

## Absence of action

Randolph Clarke

Published online: 3 March 2012  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2012

When I raise my arm, my raising my arm is an event. When I stop at the store and buy milk, my doing so is a process. When I omit to raise my arm or to stop and buy milk, what, if anything, is my *not doing* these things? What, in general, are omissions to act?

Sometimes when someone refrains from doing a certain thing, the agent performs an action of preventing himself from so acting. A policeman might hold his arm at his side to keep from shooting a fleeing suspect.<sup>1</sup> But in many cases of omission there's no such action. When I forget to stop and buy milk, my omission seems to be, in the first place, an absence, the absence of an action by me of buying milk.<sup>2</sup> But what is an absence of an action?

Many things are absent from the world—many objects (unicorns), many states (perfect virtue), and many events (a World Series triumph by the Cubs in the last hundred years). If these things existed, they would be entities of various sorts. Are the absences of these things beings of some kind? If so, what kind of thing are they? Or are they nothing at all?

I favor the view that absences aren't beings of any sort: there's no entity that is an absence. If this is correct, then in many cases in which someone omits to act, there's nothing in the world that is the omission.

It isn't exactly common sense that the absence of a thing is itself a thing. And there are good reasons not to take absences as entities of any kind. Doing so would greatly proliferate beings. Think of all the objects, properties, events, etc. absent where you are right now! Further, admitting such things would generate difficulties

---

<sup>1</sup> The example is from Brand (1971, pp. 45–46).

<sup>2</sup> I don't mean to imply that omitting is the same thing as refraining, nor that every absence of action is an omission. In fact I believe neither of these things. I discuss differences between omitting and refraining, and in which cases an absence of action is an omission, in Clarke in press.

about individuation. Is Jane's lack of an iPhone her lack of an Apple smartphone?<sup>3</sup> Similarly, there would arise perplexities about where and when absences are located. Where and when is the lack of that Cubs' victory?

The fundamental difficulty, of course, would lie in saying what kind of thing an absence is. When it comes to absences of actions, the candidates that might be proposed are, I think, either ineligible or unappealing. I'll discuss several of them here, but I don't aim to give a detailed treatment of every possible proposal. My main goal is to render plausible the view that absences of actions aren't things of any sort.

Several considerations might be thought to count against this view. First, it seems that we can talk about omissions, and it might seem that we can distinguish them. I meant to stop and buy milk on the way home, and I meant to pick up the dry cleaning. I started thinking about omissions, and I omitted both things. It isn't the case that my omitting to get milk is my omitting to get the dry cleaning. If we've distinguished two omissions here, then each omission is something. And it might seem that we've referred to each of two omissions.

Second, it appears that omissions can have consequences, and that they can result from prior things. A child might die as a consequence of his parents' failure to take him to a doctor. The parents' omission might have resulted from their commitment to faith healing. What generates consequences in this way is, it might seem, a cause, and what results in this way might seem to be a causal effect. And we might think that any cause or effect is a causal relatum, and any relatum of any relation is a being of some sort.

Further, omitting is like acting in that we can omit intentionally and for reasons. Isn't something done for a reason an exercise of agency, and isn't any such exercise a thing of some kind? Finally, we can be blameworthy or praiseworthy for omitting; when we are, it seems, there's something for which we're responsible.

We should want to see whether these things are indeed so, and if they are, how that can be, if in many cases in which someone omits to act, there isn't anything at all that is the omission. This paper aims to lay the groundwork for an understanding of this sort.

## 1 Negatives as positives

It would be a neat solution if we could identify absences with some ordinary entities that uncontroversially exist. In the case of omissions, this solution is often unavailable.

There *are* some cases in which what is characterized as someone's not doing a certain thing is, very plausibly, that individual's performing an action of some sort. Imagine a child crouching behind a chair and holding still for several minutes while playing hide and seek.<sup>4</sup> The child's keeping her body still is an action. Her relatively unchanging position and posture is presumably caused by a pattern of motor signals

<sup>3</sup> The first and second points here are raised by Varzi (2006, p. 131).

<sup>4</sup> The example is from Mele (1997, p. 232), though he employs it for a different purpose.

sent to certain muscles, together with the inhibition of other motor signals, her balance maintained with fine adjustments made in response to feedback, all resulting from the child's intending to hold still. The disposition of her body during this interval constitutes an action precisely because it is so caused.

What is the child's not moving on this occasion? A good answer is that it is simply her act of holding still described differently, in terms of something it isn't (an instance of moving). We don't have here a negative entity, but rather an action under a negative description.

But few instances of omission lend themselves to this kind of treatment. In many cases a candidate action that one is performing will have causes or effects or other features that aren't attributable to the omission. Suppose that Al, having forgotten his plan to go for a stroll with Tom, accepts Sue's invitation to go jogging.<sup>5</sup> The invitation might be a cause of Al's jogging but not a cause of his not walking with Tom. And the jogging might be speedy; the not walking isn't.

