal explanation) for every physical effect, with the result that allowing for the causal efficacy of irreducible mental events gives rise to widespread overdetermination. For our purposes, it will suffice to understand the causal closure of the physical in the following way:

Physical Causal Closure (PCC) For any physical event *p*, if *p* has a cause at *t*, it has a physical cause at *t*.

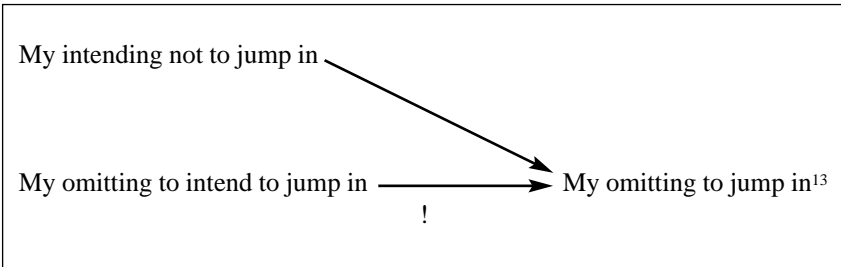
According to Nonreductive Physicalists, mental events/states can be causes of physical (brain) events/states. However, if PCC is true, then every physical event P allegedly caused by a mental event/state M will also have a physical cause P*. So, the picture (made quite familiar by Kim) looks like this (where “!” indicates causal efficacy):



If the physical is causally closed, and widespread overdetermination is implausible, then the question arises: Just what causal work remains to be done on the part of the mental? Kim's conclusion is that if the mental is not reducible to the physical, the mental would seem to be epiphenomenal.

Now, Sartorio's exclusion problem for omissions does not allege that the mental is generally causally inefficacious. Her claim is that in the case of omis-

sions, there arises a question about which (of two possible candidates) is properly thought to be the cause of the omission. Importantly, there is no principle analogous to PCC. Instead, the argument rests on an analogy between bodily acts and mental acts—or more accurately, between the causal role played by extra-mental omissions and the analogous role played by mental omissions. In other words, we begin with a case like *Pond* and propose that what caused the child’s drowning was my failing to jump in, rather than my doing yoga on the shore. Once we concede that my failing to jump in caused the child’s death, there appears to remain no causal work to be done by my doing yoga. Analogously, we notice that there are two candidates for the cause of my omission to jump into the pond. One candidate is my intention not to jump in. The other is my failure to form an intention to jump in. Now, if the correct answer in the extra-mental case was that the proper cause of the child’s drowning is my omitting to jump in, rather than my doing yoga, then (by analogy) the proper cause of my omitting to jump in, is my failing to intend to jump in, rather than my intending not to jump in. The picture Sartorio envisages is this:



The argument suggests that my causal relationship to the drowning child is negative throughout. The child’s drowning was caused by my failure to jump in, and my failure to jump in was caused by my failure to intend to jump in.

The challenge for the causal theorist can now be brought into view. If Sartorio is correct that in cases like the one under consideration, extra-mental omissions are caused by mental omissions, then given its claim that intentional actions are caused by certain positive mental items—a belief/desire pair, or an intention—CTA fails to account for intentional omissions—or in any case, it fails to account for them in the way it accounts for intentional actions. And yet, intentional omissions like my failing to jump in the pond seem to fall under a proper subclass of intentional behavior. So, CTA is inadequate (or else highly disjunctive).

Randolph Clarke (2010a) objects that in the case where my omitting to form the intention to jump in the pond causes my failure to jump in, the bodily omission (my not jumping in) is not intentional.¹⁴ I agree. Roughly, the reason for thinking a positive intention is required is that we may rightly ask how it is (i.e., in virtue of what it is the case) that my omitting to jump in is intentional if there is no intention not to do so. Now, one might allow that in the case in

¹³ Note that the “→” here is a causal arrow.

¹⁴ The discussion continues in Clarke (2010b) and Sartorio (2010).

which my failure to form the relevant intention causes my omitting to jump in, the extra-mental omission is intentional so long as I have formed some positive intention (perhaps somewhere farther back in the chain). Perhaps I form an intention not to intend to jump in and I thereby don't intend to jump in, which ultimately results in my not jumping in. There would appear to be no reason to suppose that the immediate causal antecedent of my not jumping must itself be intentional if my not jumping in is intentional. However, if the extra-mental omission is itself intentional, then it will have to have received that status from some causally efficacious intention somewhere in its (not too distant) causal history.

