**Negative Agency**

Randolph Clarke

We perform actions of various kinds, and our doing so is an aspect of our agency. We also sometimes omit to act (to turn out the lights when we leave) or refrain from acting (from reaching for a chocolate), and these phenomena, too, are agential in important respects. Just as one can intentionally perform a certain action, acting for certain reasons when one does, so one can intentionally not do a certain thing, refraining for reasons from doing that thing. And just as one can be morally responsible for an action, and for things that result from it, so one can be morally responsible for omitting or refraining, and for things that result from it.

A comprehensive theory of agency should encompass omitting and refraining as well as acting. But there is reason to doubt that a theory can uniformly cover all of these phenomena.

To make the point, I focus here on widely held causal theories of action. Some of these take an action to count as such *because of how and by what it is caused*, others *because the action is itself a causing* of a certain kind. Some take the causation in question to be causation by *events* or *states*, others by *agents*.[[1]](#endnote-1) Despite the variety, causal theories commonly hold that what is caused, when one acts, is some event or state, usually including (if not entirely consisting of) some motion or position of one’s body (or part of one’s body). For example, when I type a sentence, my action might be a certain movement by me of my fingers, consisting of certain motions caused in a certain way, or consisting of a causing of such motions. The motions are said to be the action, or to partly constitute it, because of satisfaction of the causal requirement.

 But when I *refrain* from typing a sentence, my doing so is, it seems, partly a matter of there *not* existing any such movement by me. To apply a causal theory here, it appears, we would have to say that what is caused is an absence of a motion, the non-occurrence of a certain kind of event. And absences or non-occurrences, if they are things of any kind at all, seem to be rather different from bodily motions.

 Similarly, when I am responsible for results of my actions, commonly these are causal effects of my actions. In contrast, a result of my *omitting* to perform an action—to turn out the lights when I leave my office, say—seems to stem from an *absence* of any such action by me on that occasion. If we have causation here, it appears to be causation by a non-occurrence. The ontological category of the cause, it seems, differs from that of act particulars—it might be said to be that of merely possible things,[[2]](#endnote-2) or of abstract entities,[[3]](#endnote-3) or of beings that are in some way ontically negative[[4]](#endnote-4)—or we might hold that we have causation here even though there is nothing at all that is the cause (as Lewis [2004] suggests).[[5]](#endnote-5)

 Despite these appearances, some theorists maintain that a causal theory can uniformly apply to acting, omitting, and refraining. For, they claim, each omission and each instance of refraining can be identified with a garden-variety action. I argue here that this strategy often fails. We can nevertheless provide sufficient conditions for omitting or refraining without committing to exotic entities or questionable causal claims. The account of agency we are left with is less uniform than what might have been preferred, but diversity in the subject matter might preclude any more uniform theory.

1. **ACTIONS NEGATIVELY DESCRIBED**

There are cases of refraining in which an agent’s not doing a certain thing *is* arguably identical with the agent’s performing an action, one that can be understood in terms of a causal theory. A mime stands on a sidewalk, frozen in mid-gesture, for many minutes refraining from noticeably moving. Maintaining the pose requires exerting effort, making fine adjustments to muscle tension in response to careful self-monitoring. The mime is active in doing this; and with a causal theory assumed, we may take her act of holding still to be her continuing body posture, appropriately caused, or to be the causing of that posture. What is the mime’s intentionally not moving, her refraining from moving? There is a good case for saying that this is simply her act of holding the pose, now negatively described, in terms of something it is not.[[6]](#endnote-6) The refraining takes place when and where the act does, it is just as static and as difficult as the act is, and it has that act’s causal features—caused by all and only the things that cause the act and causing all and only the things that the act causes. In this case, commitment to a causal theory requires neither an admission of exotic kinds of being nor the acceptance of causation where there is nothing that is the causal effect.

 Causalists might hope that all omissions can be treated in this way, and some claim that they can. In defending ‘the standard story of action’—largely following Donald Davidson (1980a, 1980b)—Michael Smith maintains that each action is an event particular, a bodily movement, with a certain causal etiology. This claim ‘has to be interpreted so that any orientation of the body counts as a bodily movement’ (2010: 45-46); keeping still can count.[[7]](#endnote-7) Such a theory can provide ‘a story about actions in a quite general sense in which the distinction between actions and omissions is invisible’ (48). A causal theory of omissions, then, is a causal account of certain bodily motions that count as actions—and count as such for the same reason that any action counts as such (see also Payton 2018: 87).[[8]](#endnote-8)

 The appeal of identification as a general strategy is obvious. It promises a comprehensive theory of agency on which each action and omission is the same kind of thing—an event particular—something of a familiar ontological category and not ontically negative (although it may be described negatively). All such events count as agential for the same reason: they all satisfy, in the same way, the same causal requirement.