Neither can we generally identify omissions with events actually occurring where and when the absent actions would have been, had they occurred. When I omit to buy milk on the way home, there might be others who do the same. What's actually going on in the grocery store at that time isn't identical with our omissions, for it isn't the case that our omissions are identical. And what's going on in the store might be a violent commotion; my omission isn't violent.

## 2 Facts

It might be suggested that absences are facts that certain things aren't present at certain places and times. Surely there are such facts. For there are many truths about what's not present at certain places and times. And for any truth that  $p$ , it's a fact that  $p$ .

Thus, since it's true that there isn't a hippo in the room right now, it's a fact that there isn't a hippo in the room. And since it's true that I'm not now hunting hippo, it's a fact that I'm not hunting hippo.

Facts of this sort are in no serious way things of a different kind from the facts that there's a desk in the room or that I'm now writing. On this conception, negative facts are entirely on a par with positive ones, and there's no less reason to affirm the former than there is to admit the latter.

However, negative facts of this sort aren't themselves absences. Such facts are simply truths. But absences aren't truths. Truths are true truthbearers, and many of them could have been false. Absences aren't true truthbearers; they aren't things that are true, and they aren't capable of being false.

There are numerous facts about who omits what when. Such facts can be of great importance, and we can be morally responsible for such things' being the case. We can have reasons for ensuring that such-and-such is the case, and we can intentionally do so. But, again, facts of this sort—truths about who omits what when—are poor candidates for what omissions are.

<sup>5</sup> I've adapted the example from Varzi (2006, p. 135), making changes to illustrate my points here.

### 3 Negative states of affairs

The world doesn't consist just of truths. It includes entities in virtue of which at least many of these truths are true, and most of these things aren't themselves truths. Entities in virtue of which truths are true are commonly called truthmakers.

If I stop on the way home and buy milk, I perform an action of buying milk. It's in virtue of the existence of my action and its social setting that it's true that I buy milk. The action and its setting serve as truthmaker for this truth.

When it's true that I omitted to buy milk on the way home, does this truth have a truthmaker? If so, is its truthmaker (or does its truthmaker include) some distinctly negative entity?

If there is such a truthmaker, something like my having earlier formed an intention to stop and get milk will be part of it. (My not stopping won't count as an omission unless something of this sort is so.) Is some negative entity—my not making the stop—included as well?

It's sometimes thought that truthmakers include states of affairs, things such as a certain electron's having spin-up or a sphere's being red. States of affairs, understood in this way, are in most cases mind- and language-independent entities that make up the world. (The exceptions would be states of affairs involving thinking or language use.) These things aren't truthbearers, they aren't themselves things capable of being true or false. States of affairs of this sort are importantly different from the facts that were considered in the preceding section.

We can ask: are there among states of affairs *of this kind* some that are metaphysically negative and serve as truthmakers for such truths as that I omitted to buy milk on the way home? Are there negative states of affairs ontologically on a par with the electron's having spin-up or the sphere's being red? Might such negative states of affairs be the absences that we have in many cases of omission? That would make these omissions *bona fide* beings, perhaps entities capable of entering into causal relations, of being done intentionally and for reasons, things for which we can be responsible, things that can matter.

Suppose that there are states of affairs of the sort characterized two paragraphs back. A certain sphere's being red might be said to have two constituents, the sphere and the property redness. The state of affairs is the sphere's instantiating redness, the sphere and redness tied together by instantiation.

If there are negative states of affairs on a par with this sort of entity, what might they be? Consider the sphere's not being made of wood. There are three main options for what this might consist of: the sphere and the property of being made of wood, tied together by non-instantiation<sup>6</sup>; the sphere and the property of not-being-made-of-wood, tied together by instantiation; and the sphere, the property of being made of wood, and some third, negative constituent, tied together by instantiation.<sup>7</sup>

Strange beasts. I can't show that there aren't any such things. I'll give my reasons for doubting that there are.

<sup>6</sup> Brownstein (1973) and Hochberg (1969) advance this sort of view.

<sup>7</sup> Beall (2000) and Priest (2000) propose views of this sort.

The first option, it seems to me, hypostatizes non-instantiation. When objects possess properties, the objects are genuinely tied in some way to those properties. When objects lack properties, they aren't so tied to them. It seems confused to think of this as their being tied to the properties in some different way.

Similarly, it seems, the second option mistakes the lack of a property for possession of a complement of it. Properties figuring in states of affairs of the kind under consideration are distinct from predicates, their meanings, or their extensions; such properties are mind- and language independent entities. Properties of this sort are commonly taken (by those who admit them) to be the grounds of objective resemblance and the bases of causal powers.

Must everything lacking spin-up—a spin-down electron, Operation Desert Storm, humility—be genuinely similar to all the others, and must they all share some common causal capacities? It seems to me that the applicability of the predicate 'doesn't have the property of spin-up' to them all requires neither of these things.<sup>8</sup> It requires that they don't have the property of spin-up, not that there's some property all of them have.