Sartorio insists that my failing to jump in is intentional even when no intention is present (Sartorio 2010, 158). But it seems to me this can't be right. To see why, it will be necessary to appreciate the role that reasons play on a view like CTA. A good place to start is to revisit Davidson's emphasis on the agent's psychological situation in cases in which she behaves intentionally.¹⁵

According to Davidson, when one comes to know an agent's reason(s) for performing an action *a*, one comes to understand what it was that the agent took *a*-ing to have going for it such that she performed *a*. Davidson says, "A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action" (Davidson 2001, 3). Properly identifying the agent's reason(s) for acting affords an answer to the question of why the agent acted as she did. In other words, human actions are generally rationalizable. They are the sorts of things generally done for reasons.¹⁶ Indeed, knowing the reason for which an agent acts not only informs one of why she so acted, but it also conveys *what* it is she did. In opening the door, I may be answering a knock at the door or checking the mail. When I tell you which it is, you not only know why I open the door, but you also understand what I'm doing (answering a knock at the door, say).

Suppose that when you ask me why I opened the door, I reply that I wanted to know who was there and that I believed that answering the door was a good way to find out. Sometimes I will be attending to these mental antecedents at the time that I act; other times I won't be (as when I walk a familiar path to work while thinking about an upcoming lecture). But even in the latter case, I can provide the relevant belief-desire pair when pressed. On the assumption that symmetry between actions and omissions is desirable,¹⁷ CTA will require that when I intentionally omit to jump in the pond, there will be some reason—

¹⁵ In what follows, I make use of Davidson's description of the causal antecedents of intentional behaviors as belief-desire pairs. For our purposes, this will be a natural way to speak. But everything I say can be said while replacing belief-desire pairs with intentions.

¹⁶ Similarly, Clarke (2010b) notes that Sartorio's account does not deal with the question of what it is to omit for reasons. If Sartorio concedes that when one omits to intend, she generally does so for a reason, her view will be "more thoroughly causalist, even if it still denies intentions any necessary causal role" (163). If she denies that omitting to intend requires having reasons for so omitting, it becomes appropriate to ask what it does require.

¹⁷ An assumption I'm inclined to deny since, on the view I favor, the two belong to distinct ontological categories.

a belief-desire pair—which caused, and rationally explains—my not jumping in. Interestingly, in the case of *Pond* that reason might not directly relate to the omission, but may instead reference the action in fact performed. So, perhaps I don't jump in because I *really* want to do yoga straightaway and I simply can't be persuaded to wait until after the rescue. Or perhaps I have a strong desire not to get wet, or not to expend the energy required, or not to be near a child (as well as the corresponding belief that not jumping in is a good way to satisfy the relevant desire). Now, the desires just mentioned are negative desires. But I don't see that much turns on this fact. After all, a negative desire may just be identical with some positive desire. (My desire not to get wet is identical with a desire to stay dry; my desire not to expend energy is identical to a desire to remain rested.) But even if some negative desires are not identical with any positive ones (as I suspect is the case), this will be of little matter since there's no reason to think that the relevant negative desire cannot be causally efficacious (note that Sartorio grants something like this in granting that a negative intention—my intending not to jump into the pond—can be causally efficacious). The reason that rationalizes my intentional action is, according to CTA, the reason which causes it.

Now imagine, however, that the cause of my omitting to jump in the pond is that I omitted to form the intention to jump in. Or to put it in Davidsonian terms, my omission is caused by my failing to have the relevant belief-desire pair. Are we therefore to conclude that there is nothing that I “saw” in not jumping in the pond? Was there no reason for which I omitted to jump in? If that's the case, then it is quite natural to infer that my omission is not intentional. Perhaps Sartorio will suggest that it was simply in virtue of wanting to do yoga that I omit to jump in the pond. But again, this won't do. While the desire to do yoga explains my doing yoga, it does not explain—or make rational—my omitting to jump in the pond unless I also recognized that jumping in would prevent me from satisfying my desire to do yoga (here and now) in which case it seems proper to attribute to me a general pro-attitude toward omitting to jump in the pond.¹⁸ And if indeed that pro-attitude explains my failure to jump in it does so, according to CTA, in virtue of being its cause.¹⁹

2 ACCOMMODATING OMISSIONS: SOME PROPOSALS

We have so far been allowing that omissions can be causes and effects. Indeed, Sartorio's argument explicitly allows for this. In my view, however, this is something we do well to deny. My reasons for thinking so will emerge shortly. But first I will consider some of the strategies that have been suggested for

¹⁸ Note that the desire to do yoga renders my doing yoga intentional, but it does not, by itself, render my omission intentional. Though it will, on Davidson's view, render it an action since an event is an action if it is intentional under some description.