1. **UNWITTING OMISSIONS**

Before addressing Smith’s argument, consider cases of unintentional or unwitting omission. Sometimes one intends to do a certain thing at a certain time—stop and get milk on the way home, say—but forgets to do it. Or one has a policy of doing a certain kind of thing in certain circumstances—leave the pool pump running on nights when the temperature dips below freezing—but on some occasion one fails to follow it because one forgets or fails to notice that the relevant circumstances obtain. Sometimes there is something that one ought to do—send a thank you note—but one does not so much as think to do it. In all such cases, during the time when the thing in question is meant to be done, or when one ought to be doing it, one isn’t aware that one is omitting to do it. These are ‘unwitting omissions.’

 Unwitting omissions are failures to act. It is implausible that each such failure is itself an action. Further, at the time when the action was meant to be done, or ought to have been done, one might be performing no action at all; one might be sound asleep. Here, the strategy of identifying each omission with an action seems misguided.

 An identification theorist might reply by holding that each omission to act is (identical with) a bodily movement (broadly construed), without claiming further that each such movement is an action (Payton 2018). On this view, some unwitting omissions are said to be actions, and some not to be; it depends on what the agent is doing at the time at which she intended to be, or ought to be, doing what she omits. Indeed, some unwitting omissions will be said to have parts that are actions and parts that are not.

 This variant of the identification strategy fails to deliver what seemed most promising about the approach. Although unwitting omissions are identified with bodily movements, they are not agentive by satisfying a causal requirement, for they need not satisfy any such requirement. They are agentive only because they occur when the agents are not doing what they meant to do or ought to have done.

 Further, things that result from an omission need not be caused by bodily movements of the agent at the time when the omitted action was meant to be, or ought to have been, performed. Imagine a patient who died because a life-saving injection was not administered. The doctor who was supposed to give the injection was instead, at the crucial time, dining at a restaurant. There will be no counterfactual dependence of the death on the dining if, had the doctor’s act of dining not occurred, an act of her dancing would have. Indeed, (to adapt a point from Dowe [2009: 32]), it is possible for the doctor to have been sufficiently distant from the patient at the crucial time that the causal speed limit precludes causal influence on the death by her movements then. We might still count the death as a result of her omission.

 What are unwitting omissions, if we reject the identification strategy? We might hold that unwitting omissions are things of some sort, though not garden-variety bodily movements. They might be said to be mere *possibilia*, or abstracta, or ontically negative concrete entities. Alternatively, an unwitting omission might be said to be nothing at all (more carefully: although agents sometimes unwittingly omit to do this or that, there is no entity that is an unwitting omission).

 Compatibly with this last option, the following conditions appear to suffice for its being the case that an agent *S* unwittingly omits to *A* at time *t*:

 i) *S* ought to *A* at *t*;

 ii) *S* has the ability and opportunity to *A* at *t*;

 iii) *S* believes that she can *A* at *t*;

 iv) *S* does not *A* at *t*; and

 v) *S* is not aware that she does not *A* at *t*.

In this formulation, the relevant time *t* at which *S* omits to *A* is a time when *S* ought to *A*. It is not the time when something that is an omission by *S* occurs; there need be no such thing, and thus no time at which such a thing occurs.

 Cases of unwitting omission are varied, and in some, satisfaction of different sets of conditions suffices. For instance, one can unwittingly omit to do what one intended to do but wasn’t required to do.[[9]](#endnote-9) Still, the conditions seem to be jointly sufficient. By disjoining several sets of jointly sufficient conditions, we might state a condition both necessary and sufficient for unwitting omission. Our account would then be disjunctive, as would a comprehensive theory of agency incorporating it. But it remains to be seen whether taking unwitting omissions to be entities of some kind can yield greater uniformity.