A recent version of the third option posits an additional constituent, a polarity, for every state of affairs, whether positive or negative (Beall 2000; Priest 2000). When the polarity is positive, we have a positive state of affairs (a sphere's being red); when it is negative, we have a negative state of affairs (a sphere's not being red).<sup>9</sup>

No doubt we can employ opposing signs in representations of, on the one hand, the sphere's being red and, on the other, a situation in which it isn't red. But do real states of affairs—bits of reality—include things corresponding to such signs?<sup>10</sup>

What are the polarities supposed to be? They are opposite variants of something; but opposite variants of what? The tie of instantiation is the same for both types of state of affairs, the object and property can be the same; what is the element on which they differ?

Proponents of this view suggest an analogy with physical polarities such as spin or flavor. But physical theories provide an understanding of spin, for example—as intrinsic angular momentum—in the context of which spin-up and spin-down can be

<sup>8</sup> Armstrong (1978, pp. 23–29) advances these reasons for rejecting negative properties.

<sup>9</sup> Priest says at one point that we needn't think of the polarities "as objects. They simply code the fact that there are two ways in which [a property] may relate to [an object], namely, positively or negatively" (2000, pp. 317–318). Stating the view this way suggests that it distinguishes two kinds of ties—instantiation and non-instantiation—that can each bind an object and a property into a state of affairs.

<sup>10</sup> Both Beall and Priest cite Barwise and Perry (1983) as a source of their view. Barwise and Perry take each "abstract situation" to include as a constituent 1 or 0: 1 if the object or objects instantiate the property or relation at the location in question, 0 if they don't.

But abstract situations are introduced as representations of what are called "real situations." The former are "abstract set-theoretic objects, built up from the individuals, properties, relations, and locations abstracted from real situations. They play no role in the causal order. People don't grasp them, see them, move them, or even know or believe them" (1983, p. 9). In contrast, real situations "are not sets, but parts of reality" (p. 58).

Barwise and Perry caution: "It is important...not to confuse real situations with their abstract counterparts" (1983, p. 58). When they list the things that make up real situations (7, 50), nothing corresponding to the 1- or 0-constituent of an abstract state of affairs appears in the list. What would it be?

"The numbers 0 and 1," Barwise and Perry say, "unlike the individuals [who partly make up real situations], are just tools we use to build up our system of classifying real situations" (1983, p. 8). They are, I take it, just constituents of representations of real situations.

comprehended as opposing variants of that kind of property, differing with regard to axis of rotation. We're offered no such understanding of what the two polarities of states of affairs are supposed to be variants of (Dodd 2007, pp. 390–391).

Positive states of affairs have no apparent need of this additional constituent; an object's instantiating a property seems to suffice to give us a complete entity. Attributing the further element of a polarity to it appears to be, besides unilluminating, unnecessary.

What most often motivates the admission of negative states of affairs of any of these sorts is the idea that negative truths need truthmakers. However, many negative truths need no such entities in order to have truthmakers, and such entities fail to provide truthmakers for many other negative truths.

The red sphere isn't green. Suppose, as seems to be the case, that it's impossible for the sphere to be both red and green. Then the sphere's instantiating redness suffices to make it true that the sphere isn't green. No further, negative, state of affairs is needed.<sup>11</sup>

Suppose there exists only one sphere, *a*. Imagine that, although a sphere can be made of wood, *a* isn't. Then it's true that there aren't any wooden spheres. Imagine, then, that there exists the negative state of affairs, *a*'s not being made of wood. This entity doesn't suffice to make it true that there aren't any wooden spheres, for there could coexist with it an additional sphere that's made of wood. Admitting negative states of affairs of this sort, then, doesn't give us truthmakers for claims that nothing of certain kinds exists.<sup>12</sup>

What are we to say, then, about the ontological ground of negative truths, such as that I didn't stop and get milk? Perhaps such truths are made true by positive things—if by nothing less, by the world as it is (Cheyne and Pigden 2006); or perhaps they're true because nothing exists that makes them false.<sup>13</sup> Since negative states of affairs of the sort we've considered seem a bad idea and in any case don't get the job done, these other options are worth pursuing.

## 4 Possibilia

Some philosophers believe that there exist non-actual possible entities. On this view, the things that exist include not only those that actually exist, but also those

<sup>11</sup> See Armstrong (2004, p. 62) and Mellor (1995, p. 164).

<sup>12</sup> Armstrong (2004, p. 59) makes a similar point. He posits "totality states of affairs" as truthmakers for truths such as (our imagined truth) that there are no wooden spheres. Such a totality might consist of positive states of affairs involving the sphere *a* together with the (higher-order) state of affairs of these being all the (lower-order) sphere-involving states of affairs. Totality states of affairs would be a kind of negative state of affairs, but none of the kinds we've considered here. They would, Armstrong says, give us limits but not absences.