¹⁹ One could of course insist on a noncausal theory of action explanation, but to do so at this juncture would seem unmotivated given that we've been allowing the causal story throughout (a central virtue of which—many of its advocates argue—is its ability to render both a theory of action and a theory of action explanation).

dealing with omissions, and show how each can be employed for use in a defense of CTA. I then explain why a causal theorist is nevertheless well-advised to avoid each.²⁰

2.1 EVERY OMISSION IS IDENTICAL WITH SOME POSITIVE ACTION

One way for the causal theorist to reply is to suggest that there is no distinctive problem of omissions for CTA because every omission is identical with whatever positive action the agent was performing at the time at which she omitted. It is the positive action, rather than the omission, that enters into causal relations in the way required by CTA. A causal understanding of *Pond* will maintain that:

Pond_{Causal}: My failing to jump into the pond caused the child to drown.

On the current proposal, an equally correct (and indeed more precise) description of *Pond* can be given in terms of *Yoga*, as follows:

Yoga_{Causal}: My doing yoga caused the child to drown.

This restatement is acceptable on the assumption that *Pond_{Causal}* contains a positive cause which is negatively described. The positive cause is then made explicit in *Yoga_{Causal}*. In other words, we can replace “my failing to jump in” with “my doing yoga on the shore,” and the outcome is materially equivalent. The consequence is that *Yoga_{Causal}* is an equally satisfactory (and perhaps more informative) description of what happened as is *Pond_{Causal}*.

In my view, this is not a promising move. Though it may be true of some omissions that they are positive events negatively described, it will not be true of all. *Pond* is a case in point. It is simply incorrect to suppose that “my failing to jump in at *t*” refers to the same event as “my doing yoga on the shore at *t*.” Notice that *Pond_{Causal}* can turn out true when substituted with any number of statements of the form “My doing action *a* caused the child to drown,” where *a* is any positive action that is not a jumping-in. *Yoga_{Causal}* offers one such substitution. But if instead of doing yoga I was jogging, or eating a sandwich, or reading a book, it would be these actions, rather than my doing yoga, that caused the child’s drowning. It’s not clear, then, that my doing yoga is identical to my failing to jump in. For I might have performed any number of positive actions at the time I would otherwise have been jumping in. Additionally, my omitting to jump in (if it has causal powers at all) has different causal powers than does my doing yoga on the shore. Doing yoga burns calories, omitting to jump in does not.

What’s more, there will be cases in which it’s not clear that the omission heralded as the cause of an event can properly be understood to be identical with

²⁰ The proposals I here consider are among those that have received detailed treatment in the literature. They notably exhaust neither the possibilities nor the views on offer.

any particular positive action on the part of the agent.²¹ *Pond* may be one such case. But if it doesn't manage to persuade, perhaps the following case (call it "Acknowledgement") will.

Acknowledgement: Cindy's omitting John's name from the list of acknowledgments in her new book made John angry.

What did Cindy do that accounts for John's anger? She left John's name off the list, of course. But such a response has the ring of a positive description of Cindy's omission rather than a negative description of something she actually did.²² Is her omission identical with her writing of the other names, or her momentarily staring into space, or her taking a coffee break from writing whereby John's name slipped from her mind? It's far from clear that it is. So it would seem incorrect to suppose that for every case in which an omission occurs, there is some positive action which is identical to the omission and which causes the relevant outcome (in this case, John's becoming angry).²³ The result is that any problems omissions pose cannot be explained away by simply identifying the omission with some positive action.