1. **REFRAINING**

Even if the standard causal story is not applicable to unwitting omissions, it might be thought to be straightforwardly applicable to intentionally omitting or refraining. Smith, for one, argues so. Given a capacious notion on which keeping still can count as bodily movement, an intentional omission, he maintains, is a bodily movement with respect to which the agent has a certain know-how, and which is caused in the right way and rationalized by a certain desire-belief pair (2010: 45). For example, when an agent *S* decides not to take a chocolate and refrains from moving her arm toward the chocolate box, her act of refraining is ‘a bodily movement that she knows how to perform, where her knowledge how to perform that bodily movement is not explained by her knowledge how to do something else,’ (48-49), which movement has the indicated causal etiology.

 Smith speaks of whatever actual movement of *S*’s arm occurs as the *way* in which *S* refrains; the agent, he says, ‘has no alternative but to refrain from moving her arm in one of [the available] ways…. For the only way that [*S*] can keep her arm from moving toward the chocolate box is by ensuring that it is somewhere else’ (2010: 49).

 Imagine that *S*’s arms were hanging freely at her sides before she made her decision, and they remain hanging there freely when she decides and for some time thereafter. Likewise, the chocolates were sitting in the box before and remain there after the decision. Gravitational forces, with no help needed from *S*’s will, might suffice to keep both her arms and the chocolates in place. In both cases, all that *S* has to do is *not* do something (move her arms, move a chocolate). No *act* of keeping her arms from moving toward the chocolates is then required, any more than is an act of keeping the chocolates from moving toward her.[[10]](#endnote-10)

 Smith says that such an agent ‘clearly does exercise control over the way her body moves, because she makes sure that it doesn’t move toward the chocolate box’ (2010: 49). About a similar case, he says that the orientation of the agent’s body ‘is under [her] control in the sense of being sensitive to what [the agent] desire[s] and believe[s]’ (46). I agree with the latter claim. But the same can be said about the position of the chocolates. *S* can move them; their position is under her control, sensitive to what she desires and believes. But neither *S* nor any of her desires or beliefs are causing the chocolates’ remaining where they are. Their position is *under her control* even though she is not *controlling* it.

 The same can be said about motions of parts of our bodies. The rate of one’s breathing can be under one’s control, in that one can speed or slow it at will. The rate can be sensitive to whether one desires to alter it. But most of the time, one is not controlling the rate of one’s breathing. So it might be with the position of *S*’s arms when she refrains from taking a chocolate.

 It might be suggested that *S*’s *decision* not to reach for a chocolate is the action that is her refraining. But deciding not to do something isn’t refraining from doing it; having made the decision, one might change one’s mind or become distracted, failing to carry out the decision. And in any case, one can refrain from *A*-ing without having decided not to *A*. We make decisions when we face uncertainty about what to do; but intentions are sometimes acquired without any such uncertainty, as when one reaches for one’s keys on arriving at one’s office door in the morning. Intentions not to do this or that can be similarly acquired, as when one sees a snake on the path ahead and immediately comes to intend not to take another step. One might then intentionally not take another step, without having had to decide not to do so.

 Some cases are amenable to Smith’s approach. In what Bruce Vermazen (1985: 103) calls ‘displacement refraining,’ an agent performs one action to prevent herself from performing another. If *S* had doubted her self-control, she might have shoved her hands into her pockets, or grasped them tightly behind her back, to keep herself from reaching for a chocolate. It is crucial that in this kind of case, the agent conceives of the action she performs as something she does in order to prevent herself from performing the action from which she refrains.

 But intentionally not doing a certain thing, or refraining, does not always take this form. One does not always, when one refrains from *A*-ing, perform any action at all as a means to not *A*-ing. When one does not, although one exercises one’s capacity to do things intentionally, it is not clear that there need be anything at all that is an act of refraining.

 Suppose that on some occasion all of the following are true:

i) *S* has the ability and opportunity to *A* at *t*;

ii) *S* believes that she can *A* at *t*;

iii) shortly before and at *t*, *S* intends not to *A* at *t*;

iv) *S*’s so intending prevents her *A*-ing at *t* withoutundermining her control over whether she *A*-s then; and

v) *S* is aware at *t* that she is not *A*-ing then.

Consider whether we have here sufficient conditions for its being the case that *S* refrains from *A*-ing at *t*, that she intentionally does not *A* then.