Might omissions be said to be limits of this sort? One difficulty concerns wrongly identifying certain omissions. The totality state of affairs consisting of all that I did during a certain interval on a certain day (and the state of affairs of that being all that I did) isn't both my omitting to get the milk and my omitting to pick up the dry cleaning, for it isn't true that these omissions are identical.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis (1992, p. 216) suggests this sort of treatment of negative existentials, such as that there are no unicorns.

that don't actually but could exist. The latter are called *possibilia*. Might absences of things be *possibilia*?<sup>14</sup>

I'm myself reluctant to say that such things exist, but suppose they do. They're poor candidates for absences of actions in cases of omission.

If I omitted to pull weeds from the garden last month, there's no actual action of pulling weeds from the garden performed by me during that period. But possibly there are many such actions; I might have done it daily, and for more than one period per day. Which of these possible episodes of weed pulling is my omission? There isn't an omission for each one; in failing to do what I intended to do, I'm not guilty of that many omissions. And if what I intended was simply to pull weeds at least once, it seems wrong to identify my omission with the fusion of all these possible weed-pulling episodes.

More fundamentally, it's hard to see how what is possibly an action and actually nothing can be, either actually or possibly, an omission to act. The suggestion that it is seems to conflate the absent thing with the absence of that thing. Further, if the proposal were meant to account for the appearance that omissions are causal relata, it would seem to fail in this respect. For it does not seem that non-actual things can actually stand in causal relations to actual things (or, for that matter, to other non-actual things).

Similar objections would apply to the suggestion that omissions are uninstantiated act-types.<sup>15</sup> When I omit to stop and buy milk, the act-type stopping-and-buying-milk isn't instantiated by me. Of course, that act-type is instantiated on various occasions by various agents. But there's no doubt some fine-grained act-type that I fail to instantiate on that occasion and that no one ever instantiates. Might my omission be such a never-instantiated act-type?

Assuming that there exist never-instantiated act-types, there are many such fine-grained, never-instantiated act-types that I fail to instantiate when I omit to buy milk. There isn't an omission by me for each one of these, but which one is my omission? I didn't intend of any of them that I instantiate it.

Again, the proposal seems to conflate the thing absent with the absence of that thing—the thing not instantiated with its not being instantiated. And again, never-instantiated act-types would be poor candidates for causal relata.

## 5 Absences as *sui generis*

It might be suggested that absences are things of a *sui generis* kind, not any kind of event, state of affairs, *possibile*, or act-type, but simply...absences!<sup>16</sup>

Until more is said, it's hard to see what the idea comes to. We should want to know whether the beings in question are supposed to be concrete entities, located in space–time. (The question is pertinent even if absences are said to be an ontological

<sup>14</sup> In comments on this paper for the Bellingham meeting, Sara Bernstein suggested that what she calls failures—absences of things that could have or should have been—are *possibilia*.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Forrest proposed this view during the discussion at Bellingham.

<sup>16</sup> Several members of the Bellingham audience seemed to like this idea.

kind unto themselves.) If the proposal is meant to support the view that absences can be causal relata, then an affirmative answer seems preferable. But then questions arise about the locations of these things. Is the lack of that Cubs' triumph located where and when World Series finales have been played, or where the Cubs have been when those games were played, or where and when the Cubs *would* have won the Series, had they done so, or at all the places and times they *might* have done so, or in all of space–time causally downstream from Bennett Park on an October afternoon in 1908, or...? And if it's possible for there to be no space–time at all, where and when would the complete absence of space–time be? We should also want to know how absences (Jane's lack of an iPhone, and her lack of an Apple smartphone) are individuated, and whether, for example, every possible world contains an absence of each (possible and impossible) thing that doesn't exist in that world.

Perhaps decent answers to such questions can be provided. But if we can save the appearances to a satisfactory extent without committing to such a profligate ontology, we can set these worries aside.

## 6 Doing without things

Some writers take absences to be states or features of space–time regions—how those regions are—but not to be things, beings, or entities of any sort. “Absences of entities are not themselves entities” (Kukso 2006, p. 32); “non-being is not a form of being any more than being is a form of non-being” (Martin 1996, p. 64). It's nevertheless said that we must include absences in a comprehensive ontology; how the world is allegedly includes absences of beings as well as beings.

This is a puzzling view. It's accepted that there are regions of space–time, and if there are, these regions would be things, in a broad sense of the term. How something is—a state or feature of that thing—is a thing of some kind as well. Perhaps this view is a version of what we considered in the preceding section.

Let's set aside such proposals.<sup>17</sup> Can we do without entities as absences, in the case of omissions, at least?

We say various things that are apparently about omissions. And it seems that we often speak truly when we do so. How can this be so if there's nothing that we're talking about?

I sometimes omit to turn out the lights in my office when I leave. When I acknowledge this fact, what does it take for what I say to be true?