2.2 OMISSIONS FEATURE IN CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS

Perhaps omissions are not causes, but they nevertheless feature in causal explanations. Helen Beebe maintains that while omissions do not enter into causal relations, they do figure in causal *explanations*. Beebe claims that there is a distinction between causation, on the one hand, and causal explanation, on the other. That is, there are some causal explanations that are not reports of causation; some causal explanations in which the explanans does not stand to the explanandum as cause to effect. The distinction is borrowed from David Lewis.²⁴ Causation, for Lewis, is a matter of counterfactual dependence of events on further events. On his view of causal explanation, explaining an event involves providing information about the event's causal history. According to Lewis, "a causal history is a relational structure" which has "the structure of a

²¹ As Clarke (2010a, 159) points out, this may sometimes be the case as when the child's omitting to move during a game of hide-and-seek just is his holding still.

²² This line of thinking mirrors a discussion in Varzi (2007).

²³ A natural response here may be to suggest that while Cindy's omissions is not type-identical with any positive behavior of hers, it is token-identical with whichever positive behavior she was performing at the time at which she would have been including John's name. (Thanks to Alyssa Ney for bringing this to my attention). There are two problems with this response: (1) it doesn't help to explain why John's anger counterfactually depends on Cindy's omission, but not on, say, her writing of the other names. (2) It can't account for the apparent fact that Cindy's omission and her positive action have different causal powers. Her writing of the other names aggravates her carpal tunnel syndrome, but omitting John's name does not.

²⁴ Lewis (1986), "Postscripts to 'Causation.'" Interestingly, in his 1967 paper, "Causal Relations," Davidson argues for a distinction between causation and causal explanation by focusing on the logical form of causal statements. According to Davidson, causation is a two-place relation among events. However, the "because" in the causal explanation, "*e* because *c*," where *e* and *c* are facts (rather than events), is a sentential connective. A causal explanation cannot be a causal claim because, on Davidson's view, it lacks the right logical form.

tree”—as a particular event is “the culmination of countless distinct, converging [and diverging] causal chains” (Lewis 1986, 214–216). Importantly, this information need not be restricted to a mere citation of the event’s causes. There are ways to provide information about an event’s causal history, or so the thinking goes, such that something can be part of the explanation of an event’s occurrence without itself being a cause of the event. Consider, for example, the following three sentences, all of which are true:²⁵

- (1) Booth’s shot caused Lincoln’s death.
- (2) Lincoln died because Booth shot him.
- (3) Lincoln died because somebody shot him.

On Lewis’s view, only (1) is, strictly speaking, a causal truth. (2) and (3), on the other hand, are causal explanations. What makes (2) a distinctively *causal* explanation is that both the explanans and the explanandum are particular events which occurred and which are in fact causally related, and hence the statement provides causal information about the effect event. In the case of (3), the explanans does not report that any particular event has occurred since “*someone’s* shooting Lincoln” does not describe any one event, unless the event is disjunctive (i.e., unless the event were of Booth’s shooting or the security guard’s shooting or the lead actor’s shooting or . . . and so on). But, as Beebee points out, “there is no more such an event than there is an event of my-birthday-party-or-your-morning-bath” (Beebee 2004, 303). (3) tells us that some event or other was the cause of Lincoln’s death and that the cause involved a shooting by someone. But it does not pick out any particular event, and hence the explanans does not stand to the explanandum in the role of cause to effect. And yet (3) nevertheless counts as a true causal explanation because it provides information about the causal history of Lincoln’s death, namely, that it involved a shooting by someone.

The view extends to omissions in a natural way. Omissions are neither causes nor effects, but they feature in causal explanations. My omitting to jump in the pond is not a cause of the child’s death, but it does feature in a causal explanation of the death. In this way, the omission is relevant—causally relevant, even—to the drowning. A causal theorist may insist that this is just the story it seems right to tell.²⁶

While I see this as an improvement on the view that omissions are themselves causes, it seems to me that even Beebee’s approach places too much emphasis on the “causal” relevance of omissions. It’s not clear to me that it is correct to think of omissions as figuring in, or contributing to, causal explanations. That’s because it’s not clear that the information they relay is distinctive-

²⁵ These sentences are taken from Beebee (2004), except that in her sentences, the shooting victim is JFK.

