

Causalism and Intentional Omission<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT

It is natural to think that at root, agents are beings that act. Agents do more than this, however – agents omit to act. Sometimes agents do so intentionally. How should we understand intentional omission? Recent accounts of intentional omission have given causation a central theoretical role. The move is well-motivated. If some form of causalism about intentional omission can successfully exploit similarities between action and omission, it might inherit the broad support causalism about intentional action enjoys. In this paper I consider the prospects for causalism about intentional omission. I examine two recent proposals: one Carolina Sartorio (2009) defends, and one Randolph Clarke (2010a) defends. I argue these versions fail, and for a similar reason. Reflection on the function of intention for agency brings this reason to light, and motivates a novel causalism about intentional omission. On the account I go on to defend necessarily, an agent J intentionally omits to A only if an intention of J's with relevant content (or the intention's acquisition) causes in J a disposition not to A. Though the causal work done by intentions to omit differs in some cases from the causal work done by intentions to act, it turns out that causalism about intentional behavior (i.e., about action and omission) is viable.

**Keywords:** Intentional omission, Intentional action, Causalism, Action theory, Intention

## 1. Intentional omission and intentional action

Intentional omissions are exercises of agency. Most agree, for example, that we can intentionally omit for reasons, and that we can be morally responsible for intentionally omitting

to act. What is intentional omission? Although this question is complicated by controversy surrounding the nature of omission, a natural suggestion is that (at least initially) we work by analogy with intentional action, which is better understood. As exercises of agency, intentional omissions share important similarities with intentional actions. We intend to omit, for example. And sometimes executing an intention to omit requires a great deal of skill and effort. Working by analogy with intentional action seems to be a start.

If this suggestion is on track, motivation exists for pursuing a *causalist* account of intentional omission – that is, an account on which causation plays an essential role in a correct account of an omission’s intentionality. Causalist accounts of intentional action enjoy broad support (see Aguilar and Buckareff 2010). One might thus pursue a causalist account of intentional omission in hopes of unifying all intentional behavior under a causalist banner. Less ambitiously, one might pursue a causalist account of intentional omission in seeking to understand the scope of causalism about intentional behavior. Does a successful account of intentional action transmit to intentional omission, or are different resources required?

On causalist accounts of intentional action (e.g., Mele and Moser 1994), necessarily, agent-involving mental states and events non-deviantly cause an agent’s intentional action.<sup>2</sup> The paradigm mental state here is an intention, and the paradigm event is the acquisition of an intention.<sup>3</sup> Thus we get the following necessary condition on intentional action: necessarily, an agent J intentionally acts only if an intention relevant to the action (or the intention’s acquisition) non-deviantly causes the action. Working by strict analogy with intentional action, then, we might represent a causal condition for intentional omission as follows.

*Causal condition 1.* Necessarily, an agent J intentionally omits to A only if an intention relevant to the omission non-deviantly causes the omission.

Note that this is only a necessary condition. A full account of intentional omission will require other conditions, the development of which is well beyond the scope of the present paper.<sup>4</sup> Here I restrict reflection to the issue of causalism. As such, I am searching only for a successful necessary condition.

Note, further, this condition (and others I examine) arguably applies only to *intended* intentional omissions. Mirroring debates about intentional action (see Knobe 2003), it is arguable that some so-called side-effect omissions should be considered intentional. These are omissions that seem to result from other things agents do or omit to do. For example, Jack promises to water your plants, but goes skiing instead. Jack did not intend to omit to water your plants, but he did foresee that his going skiing would preclude his watering your plants. While it is arguable that Jack's omission was intentional, it is controversial whether any relevant intention of Jack's (e.g., to go skiing) non-deviantly caused this omission. It might be, then, that side-effect omissions fall outside the scope of *Causal condition 1*.

Although it is arguable that they are, whether such side-effects are best considered intentional is a matter of controversy – one beyond the scope of this paper. In what follows I consider only the prospects for causalism about intended intentional omission, frequently dropping the reference to “intended” for ease of exposition.