 Prevention can be understood as what Phil Dowe (2001) calls quasi-causation of a non-occurrence. We have it if one’s coming to intend not to *A* causally interacts with an ongoing process—deliberation, for example—that, were it not for this interaction, would have culminated in one’s *A*-ing, and one does not then *A*. Such prevention *could* undermine one’s control over whether one *A*-s, as it would if, for example, it immediately and unexpectedly caused an episode of narcolepsy. But the prevention need not (and would not ordinarily) do this. One’s control over whether one *A*-s is retained if one remains able to change one’s mind and *A* at the relevant time.

 Again, it should be recognized that refraining is varied, and in some cases satisfaction of different sets of conditions will suffice. Commonly when we refrain from doing something, there is no process underway that will culminate in our doing that thing unless we come to intend not to. In many of these cases, one’s intention still plays an inhibitory role, diminishing motivation, preventing thoughts about doing the thing in question, or turning one’s attention to alternatives or to other matters altogether.[[11]](#endnote-11) Further, there are cases of intentionally not *A*-ing in which the relevant intention of the agent is not an intention not to *A*. (Reaching a fork in a path, I might intend to take the shorter left path and intentionally do so, realizing when I do that I am foregoing the pleasures of the scenery from the right path. It might then correctly be said that I intentionally do not take the right path.) And it is not necessary for intentionally not *A*-ing at *t* that one is aware at *t* that one is not *A*-ing then. (One can intentionally not attend a conference held on certain dates without being aware on those dates that one is not at the conference. Having earlier foregone making any arrangements to go, having foregone traveling to the conference location, and so forth, there is no need for one to be aware at the time of the meeting that one is skipping it.) But the goal was to identify sufficient conditions. If we’ve done that, we’ve done so without commitment to there being, when one intentionally omits or refrains, an action—or, indeed, anything at all—that is one’s intentional omission or one’s refraining.[[12]](#endnote-12)

 It is worth reflecting briefly on a more complicated case. The instances of refraining considered so far are *episodic*: there is some relatively brief interval of time that is the relevant time during which one intentionally does not *A*. Other instances are *periodic*: one refrains for years, or one resolves never again to do a certain thing, and one carries out that intention. For example, I’ve refrained from smoking for the past twenty years.

 Although my resolution not to smoke, when first formed, might have played an inhibitory role, and might have done the same on occasion since then, there is little that it needs to do nowadays—I’m never tempted—and nothing at all is needed from it during many stretches of time (when I’m asleep, for example). Still, it isn’t that I’ve refrained only on certain occasions when, say, cigarettes were on offer. If credit is due, then I get it for the whole period.

 It seems to me even less plausible in this kind of case (in comparison with episodic refraining) that there exists some concrete particular—some spatiotemporally located thing—or some fusion or set of such things that is my refraining for the past twenty years. Further, I find it unclear just what kind of causal story, if any, must be told about this kind of case. If there is one, it seems unlikely to follow closely the lines of a causal theory of action.

1. **DIFFERENCES**

Smith maintains that ‘the standard story aims to explain agency quite generally’ (2010: 48), encompassing omission as well as action. Taking such an aim for granted, some critics argue, against the standard story, that cases of omitting or refraining present stumbling blocks to, or undermine, such a theory.[[13]](#endnote-13)

 I suggest that the starting point of this debate is mistaken. Agency is diverse. A causal thesis might apply in one way to some agential phenomena, in another way to others, and perhaps not at all to yet others. It is, in the first instance, a thesis about action. But there are agential phenomena that are not actions. In cases of unwitting omission, there need be no action that the agent performs that is her omission. This might be so even in some cases of intentional omission or refraining. While the mime’s holding still, or an instance of displacement refraining, is an action, it is not clear that there need be any action that is one’s refraining when one refrains from reaching for a chocolate. Nor does it seem that there must be some action (or string of actions) that one performs that is one’s refraining when one refrains from smoking for twenty years.

 The phenomena, though not uniform, nevertheless form a decently coherent subject matter. Reasons for action bear on omitting and refraining as well as on acting. An episode of any of these can reflect an agent’s practical identity. Each can be attributable to one as an agent, justifying ethical evaluation, reactive attitudes, and overt responses, as can their results. We have a coherent practical interest in this variety of things.