²⁶ Since they seem not to be actions (which might be properly restricted to bodily movements or positive events generally). And yet, at the same time, it often *seems* like an omission is causally responsible for an event (as in the case of *Pond*). This strategy allows the causal theorist to deny that omissions are causes while simultaneously accounting for why it sometimes seems to us as though they are.

ly causal in nature. Something counts as a causal explanation (according to Beebe, and following Lewis) insofar as it provides information about the causal history of the event in question. But is it the case that my omission provides information about the drowning's *causal* history? It's not clear that it does. One reason it may seem to is that the child's death counterfactually depends on my omission. And yet it also counterfactually depends on Pope Benedict XVI's failure to jump in. But surely we don't want to say that Pope Benedict's failure properly features in a causal explanation of the child's death. And that's because Pope Benedict's omission was not a cause of the unfortunate event, nor was it part of the event's causal history. That being the case, it's not clear in what sense my omission serves either role. There are differences between mine and the pope's relationship to the child's death (differences I'll get to shortly), but it's not at all clear that those differences are *causal* in nature. And if they're not causal in nature, then we should wonder why my failure (but not the pope's) should figure in an explanation in terms of the *causal* history of the child's drowning. My refraining from jumping in no more explains (causally) the child's drowning than does Pope Benedict's failure to jump in.

2.3 SOME OMISSIONS ARE CAUSES AND CAUSATION CONTAINS A NORMATIVE COMPONENT

Finally, many have been convinced that some omissions are causes. We might say that common sense dictates that this is so. Recall, for example, Jonathan Schaffer's claim that causation by omission is pervasive. To accommodate the intuition that omissions are (at least sometimes) causes, Sarah McGrath (2005) radically revises the notion of causation. She argues that the following thesis, which she dubs, "*Dilemma*," is true:

Dilemma: Either there is no causation by omission, or there is far more than common sense says there is.

Common sense appears to dictate that some omissions are causes. But common sense is again violated if we suppose, as advocates of a counterfactual account of causation appear forced to, that there is a whole lot of causation by omission. That's because we will want to deny that Pope Benedict is also a cause of the child's drowning. The way to defend common sense against *Dilemma*, according to McGrath, is to acknowledge that causation has a normative component.

What McGrath suggests is that an analysis of causation by omission should include a notion of the "normal." She thinks the notion can be understood in a familiar way, and offers the following: "It is normal for x to ϕ iff x is *supposed* to ϕ ," where by "supposed to," McGrath intends to refer to certain imposed standards; standards which will vary from case to case (McGrath 2005, 138).²⁷ The standards will vary because the notion has very broad application, applying to the behavior of people, artifacts, and both biological and non-living systems.

²⁷ Importantly, "supposed to" is not a moral "supposed to" (though I suppose it will sometimes be that).

McGrath offers the following as examples:

People are supposed to keep their promises (it is normal for them to keep their promises); alarm clocks are supposed to ring at the set time (it is normal for them to ring at the set time); hearts are supposed to pump blood (it is normal for them to pump blood); the rain is supposed to come in April (it is normal for it to come in April) (McGrath 2005, 138)

“Normal,” in McGrath’s sense, is not a statistical notion of what is usual. Take the case of the alarm clock. There are certain standards governing what things like alarm clocks are supposed to do. If an alarm clock fails to ring at the set time, it violates these standards, and hence is malfunctioning. It needn’t be the case that most alarm clocks ring at the proper time for one that fails to do so to be malfunctioning.²⁸

Now, this all applies to causation by omission in the following way. My failing to jump into the pond is a cause of the child’s drowning if, and only if, there is some standard that is imposed by the situation relative to which, had the child’s death been prevented, it would have been normal for a jumping in by me to have prevented it. If McGrath is right, then we have a principled way of accounting for why, precisely, common sense is correct in judging my failure, but not the pope’s, to be a cause of the child’s drowning. However, the foregoing strikes me as far less a convincing account of *causation* (with the exception of the counterfactual component) than it is an account of some other type of salience that my omitting to jump in bears to the event of the child’s drowning. In fact, the supposition that the introduction of “normal” has captured some causal feature of the situation is, I think, based on a mistake. It is true that my jumping in (had it occurred) would (likely) have caused the child to survive. In that sense, my jumping in is, in McGrath’s language, a “would-be preventer” of the child’s death, and a “normal” one at that (or so I’m willing to concede).²⁹ The mistake occurs in thinking that it follows from this that my failing to jump in *causes* the child’s death. It simply does not follow, at least not in any obvious way. The inference which is simply assumed is this:

Inference: If x is a “normal, would-be preventer” of y , then the non-occurrence of x is a cause of y .