There must be some occasions when I omit to turn out the office lights. The occasions exist, as do I, the office, and the lights. We considered at the end of Sect. 3

<sup>17</sup> Another proposal is that omissions are things not identical with but constituted, at least in part, by the ways agents actually move their bodies at certain times (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, pp. 132–134). One difficulty for such a view lies in saying to what category of being these constituted entities belong. The constituting things are events, processes, or states of affairs; are the constituted things negative versions of one or another of these things? If so, my discussion in the text above bears on this view. A second kind of problem is that for many cases this view implies incorrect attributions of locations, times, causes, effects, and other features to omissions. I develop this criticism in Clarke (2011) and in press.

a couple of options concerning what, if anything, makes it true that on one or another of these occasions there isn't an action by me of turning out the lights. Neither requires the existence of something that is an absence.<sup>18</sup>

I might confess that my omission today to turn out the lights was the second such omission by me this month. How can this be so if there's nothing at all that is my omission today to turn out the lights?

In speaking about situations in which things are lacking, absent, or omitted, we often use the nouns 'lack', 'absence' and 'omission', apparently talking of lacks, absences, and omissions. Regarding the things we then say, a couple of alternatives present themselves. One is that the truth of such statements requires no entities that are lacks, absences, or omissions, but only that certain entities be lacking, absent, or omitted. A semantics of the sentences we utter or write when we say such things might support this suggestion; but I have no such theory to offer.

A second view is that, strictly speaking, what we say on such occasions isn't true. It isn't true that my omission today to turn out the lights was the second such omission by me this month, because the truth of such a statement would require that there exist something that is my omission, and there's no such thing. Still, there are readily available true replacements for such untrue things. In the case at hand, it's true that there are two distinct occasions this month, one of them today, on each of which I omitted to turn out the lights. Again, we've yet to see reason why there has to exist something that is an omission or an absence of any kind in order for this to be so.

On this second alternative, we speak loosely when make the untrue statements. It's often convenient and harmless to do so. And the true replacement statements are typically easily enough produced.

I'm inclined to think that the second alternative is overly concessive. But as I said, I'm not in a position to defend the first one. Still, for the sake of convenience, I'll continue to speak (apparently) about omissions, and absences generally, in the less cautious way, as I've done from the start. I'll indicate at several points what the replacement truths might be if these less cautious claims are strictly speaking untrue.

It's worth noting again that the risk of untruth doesn't arise for every occasion when we speak of someone's not doing, or refraining from doing, a certain thing. We can refer to the child's actively holding still while playing hide and seek as her not moving, or as her refraining from moving. 'The child's not moving' or 'her refraining from moving' can designate a real thing. That entity isn't negative; only the linguistic expression that we use to pick it out is negative.

How do we distinguish omissions, if there are no entities to be distinguished? There are, even if these entities aren't omissions. I omitted to buy milk, and I omitted to pick up the dry cleaning. I'm guilty here of two omissions, not one. If this statement is true, its truth comes to the facts that I was supposed to buy milk, and I was supposed to pick up the dry cleaning; I did neither; and the things I omitted are

<sup>18</sup> Varzi (2006, pp. 138–139) makes similar points, but his focus is on analyses of sentences we might affirm regarding omissions. My concern here is not with analysis or logical form of sentences but with what entities must exist if those sentences are to be true.

two distinct things. If what we say when we draw the distinction in terms of omissions isn't strictly true, then what I've just said identifies the replacement truths.

I've mentioned difficulties in saying where and when omissions are located, if they are taken to be things of some sort. Yet in many cases in which someone omits to do a certain thing, there evidently *is* some relevant place and time. Suppose, for example, that Ann promised to meet Bob at the airport at 2:30 AM and drive him home, but she omitted to do so. On the view I'm advancing, there may well be in such a case nothing that is Ann's omission and located at the airport (or anywhere else) at 2:30 (or anytime else). Rather, there isn't any action by Ann at 2:30 (and thenabouts) of going to the airport and driving Bob home. The time and place in question are some pertinent time and place at which there isn't such an action. The pertinent time and place are determined, in this case, by the promise that Ann made.

What of modifications—the properties or features—of omissions and refrainings? The child's not moving for several minutes while playing hide and seek is, we may suppose, difficult. No problem here if, as I've argued, her not moving is her act of holding still. That action has the property of being performed with difficulty.

But we can imagine that while she holds still the child also easily refrains from leaping up and shouting at her playmate. The child's not leaping and shouting isn't her act of holding still, for the former is easy while the latter is difficult. But now, if there's nothing that is her refraining from leaping and shouting, then there's nothing that has the property of being easily done. How, then, can it be truly said that the child's not leaping and shouting is easy?

The not leaping and shouting is an absence. So is the lack of difficulty in not leaping and shouting. Or better: it's not at all difficult for the child to refrain from leaping and shouting. There needn't be things that are absences in order for this to be so.