*Causal condition 1* is unobjectionable for a large number of intentional omissions. As Randolph Clarke (2010a) points out, some intentional omissions seem identical with (or redescrivable as) intentional actions. When a child holds still for several minutes – playing hide

and seek, or perhaps freeze tag – this holding still is arguably both an intentional action and an intentional omission.<sup>5</sup> As Clarke writes, “it requires the sending of a pattern of motor signals to certain muscles, perhaps the inhibition of other motor signals, the maintenance of balance, with fine adjustments made in response to feedback . . .” (2010a, 159). The child can plausibly have an intention not to move that, in this case, causally guides her action of holding still. So she might plausibly perform an intentional action, and at the same time and in the same way intentionally omit to move. In such a case, her intention not to move must non-deviantly cause her subsequent behavior, including her subsequent action, in order to render her omission intentional.<sup>6</sup>

But *Causal condition 1* founders on cases of intentional omission that are not identical with or redescribable as intentional actions.<sup>7</sup> These are cases that involve no specific activity on the agent’s part apart from her intending not to A. Diana takes a leisurely stroll by a pond. Suddenly Diana notices a child drowning. She deliberates for a brief moment about jumping in to save the child, forms an intention not to do so, and immediately resumes her stroll. It seems clear that Diana intentionally omits to save the child, but it is less clear whether we can give a causal explanation of her omission’s intentionality.

Here is one way we might do so. First, maintain that omissions are non-occurrences of a certain kind of event, namely, actions (Lewis 1987; Clarke 2012). Second, maintain that absences, including absences of action, can be causes and effects (Kukso 2006; Lewis 2004). Third, maintain that intentions to omit have relevant omissions among their effects. Fourth, maintain that the causal work of intentions here is explanatorily important for the intentionality of the omission in question.

Though this view is a possibility, there is motivation to avoid it. The third and fourth steps seem dubious – nothing besides an analogy with intentional action motivates the thought that the causal work of an intention to omit is uniquely explanatorily relevant to the intentionality of an omission. Given that actions are not absences, however, it seems that we should not take the analogy this far. And at any rate, strong arguments against absence causation exist (see Beebe 2004), rendering the second step problematic as well. Although nothing I say rules out this brand of causalism about intentional omission, in what follows I proceed under the assumption that this brand of causalism about intentional omission should be avoided if possible. As we will see, it turns out that it is avoidable.

Given the success of causalism about intentional action, there is motivation to develop some version of causalism about intentional omission. In the next two sections, I discuss two recent causalist accounts of intentional omission that attempt to give a causal explanation of cases like Diana's – cases of intentional omission not identical with or redescribable as intentional action. I argue both accounts fail. I go on to offer a novel causalist condition on such cases of intentional omission.

## **2. Sartorio's causalism**

Carolina Sartorio offers a causalist account of intentional omission that departs significantly from the spirit of causalism about intentional action. This is intentional: according to Sartorio, intentional omissions require a different type of causal account than do intentional actions. Instead of mental states (e.g., intentions) causing omissions, Sartorio argues it is *omissions to intend* that cause intentional omissions. As a result, Sartorio argues "causalism is

incomplete – or, at best, highly disjunctive – as a theory of what it is to behave intentionally” (2009, 513).

In the end I will agree with Sartorio that causalism about intentional *behavior* (i.e., about action and omission) is disjunctive (although not highly so). My reasons for thinking so are different, however. For as I will argue, Sartorio’s causal account of intentional omission fails.

By way of explicating her position, Sartorio presents the following case.

*Drowning Child.* A child is drowning in a nearby pond. I could jump in and save him. However, after deliberating about it for a bit, I choose not to jump in and to eat an ice cream instead. (2009, 514)

According to Sartorio, this is an intentional omission. In virtue of what is it so? One natural place to look is the agent’s mental states. The agent intended not to jump in. It seems this intention is in some way – perhaps in some causal way – responsible for the omission’s intentionality. Sartorio does not take this route, however. Instead, she offers an alternative causal account that makes no use of the intention not to jump in.