I have already conceded that I am causally related to the child’s drowning in the weak sense that my jumping in would putatively have resulted in the child’s survival—that is, I had it within my power to save him. And there are interesting things that follow from my being so related to the child’s death—most (if not all) of which are evaluative or normative in nature. What does not straight-

²⁸ Importantly, “supposed to” is not a moral “supposed to” (though I suppose it will sometimes be that).

²⁹ More precisely, when a particular sort of event *e/o* (e.g., a jumping into the pond by me) is such that its occurrence would have prevented a further event *e* (e.g., the child’s drowning), then *e/o* is a would-be preventer of *e*.

forwardly follow, however, is the claim that I (or, more accurately, my not jumping in) is a cause of his death.

3 OMISSIONS, CAUSATION, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

My own view is that we should resist the temptation to radically revise the notion of causation to accommodate causation by omission. But what about all the “to do” about common sense intuitions dictating that some omissions are causes? Let me offer a couple of reflections here. I think it particularly interesting that on any view of causation according to which causation is a relation among events, the theory will fail to match up with common sense (regarding omissions). Consider first a counterfactual theory of causation. It has the result that there are far more cases of causation by omission than common sense says there is. Indeed, it has the result that both my failing to jump in, and the pope’s failing to jump in, are causes of the child’s drowning. Common sense deems my failure, but not the pope’s, to be a cause. And “thicker” accounts arguably don’t fare any better. For example, on the view that causation involves production or generation, there will be far fewer cases of causation by omission than common sense says there are (since there will be none). That’s because such cases involve failings, refrainings, or absences—that is, items that are not capable of generating or producing other events (particularly if by production we mean something like energy transfer, or the like). If indeed there is good reason to doubt that such items are events, capable (on the model we’re considering) of entering into causal relations, any causal account which understands causation as a relation of *events* will fail to match up with what common sense says about causation by omission.

We could, of course, see this as grounds for denying the event model of causation and instead adopt a view according to which causation is a relation among other sorts of items: facts, perhaps, or aspects. But before we abandon an otherwise attractive metaphysical view, we should think more carefully about just how much we are warranted in staking on what we’re calling “commonsense” intuitions about causation by omission. What exactly are our intuitions latching on to when, on their basis, we make a determination about the status of a potential instance of causation? I find it unlikely that they’re latching on to any real feature of the world at the level of the metaphysics of causation. In fact, recent developments in experimental philosophy suggest that subjects sometimes judge the moral status of a person to be relevant to her status as a cause (Knobe and Fraser 2008). If this is true, then we should not be surprised if in general subjects presented with the case of *Pond* “intuit” that my omission is a cause of the child’s death given the moral facts of the case. And yet, few metaphysicians working in causation are inclined to assert, on this basis, that the truth conditions for causal claims contain a moral component.³⁰

It may be that what prompts us to deem some omissions causes is a view

³⁰ Helen Beebe (2004) also points to this as the general view of philosophers, at least among those working in the prevailing tradition of the metaphysics of causation.

about the tight link between causation and moral responsibility.³¹ Consider a proposal that McGrath considers (and rejects) along the way toward the view she endorses (described in section 2.3). The account is dubbed the “Moral Ought Proposal,” and maintains that an omission *o* is a cause of an event *e* just in case the agent *a* involved in *o* morally ought to have prevented *e*. Though McGrath ultimately rejects this proposal in light of its failure to provide a necessary condition for causation by omission, she nevertheless declares that it “might supply a *sufficient* condition for *o* to cause *e* . . .” (2005, 136). The suggestion seems to be that *a*’s bearing moral responsibility for *e* implies that *o* caused *e*. But this claim is motivated by a more general view about the connection between moral responsibility and causation. In McGrath’s words, “Causation and responsibility are linked, albeit in some hard to spell out way” (2005, 131). In fact, McGrath takes it that in the case in which both I and the pope fail to jump in to save the child, the fact that I, but not the pope, am responsible for the child’s drowning is a sign that unlike the pope, I was a cause of the child’s drowning. Indeed, she goes so far as to say that if we countenance neither as a cause—as I suggest we do—“this link [between causation and responsibility] disappears” (2005, 131). Indeed, it does (or in any case, it is weakened), but that is hardly a loss if our belief in so strong a link was mistaken in the first place.