Can omissions matter if, in many cases, there isn't anything that is the omission? A lack of food is a grave problem. Or, if strictly speaking this isn't true (because there's nothing that is a lack of food), we have a grave problem when food is altogether lacking. It can be a fact that food is lacking, and that fact can be problematic, even if, unlike food, a lack of food isn't an entity of any sort.

It seems that a lack of food can result from a drought, and the lack might result in widespread hunger. (The latter possibility, of course, might be why the lack of food matters.) Likewise, it seems that omissions can result from prior things, and they can have consequences. Must we then count them as things of some sort?

## 7 Results

Of course, it's a matter of dispute whether absences can be causes and causal effects. I'll turn to that question in the next section. I'll try in this section to show that—at least loosely speaking—absences can result and have results even if no absences are causal effects or causes. If strictly speaking such things can't be so, things near enough to them can be.

While driving home, I started to think about a paper I was working on. As a result, I omitted to get the milk. In order for this to be so, must an omission have been caused by my thinking about my work?

I had earlier planned to stop for milk. While driving home, I began thinking about my work. My doing so caused my doing certain further things—including continuing to drive—that are incompatible with my stopping to get the milk. If I hadn't been thinking about my work, my having earlier planned to get milk would have caused me to stop and get it.<sup>19</sup>

This is a story about actual and would-be causal processes—processes that did or would have occurred—involving only ordinary or “positive” events. Given this pattern of actual and would-be causation, it can be truly said that as a result of thinking about my work, I omitted to get milk, and that it resulted from my thinking about my work that I omitted to do that. If the less cautious way of speaking about such situations can yield statements that are strictly speaking true, then it can also be truly said that my omission resulted from my thinking about my work.

It might be proposed that such a pattern suffices for its being the case that my thinking of my work *caused* my not stopping for milk. Perhaps that's so; but suppose that it isn't. It seems that we can still truly make some of the indicated claims.

Outcomes caused by prior events result from those events. I've suggested that some outcomes can count as resulting even if they aren't causal effects. I grant that “resulting from” is commonly a causal notion.<sup>20</sup> But it doesn't follow that only causal effects result from things. Things that result can be of a variety of different categories, including objects, properties, events, situations, and facts. Not every such thing is a causal effect. It may well be that whenever anything of any of these categories results from something, there exist some relevant causal transactions in virtue of which this is so. But then, on the proposal I've offered, there are actual and would-be causal transactions in virtue of which it's true that it resulted from my thinking about my work that I omitted to stop and get milk.

Similarly, we can accept that (at least loosely speaking) omissions have consequences without thereby committing to the view that omissions are causes. Imagine that last Friday I got lost on my way to your house. I had decided to go there, and my so deciding initiated a causal process culminating in my losing my way. Shortly after I made my decision, you gave me directions. I didn't listen carefully. If I had, my doing so would have caused my finding my way to your house, and my deciding to go to your house wouldn't have caused my getting lost.<sup>21</sup>

Again, the story is about events as actual or would-be causes and effects. Given this pattern, we can truly say (at least) that as a result of not listening carefully to

---

<sup>19</sup> Dowe (2000, p. 132) and Lewis (2004, p. 285) make similar suggestions about apparent cases of causation of absences, though what I suggest here differs from both of their proposals. Dowe doesn't think that such apparent causation is genuine, while Lewis does.

<sup>20</sup> The causal notion isn't the only one. Philosophers fond of a view of the world as multi-leveled often take higher-level entities to result non-causally from lower-level things. And perhaps sums result from addition. But it isn't either of these notions that I'm employing here.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Dowe (2000, p. 136) and Lewis (2004, p. 284). Again, my suggestion here differs somewhat from both of theirs.

your directions, I got lost, and that my getting lost resulted from the fact that I didn't listen carefully. Less cautiously, we might say that my getting lost resulted from my failure to listen. We can truly say (at least the more cautious of) these things even if in this case there's no entity that is my omission and absences of things can't be causes.<sup>22</sup>

In a similar fashion, omitting can result from omitting. I didn't make myself a reminder to stop and get the milk; as a result, I didn't get it. If I had made the reminder, my doing so would have caused my stopping for milk. And omitting can similarly figure as an intermediary, as when my starting to think about my work results in my becoming perturbed when I find that I've arrived home without the milk.

## 8 Causation

Do we have causation of or by absences in such cases? Favoring an affirmative answer is the fact that we commonly make and accept such claims as that someone's failure to make himself a reminder caused his omitting to do something he'd planned to do.

Several writers point out that absences satisfy many of the connotations of causation (Mellor 2004, p. 309; Schaffer 2004, p. 198). They can be relevant to the probabilities of outcomes, and antecedent conditions (conditions antecedent to some pertinent time at which a certain thing is absent) can be relevant to the likelihood of an absence. They provide evidence for predicting outcomes and for retrodicting antecedents. They often explain outcomes and can be explained by antecedents. Outcomes can counterfactually depend on absences, which can counterfactually depend on prior conditions. Absences can be means to ensuring outcomes, and prior events can be means to ensuring absences.