Sartorio’s account depends on an analogy between the cause of the child’s death and the cause of the intention not to jump in. According to Sartorio, eating ice cream is not a cause of the child’s death. However, not jumping in is a cause. Granted this, Sartorio argues for a similarity between the causal powers of the bodily and the mental items at issue. It is an omission (to jump in) that causes the child’s death. Similarly, it is an omission (to intend to jump in) that causes the omission to jump in: “I failed to jump in because of what I omitted to intend to do, not because

of what I intended to do. It seems, in fact, irrelevant that I actually formed the opposite intention: all that seems relevant is that I omitted to form the intention to jump in” (2009, 519).<sup>8</sup>

If it is an omission to intend that causes the omission, we might naturally wonder what renders the latter omission intentional. After all, an intentional action is intentional partially in virtue of a relevant *intention's* causal work. The relevant intention helps explain why the action is *intentional*.

Sartorio responds to this worry by insisting that the mental omission – the omission to intend to jump in – that causes the bodily omission is itself intentional. According to Sartorio, “I voluntarily failed to form that intention, after deliberating about whether to do so, after considering reasons for and against doing so, etc. And if I fail to jump in as a result of my *intentionally* omitting to intend to jump in, then, presumably, my failing to jump in is intentional too” (2009, 523).

This discussion suggests the following representation of Sartorio’s causal condition.

*Causal condition 2.* Necessarily, an agent J intentionally omits to A only if J’s intentional omission to intend to A caused her omission to A.

(In what follows I move frequently between talk of omissions to A and omissions to intend to A. With the reader in mind, then, I henceforth refer to omissions to intend to A as O1, and omissions to A as O2.)

There are at least two problems with *Causal condition 2*. First, assuming for the moment that O1 is intentional, it is unclear whether the intentionality of O1 can transmit to O2 in the way Sartorio envisions. What reasons do we have for thinking that the intentionality transmits?

Sartorio points out that in the example at hand, the agent considered reasons for and against her decision. But an omission is not intentional simply because one considers reasons for and against it. While watching basketball, I often think about whether I should get a beer from the fridge. Sometimes I get distracted and fail to settle the question. Thus, I omit to form an intention to get or to not get a beer. But, given that the question of whether I will get a beer remains open for me, it is wrong to judge that I intentionally omit to form this intention.

A bigger problem facing Sartorio's account is her response simply pushes the problem back a step. In virtue of what is O1 intentional? Sartorio points out that O1 was 'voluntary,' by which she must mean something distinct from intentional, on pain of circularity. In what sense is the omission voluntary? Perhaps it is voluntary because the agent in question had the ability to form the intention she omitted to form. If so, then Sartorio's point will be that O1 is intentional in virtue of its meeting some ability condition. But the possession of the ability to do other than what one does (or omits to do) is insufficient for – and seems explanatorily irrelevant to – the intentionality of any of one's actions or omissions. It thus remains unclear why we should accept Sartorio's stipulation that O1 – the omission to intend to A – is intentional.

Clarke (2010a; 2010b) presses similar criticisms. In response to Clarke, Sartorio (2010) asserts "surely, we can make sense of the concept of intentionally omitting to intend to act, and there seem to be some clear applications of such a concept" (158). As support, she contrasts "an agent who is unaware of the presence of the child in the water" with Diana, who "is fully aware of the presence of the child but still . . . decides not to save him and to continue to eat her ice cream on the shore" (2010, 158). The unaware agent is supposed to afford a clear example of a non-intentional omission to intend – Sartorio notes that "jumping in didn't even cross her mind"



(158). Diana is supposed to afford a clear example of an intentional omission to intend – Sartorio asks whether Diana’s omission to intend is intentional and answers: “Surely, it is” (158).

Sartorio’s restatement of her earlier judgment is unhelpful. As we have seen, whether the option to intend to jump in crosses an agent’s mind is insufficient for the intentionality of whatever the agent goes on to do, or to omit to do. Without any reason to think that O1 is intentional, we should reject Sartorio’s assertion that it is. And if O1 is not intentional, we have no reason to think that it does explanatory work regarding O2’s intentionality. Sartorio’s account of intentional omission fails.