4 AN OBJECTION

What I’ve said thus far may give rise to the following objection. If causation is not necessary for moral responsibility, then responsibility loses its status as a fundamental feature of the world, becoming instead no more than a normative notion of some sort. My response to this objection is twofold. First, it’s not clear that denying that causation is a necessary condition for responsibility has the result that responsibility is no longer a feature of the real world (as opposed to a feature of human functioning on a social level). After all, we might nevertheless maintain that moral responsibility requires something like libertarian free will. That is, in the case of both actions and omissions, one is properly held responsible only if she could have done otherwise. In the case of a positive action, the libertarian will typically spell out the ability to do otherwise in terms of its being within the agent’s power either to do *x* or to refrain from doing *x*. Refraining from doing *x* can often be satisfied in any number of ways. At base, then, if *x* is *stealing the car*, then I am free with respect to stealing the car at *t* just in case I can, at *t*, either steal it or refrain from stealing it.³²

³¹ Granted, this won’t be true of all omissions, or even of all intentional omissions, since plenty of omissions are either morally permissible (even praiseworthy) or morally neutral. It may be unwise to deliberately omit to lock the door upon leaving my office, but it’s not immoral. It may nevertheless be the case that omissions generally have some normative component or other.

³² More accurately, libertarians generally require the having of the ability to do otherwise at some time or other and not necessarily at the moment at which the agent acts (or immediately prior to the action). Thanks to Kevin Timpe for bringing this to my attention.

This suggests a ready way to extend libertarian freedom to cases of omission. Consider once more the case in which I fail to jump in the pond. My failure will count as free, according to the libertarian, just in case I could have, at the time in question, refrained from refraining from jumping in the pond. That is to say, my omission is free just in case I could have jumped in. If free will—of such a robust, metaphysically-charged variety—can hold of omissions as well as actions, then it is not clear that rejecting the necessity of causation for responsibility has the result that moral responsibility is without metaphysical underpinning.³³

Having said that, it's far from obvious that a libertarian account of freedom is tenable and it is certainly not my aim here to defend any such view. And that brings me to my second response to the objection. Suppose a view of moral responsibility which denies causation as a necessary condition does indeed lack a robust, metaphysical underpinning. How great a loss is this? If it is a loss, it's not at all clear to me what's been lost. After all, if what we discover is that moral responsibility belongs to the realm of the normative, it would seem a fitting place for it indeed! Notice that an alternative to this move is to make *causation* a normative notion. This is the move preferred by McGrath and others.³⁴ The motivation for doing so in McGrath's case is to preserve the intuition that my failure to jump in was a cause of the child's drowning. But, as I have suggested, this so-called intuition is little more than a philosopher's illusion. It is doubtful that there are such prephilosophical intuitions about the causal efficacy of omissions. What is far more plausible is that there are prephilosophical intuitions about when—that is, in which circumstances—it is appropriate to hold a person morally responsible for what she has done, or for what she has failed to do. If the options are to render either causation or moral responsibility to the realm of the normative, then we should favor the latter. Preserving the metaphysical status of causation is, after all, imperative if we care to preserve the critical role of the causal relation in the workings of the natural world, and if we wish to maintain a robust view of the agent's relation to that world.

5 CONCLUSION

What, then, is a causal theorist to do about omissions? First, she should maintain that causation, wherever it exists, is a relation among events. In other words, the advocate of CTA is wise not to forget a notable virtue of her view which places agents in the natural order by virtue of positing that when her intention to ϕ causes her action a , it's doing so is an instance of the very relation involved in natural cases of causation generally. Second, she should feel no compulsion (out of fear that saving her view requires it) to relegate omis-

³³ I suppose it could be suggested that libertarian free will itself requires causation. But this, I think, would be a mistake. After all, there are several incompatibilist philosophers of action who deny anything like a causal theory of action (e.g., Ginet 1990).

³⁴ Judith Jarvis Thomson (2003) has suggested something along similar lines.

sions to the world of being, claiming that they are events (say) of some sort.³⁵ The result, of course, will be that the story the causal theorist tells about intentional action will not be one and the same as the story she tells about intentional omissions. Perhaps we should find this problematic. But as Clarke has pointed out, if actions and omissions fail to belong to a single ontological category, the failure of a systematic account of all intentional behavior is not obvious reason for concern (Clarke 2010a, 172).