However, if there is absence causation, there would seem to be vastly more of it than we commonly accept (Beebe 2004). Each of you, my readers, didn't remind me to get the milk. My not getting it counterfactually depended on each one's not reminding me, which, given my own forgetfulness and everyone else's not reminding me, could serve as a means to ensuring my omission. That I omitted to get the milk is evidence that you didn't remind me. But we'd likely deny that my omission was caused by any of these absences.

We might also have metaphysical qualms about admitting absence causation. Causes, it seems, are things with powers to cause. Instances of causation manifest such causal powers, the powers of things of one kind to produce things of another. But now, we might think, the genuine properties of things are what ground such causal powers. And if absences aren't things, then they aren't things with properties (or states of affairs or events consisting of things' possession of properties). It would

<sup>22</sup> Weinryb (1980) argues that omissions have no consequences. His argument relies on a claim that omissions cause nothing. But 'causal consequence' isn't pleonastic.

appear, then, that absences can't have causal powers, and they can't be causes or causal effects.

Suppose that, as this picture suggests, causal powers do indeed stem from genuine properties—the sort of mind- and language-independent real existents that were taken above (Sect. 3) to figure in real states of affairs. Laws of nature might then be resultants of the properties that exist, having their ontological ground in these properties. Things of one kind tend to cause things of another because of the causal powers grounded in the properties constituting these kinds.

Truths concerning would-be causation by events would be made true by actual conditions and laws—the presence of various objects with their properties and hence their causal capacities. It is because the conditions were of a certain sort, and because of the laws of nature, that it's true that if I hadn't been thinking about my work, my having earlier planned to get milk would have caused me to stop and get it.

Such truths concern more than what actually happens. They concern, as well, events that would have occurred had something that happened not occurred, events that would have been prevented had something that didn't happen occurred, and so forth.

Are the causal truths just the ones about the actual manifestations of causal powers, or do they include as well some additional facts reflecting patterns of actual and would-be causation, with the latter having their ground in laws and what's present in the situations in question?

Martin (1996, p. 64) introduced a distinction that we might find helpful here. Let us say that causally operative things are, in every instance, actual beings—property instances or the instantiation of properties or events or what have you. But causally relevant factors can include more. Absences are commonly causally relevant. Often when one event causes another, it does so only given that some would-be inhibitor is absent; the outcome would have been prevented, despite the presence of the cause, had some third factor been present. The exposure to the sun caused the sunburn; but it wouldn't have done so had the swimmer applied sun screen. The lack of sun screen—or the fact that it was lacking—is a causally relevant factor. The patterns of actual and would-be causation that we considered in the preceding section involve various causally relevant absences.

Writers who deny that absences are genuine causes (e.g., Armstrong (2004, pp. 63–66) and Dowe (2000, Chap. 6)) often recognize such patterns, and sometimes (as in Armstrong's case) even employ Martin's term with respect to the absences. The latter, they say, aren't real causes, even if they're causally relevant.

But once we've recognized the ground of truths concerning such patterns—the manifestation of causal powers, further actual conditions, and laws of nature—and once we've distinguished causally operative things from other factors that are causally relevant, why deny that any of the latter can be genuine causes and effects?

The dispute, at this point, looks to be a quarrel about how to use 'cause'. Suppose that we decide to settle the question with deference to the folk, and so that we don't have to reject a huge number of folk judgments about causation. It might seem that we will then surely accept absence causation.

But we've seen that things aren't quite that simple. Causally relevant absences include vastly many factors that would commonly be said not to be causes. Do we opt for far fewer causes than the folk accept or for far more?<sup>23</sup>

I have no firm conviction on this question. But, as I've suggested, it seems to me not to concern any deep metaphysical problem. Philosophers on both sides of it can agree on the underlying facts of causal operation and causal relevance.

There is a reason for remaining noncommittal, in an account of omitting to act, about absence causation. If we do accept it, which patterns of actual and would-be causation will be said to give us genuine causation? The answer will determine which omissions we recognize as causes of which effects, and which omissions are said to be effects of which causes. Even if we accept more absence causation than the folk recognize, we confront the question of which candidate instances to affirm. I don't see how to settle these questions without going a considerable way toward figuring out what causation is, or advancing a theory of causation. It would be preferable, in an obvious respect, to have an account of omissions that doesn't hinge on controversial claims about causation.

## 9 No relation?

Are we barred from admitting causation of and by omissions if we hold, as I've suggested, that in many cases in which someone omits to do a certain thing, there's nothing at all that is the omission? If causation is a relation, relating cause and effect, then in any instance of causation there must be something that is the cause and something that is the effect. An absence of action that isn't an entity of any kind would seem to be ineligible for causing or being caused.

We can admit such causation if we can deny that causation is in every instance a matter of something's standing in a relation—that of causation—to something else.<sup>24</sup> In some cases it certainly seems to be, as when a lightning strike causes a forest fire. Might there be cases in which it isn't?