### **3. Clarke’s causalism**

Randolph Clarke’s causalist account of intentional omission is designed to accommodate agnosticism about the view that omissions are absences and as such are neither causes nor effects. As such, it is less risky than Sartorio’s, and it is compatible with what seem to me to be plausible views on both the nature of omissions (they are absences: see Lewis 1987, Clarke 2012) and of the causal status of absences (they have none: see Beebe 2004). On Clarke’s view, an omission is intentional when an intention with relevant content<sup>9</sup> causes the agent’s subsequent thought or behavior in the right way, even if the intention does not cause the omission (2010a, 168-169). We can represent Clarke’s condition as follows.

*Causal condition 3.* Necessarily, an agent J intentionally omits to act only if an intention of J’s with relevant content (or the intention’s acquisition) non-deviantly causes J’s subsequent thought or behavior.<sup>10</sup>

Notice the non-deviance requirement *Causal condition 3* adopts differs from those found in accounts of intentional action. What an intention or its acquisition must cause is not the omission, but rather the agent's subsequent thought or behavior. Why think this is a plausible non-deviance requirement? Consider the following two cases of Clarke's, which I offer in paraphrased form.

*Appropriate.* Diana sees a child drowning, deliberates about what to do, and forms an intention not to jump in and save the child. This in turn causes her to wonder what to do next, and subsequently to form and execute an intention to walk over to get a better view of the drowning.

*Inappropriate.* Diana sees a child drowning, deliberates about what to do, and forms an intention not to jump in and save the child. At this point a chip, that has been implanted in Diana's brain, seizes control of her behavior, causing her to do whatever she does next.

According to Clarke, *Appropriate* is a case of intentional omission, and *Inappropriate* is not. Why not? According to Clarke, in cases like *Inappropriate*, "[Diana] doesn't intentionally omit to jump in, because her intention doesn't in any way influence her subsequent thought or action. It's pure happenstance that what [Diana] does accords in any way with her intention. For all her intention has to do with things, what she was caused to do might just as well have been to jump into the water and save the child" (2010a, 169).

In explicating the nature of his non-deviance requirement, Clarke links the *influence* of the intention and the *accord* of Diana's behavior with that intention. How are we to understand this link? Clarke complains that the accordance is *pure happenstance*. This suggests that Clarke

wants the intention to secure – to a degree above chance, at least – the accordance. Here are two ways an intention might do so.

First, an intention might do this by actively precluding competing action-plans. Some intentions to omit plausibly play this role. I intend to omit eating a second piece of cake, and I persist in not eating it in the face of urges, desires, and recurrent thoughts about alternate action-plans – plans involving my taking just one bite, for example. Plausibly my intention plays a causal role in my resistance to such competing action-plans. But it is doubtful that intentions to omit necessarily play this role. Suppose, fully satiated, I intend to omit eating any more cake today and then forget I did so. My intention need not preclude competing action-plans, for I may have no such plans.

In this connection, Clarke discusses a relevant case. It involves an agent who notices a freshly painted object with a DON'T TOUCH sign on it, acquires an intention not to touch the sign and does not touch it. Clarke judges he intentionally omits to touch it. According to Clarke,

I might remain standing where I am – within easy reach of the object – my arms hanging freely at my sides, whistling a tune . . . And having my arms at my sides during this period need not be any more an intentional action than it was before I read the instructions and came to intend not to touch the object. I might have no temptation that needs to be resisted, and I need not intentionally hold my arms at my sides. (2010a, 161)

In such cases, Clarke holds that the agent intentionally omits even when her intention actively precludes nothing.