Once we've done this, it perhaps becomes necessary to explain why it is so very intuitive to offer explanations of certain events by invoking omissions, as when we explain the plant's dying by appealing to Susan's failure to water, and the child's drowning by appealing to my not jumping in. To put the matter another way, we think it correct to say that my failing to jump, but not the pope's failing to jump, caused the child's death. And now an answer as to why we think so presents itself. My failure is relevant to the child's death in a way that the pope's failure is not because of certain normative considerations that are relevant to me in this case, but not to the pope. In the case of *Pond*, what is true of me, but false of the pope, is that I am morally culpable for the child's drowning. And I am culpable because, among other things, I was in close proximity to the child at the time of his drowning, I knew that the child was in need of assistance, I possessed the ability to provide assistance, I knew that I possessed the relevant ability, and my failure neither prevented some more egregious state of affairs nor was it necessary to bring about a good that in some way outweighed the value of the child's life. The obtaining of each of these facts puts me, but not the pope, in the position of bearing moral responsibility for the child's drowning. Unlike the pope, it was morally obligatory that I jump in.

Notice that none of the features of my situation in virtue of which I bear moral responsibility put me in any obvious causal relationship with the child's drowning. My being in close proximity to the child did not cause the child to drown. Likewise, my knowing that the child was drowning, my ability to swim, and so on were not causes of the child's death nor in any way make me (or my failure) a cause of his death. What they do (jointly, anyway) is constitute (plausibly sufficient) conditions for my being morally obligated in that situation to jump in.³⁶ By not fulfilling my obligation, I am morally culpable for what happened to the child. I ought to have jumped in, but I didn't. I am morally responsible not in virtue of standing in a causal relation to the child's drowning, but instead in virtue of my position (physically, epistemically, and so on) with respect to the child's predicament. Given my knowledge of the situation, my proximity to the child, my ability to swim, etc., I *ought* to have jumped in. The

³⁵ Denying that omissions are events does not commit one to any particular view about what omissions are (if they are anything at all). Clarke suggests in several places that omissions are not positive entities of any kind, but are rather "absences." I'm sympathetic with this view, but unprepared to affirm the classification without a fuller explication of what it is to say of an item *x* that it is an "absence."

³⁶ Clarke (2011) offers his own list of sufficient conditions for an agent's being morally responsible for omitting to act. His set is distinct from the one I offer here (though I take them to be potentially complementary).

pope was not so obligated.

That said, I am causally related to the child's drowning in one sense. My physical proximity, ability to swim, knowledge of the child's predicament, etc. do put me in a position to save the child. That is, I have the causal power to save the child. Of course, it's a power I don't exercise on this occasion, but because it is within my power to save the child, my failing to do so (for no good reason) makes me properly subject to (severe) moral criticism. But that I am causally related in *this* sense does not imply that my failing to jump in was a cause of the child's death.

The upshot is that causation and moral responsibility come apart.³⁷ It is clear that causation does not imply moral responsibility. After all, I am not morally responsible for everything I cause. If I open a window intending to let in some fresh air, and a cloud of cigarette smoke enters the room causing you to suffer an asthma attack, I am not morally responsible for your asthmatic reaction if I didn't know, and had no reason to believe, that someone was smoking outside the room.³⁸ So, causation does not imply moral responsibility, nor are the two coextensive. But the question now before us is whether moral responsibility implies causation. As I've already argued, I think the answer to this question is no. And there are other cases which support the claim. If my dog digs in your flowerbeds, you will (rightly) hold me responsible. But it won't be because I caused the mess; nor will it be because you presume me to have caused the dog to make it. Moral responsibility does not imply causation because (allowing of course that there may be other reasons as well) one can be morally responsible for *x* in virtue of having omitted to prevent it, even though her omission didn't cause it.³⁹

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³⁷ Sartorio (2007) draws the same conclusion, but for different reasons.

³⁸ I'm presumably not responsible if I fail to know you have asthma, or that smoke aggravates asthma (or, I suppose, any number of relevant bits of information).

³⁹ For helpful discussions and/or comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I thank Ken Himma, Jaegwon Kim, Steve Layman, Patrick McDonald, Alyssa Ney, Carolina Sartorio, Ernest Sosa, Kevin Timpe, James Van Cleve, and an audience at Washington State University.

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