My starting to think about my work caused (let's suppose) my coming to see a solution to a problem about which I'd been worrying. Perhaps it also caused me to omit to get the milk. In the first case, apparently, one thought stood in a causal relation to a second thought. If there's nothing that is my omitting to get the milk, then the second case isn't a matter of anything's standing in a causal relation to an omission. It is, instead, a matter of its resulting from my having a certain thought that I performed no action of a certain type. Such a fact, I've suggested, reflects a

<sup>23</sup> Some writers have proposed views of absence causation aimed at selecting some among the many causally relevant absences that might be said to be causes. McGrath (2005) and Thomson (2003) advance views on which absence causation has a normative dimension. I find this doubtful. Dowe (2010) suggests that we might apply Yablo's (1992, 1997) proportionality constraint to select which among various candidate absences to count as causes. However, as Dowe observes, the resulting view would commonly conflict with folk judgments about absence causation.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis (2004), in response to the problem of absence causation, denies that causation is always a matter of one thing standing in a causal relation to another, and Mellor (2004) rejects the view that causation is a relation.

pattern of actual and would-be causal relations, with the truths about the latter grounded in actual conditions and laws.

Can an intentional omission (or an instance of refraining) be a manifestation of agency if there's no entity that is an absence? Can we then be responsible for omissions? I haven't addressed these questions here, though the view advanced here provides the groundwork, I think, for an affirmative answer to both. Detailed responses to these questions are left for another occasion.<sup>25</sup>

**Acknowledgments** For helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper, I want to thank Kent Bach, Mark Balaguer, Sara Bernstein, John Heil, Stephen Kearns, Al Mele, Achille Varzi, and the audience at the 2011 Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference.

## References

- Armstrong, D. M. (1978). *Universals and scientific realism, Volume 2: A theory of universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Armstrong, D. M. (2004). *Truth and truthmakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barwise, J., & Perry, J. (1983). *Situations and attitudes*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Beall, J. C. (2000). On truthmakers for negative truths. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 78, 264–268.
- Beebe, H. (2004). Causing and nothingness. In J. Collins, N. Hal, & L. A. Paul (Eds.), *Causation and counterfactuals* (pp. 291–308). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brand, Myles. (1971). The language of not doing. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 8, 45–53.
- Brownstein, D. (1973). Negative exemplification. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 10, 43–50.
- Cheyne, C., & Pigden, C. (2006). Negative truths from positive facts. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84, 249–265.
- Clarke, R. (2010). Intentional omissions. *Nouûs*, 44, 158–177.
- Clarke, R. (2011). Omissions, responsibility, and symmetry. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 82, 594–624.
- Clarke, R. (in press). What is an omission? *Philosophical Issues*.
- Dodd, J. (2007). Negative truths and truthmaker principles. *Synthese*, 156, 383–401.
- Dowe, P. (2000). *Physical causation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dowe, P. (2010). Proportionality and omissions. *Analysis*, 70, 446–451.
- Fischer, J. M., & Ravizza, M. (1998). *Responsibility and control: A theory of moral responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hochberg, H. (1969). Negation and generality. *Nouûs*, 3, 325–343.
- Kukso, B. (2006). The reality of absences. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84, 21–37.
- Lewis, D. (1992). Critical notice of D. M. Armstrong's 'A combinatorial theory of possibility'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 70, 211–224.
- Lewis, D. (2004). Void and object. In J. Collins, N. Hall, & L. A. Paul (Eds.), *Causation and counterfactuals* (pp. 277–290). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Martin, C. B. (1996). How it is: Entities, absences and voids. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74, 57–65.
- McGrath, S. (2005). Causation by omission: A dilemma. *Philosophical Studies*, 123, 125–148.
- Mele, A. R. (1997). Agency and mental action. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 11, 231–249.
- Mellor, D. H. (1995). *The facts of causation*. London: Routledge.
- Mellor, D. H. (2004). For facts as causes and effects. In J. Collins, N. Hall, & L. A. Paul (Eds.), *Causation and counterfactuals* (pp. 309–323). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Priest, G. (2000). Truth and contradiction. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 50, 305–319.
- Schaffer, J. (2004). Causes need not be physically connected to their effects: The case for negative causation. In C. Hitchcock (Ed.), *Contemporary debates in philosophy of science* (pp. 197–216). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Thomson, J. J. (2003). Causation: Omissions. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66, 81–103.

<sup>25</sup> I've addressed the first of these questions in Clarke (2010) and the second in Clarke (2011).

- Varzi, A. C. (2006). The talk I was supposed to give.... In A. Bottani & R. Davies (Eds.), *Modes of existence: Papers in ontology and philosophical logic* (pp. 131–151). Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.
- Weinryb, E. (1980). Omissions and responsibility. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 30, 1–18.
- Yablo, S. (1992). Mental causation. *Philosophical Review*, 101, 245–280.
- Yablo, S. (1997). Wide causation. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 11, 251–281.