Second, an intention might secure accordance if the intention is (at least partially) responsible for the agent's *retaining control* over subsequent thought or behavior (see Clarke 2010a, 170-171). After all, control is what Diana loses in *Inappropriate*. The problem with this suggestion is that it is difficult to believe that any of an agent's relevant mental states contribute essentially to her control over subsequent thought or behavior. An agent's control plausibly stems from much more than any one intention of the agent. Agents often change their minds, cancelling the work of one intention in favor of another without thereby losing control. It should be granted that some relevant intention *might* contribute to an agent's retention of control. But it is unclear how such a contribution would secure accordance between behavior and intention. Since the agent can remain in control while cancelling the relevant intention, the retention of control is not enough. To understand why the causal role of the intention is crucial, it seems we need to know more about the specific contribution the intention makes. But to say more would move us beyond Clarke's account.

Clarke lacks a plausible story regarding the nature of the non-deviant causation invoked in *Causal condition 3*. Without such a story, Clarke's account fails. For the fact that an intention causes subsequent thought or behavior in general bears no explanatory relevance for the type of intentional omission at issue.

#### **4. A novel causalism about intentional omission**

Although Sartorio's and Clarke's causalisms differ in significant ways, in my view both accounts share a central weakness. Reflection on the functions of intention for agency brings this weakness to light, and motivates a novel causalist view.

Proximal intentions – intentions to A *now* – typically initiate, sustain and guide action (Mele 1992). Distal intentions – intentions to A *later* – typically play roles in an agent’s deliberative or planning processes (Bratman 1987). Although these different types of intentions play different roles, they share an important commonality. The specific functions they perform are closely tied to their representational content. A proximal intention initiates, sustains and guides the action it does at least partially in virtue of its representational content. And a distal intention influences deliberation and planning in the way that it does at least partially in virtue of its representational content. This observation motivates the following explanatory condition for (intended) intentional action.

*Matching condition (action).* For any intended intentional action A, A is intentional in part because (a) A matches, to a suitable degree, the representational content of a relevant intention I, and (b) A’s doing so is explained in part by what I (or its acquisition) non-deviantly causes.

It seems to me that if we wish to maintain symmetry between intentional action and intentional omission, here is where to do it. Is a similar condition plausible for intentional omission?

*Matching condition (omission).* For any intended intentional omission O, O is intentional in part because (a) O matches, to a suitable degree, the representational content of a relevant intention I, and (b) O’s doing so is explained in part by what I (or its acquisition) non-deviantly causes.

I find *Matching condition (omission)* plausible. Jim intends to annoy his spouse by omitting to pick up milk at the store. Suppose that, for some reason, this quite pleases her instead (perhaps she picked milk up and hoped that Jim did not). Did Jim intentionally please his spouse? No. Why? Pleasing his spouse was not the content of Jim's intention. If Jim had intended to please his spouse by omitting to pick up the milk, the omission might have been intentional.

Cases like Jim's support half of *Matching condition (omission)*. What about (b) – is the intentionality of Jim's omission explained in part by what his intention (or its acquisition) causes? I think the answer is yes. Further reflection on the function of intentions not to A indicates why.

Consider: why would an agent form a distal or proximal intention not to A? The utility of forming a distal intention not to A is more obvious. Sometimes one wants to B, and one realizes that the best route to B-ing involves not A-ing. Sometimes one cannot finish a plan to B without deciding whether to A along the way, and so deciding not to A is the best way to finish one's plan. Sometimes A-ing seems particularly attractive, and one realizes that intending not to A is an effective way to avoid A-ing: thus one intends not to A. The usefulness of forming distal intentions in these ways is familiar from earlier discussions of practical reasoning (see Harman 1976). For distal intentions, it seems that intentions not to A play much the same functional roles as intentions to A.

Here we run into a problem. For distal intentions to A are not the intentions at issue in causalist accounts of intentional action. An agent might distally intend to A next week. But unless her distal intention is replaced by a *proximal* intention at the relevant time, she will not intentionally A. For the type of omission at issue, this is not the case. Kevin forms a distal

intention not to wake his wife up from her nap at 2 p.m., as he normally does. Then Kevin goes for a jog. When he returns at 2:30 p.m., his wife is awake, and angry. She accuses him – correctly, it seems – of intentionally omitting to wake her up. But there was no moment at which Kevin’s distal intention became a proximal intention. Thus, there is a disanalogy between distal intentions to A and distal intentions not to A.