 There are ontological and causal differences among these phenomena. Certainly we should strive to achieve theoretical unity where we can, but we should also recognize difference where it exists. A theory lacking a simple uniformity can nevertheless be illuminating, and that may be all that we can reasonably hope for in a comprehensive theory of agency.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**Notes**

1. Theorists who hold that the things that are actions count as such because of how and by what they are caused include Brand (1984), Davidson (1980a), Enç (2003), and Goldman (1980). Those taking actions to be causings (or bringings about) include Alvarez and Hyman (1998), Bach (1980), Dretske (1988: ch. 1), O’Connor (2000: ch. 3), and Steward (2012: 45). Although many in the latter group appeal to irreducible agent causation, Bach and Dretske do not. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bernstein maintains that omissions are non-actual possible events, although, as she sometimes states the view, it is that ‘an omission is a tripartite metaphysical entity comprised of an event at a possible world, an event at the actual world, and a counterpart relation between them’ (2014: 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The cause might be said to be a fact—the fact that I didn’t turn out the lights—with facts construed as what are stated by true sentences, statements, or propositions. Mellor (1995) takes all causes and effects to be facts of this kind. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Omissions might be seen as concrete negative states of affairs, where these are construed as instantiations of negative properties, as anti-instantiations of properties (Barker and Jago 2012; Brownstein 1973; Hochberg 1969), or as states of affairs with negative valence (Beall 2000; Priest 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A similar problem arises from the fact that actions (e.g., blocking relief convoys) can result in absences of things (food and medicine). Here, if we have causation, at first blush the effect (if it is anything at all) seems to be something other than an ordinary event. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Objects are commonly described in terms of properties that they lack; e.g., Eris may be said to be the most massive non-planet directly orbiting the Sun. So, the thought is, an action can be described as an instance of intentionally not moving. Here I agree with Davidson (1985), Schaffer (2012), and Varzi (2006; 2008), and disagree with Moore (2009: 438). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Davidson himself suggested that, for the purposes of his theory, the notion of a bodily movement must be generous enough ‘to encompass such “movements” as standing fast, and mental acts like deciding and computing’ (1980b: 49). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Davidson (1985) endorsed the identification of omissions with bodily movements in a limited range of cases, as have Clarke (2014: 21-28), Varzi (2006; 2008), and Vermazen (1985). Schaffer (2005) advances the identification strategy for absences more generally. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Condition (iii) might be more than is required. Perhaps lacking a belief that one cannot perform the action in question is enough. For discussion of a doxastic requirement on omission, see Clarke (2014: 94-95). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. As the case may be imagined, it is strikingly different from that of the mime: no continuing effort by *S*, no ongoing adjustments to muscle tension in response to self-monitoring, produces the continuing position of her arms; none are needed. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Shepherd (2014: 22-23) discusses similar roles of intentions not to do certain things. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Sartorio (2009) suggests that it suffices for intentionally omitting to *A* that an omission to *A* be caused by an intentional omission to intend to *A*. An omission to intend to *A* is intentional, she says, if one ‘voluntarily failed to form that intention, after deliberating about whether to do so, after considering reasons for and against doing so, etc.’ (523). However, failing to intend to *A* after deliberating about whether to do so doesn’t suffice to make the omission to intend intentional (one might simply have become distracted), and it is not explained what more might make an omission to intend voluntary. Further, as has been argued, one can intentionally omit to *A* without having deliberated about whether to *A*. For more on this point, see Clarke (2014: 69-70) and Shepherd (2014: 17-18). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, e.g., Hornsby (2004; 2010) and Sartorio (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For comments on a precursor to this chapter, thanks to Andrei Buckareff, Jonathan Payton, and participants at the workshop on Theories of Causation: Mental Causation, Negative Causation, and Other Challenges, Düsseldorf Center for Logic and Philosophy of Science, July 2017.

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**Further Reading**

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Clarke, R. (2014). *Omissions: Agency, Metaphysics, and Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press. The only book-length treatment of omitting and refraining, this work examines these phenomena from the perspectives of action theory, metaphysics, and moral responsibility.

Fischer, J. M. and Ravizza, M. (1998). *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 5 of this book advances a detailed account of responsibility for omissions, addressing as well some questions of the metaphysics of omission.

Sartorio, C. (2009). ‘Omissions and Causalism,’ *Noûs* 43: 513-30. Sartorio argues that a standard causal theory of action cannot be extended to cases of intentionally not doing a certain thing, for in these cases the absence of action is caused not by an intention to omit but by an omission to intend.

**Related Topics**

Agency and Causation

Agency, Events, and Processes

Intentional Agency

Agency and Responsibility [↑](#endnote-ref-14)