There is also a disanalogy between proximal intentions to A and proximal intentions not to A. Proximal intentions to A typically function by initiating, sustaining and guiding action. When such intentions do their work non-deviantly, the actions they cause are intentional. This need not be the case for proximal intentions not to A. Suppose at 2:30, Kevin formed a proximal intention not to wake his wife up. Even though Kevin intentionally omits to wake his wife up, his intention does no specific initiating, guiding or sustaining work. Even if Kevin’s intention causes his next thought, which is about going for a jog, it need not cause this thought. It might as well have caused a thought about getting a beer from the refrigerator.

Why think Kevin’s distal or proximal intention had to do anything causal in order to render his omission intentional? The answer comes in the realization that for certain types of intentional omission – namely, those that require no specific initiating, guiding or sustaining work from a relevant intention – the function of the relevant distal or proximal intentions is similar in an important way. As a first pass, we might say that both types of intentions *dispose* agents not to do those things they intend not to do. By intending not to A (either now or later), agents create dispositions that tend to prevent them from A-ing (both now and later).

This first pass formulation is insufficient. For consider that fact that in many cases – namely, those cases in which A-ing is impossible or in which the question of whether to A never arises – agents are arguably disposed not to A by default. Presumably, if the intention’s causal

role is essential, it will be because the intention does more than backup an already existing disposition. So we need to know more about the disposition in question, and about its relationship to the intention not to A.<sup>11</sup> Saying much more, of course, threatens to raise a host of difficult issues: the literature on dispositions is as contentious as it is large. Fortunately, however, I need not take a stand on any particular analysis of disposition, nor on a number of issues relevant to the nature of dispositions (see endnote 12).<sup>12</sup>

In my view, the intention's causal work is essential to an omission's intentionality if the intention meets two criteria. First, the disposition the intention brings about should be coherently related to the general functions of intentions in behavior. Second, given relevant stimulus conditions, the manifestation of the disposition should bear coherent relationships to the intention that brought it about.

In order to motivate the first criteria, consider Kevin. He intends not to wake his wife up, at which point a wizard – who has been surreptitiously monitoring Kevin's mental life – decides to ensure that Kevin does not wake his wife up. If Kevin were to reconsider the question of whether to wake his wife up, or were to make attempts to do so, the wizard would intervene, such that Kevin's wife sleeps on. According to some, in this kind of case we should say that Kevin is disposed not to wake up his wife (see Choi 2008). Although this judgment is controversial (see Lewis 1997), the key point for present purposes is that outlandish causal sequences from intention to disposition will undermine the thought that the intention's causing the disposition is somehow necessary. The intention not to A should bring about the disposition not to A in a way that is coherently related to the general functions of intentions in behavior.

We can meet this requirement by requiring that the intention cause the disposition by making relevant changes in the agent's cognitive and motivational systems. Frequently, for



example, intentions cause relevant beliefs – the agent who intends not to A comes to believe she will not A – and these beliefs tend to promote the execution of the intention. One way they do so is by playing roles in the agent’s planning about what to do next. An agent who believes she will not A will make plans the execution of which preclude her A-ing. Further, the acquisition of an intention brings about changes in an agent’s motivational system. Intentions themselves encompass relevant motivation, such that an agent who intends not to A is motivated, in virtue of this intention, not to A. And intentions often bring about related motivational states. The intention not to A might cause a desire not to A by way of a standing desire to do what one intends (see Frankish 2004).

According to the second criteria, the disposition not to A should manifest itself in a coherent way in some relevant range of cases.<sup>13</sup> It is typical to explicate the nature of a disposition by specifying that disposition’s stimulus conditions and its particular manifestations. Consider, then, a set of cases S across in which an agent J intends not to A, and the question of whether to A becomes salient to J (e.g., it becomes apparent that A-ing would fulfill some goal or desire of J’s). J’s intention not to A disposes J not to A across S in the right way if and only if (a) the relevant changes to J’s cognitive and motivational systems or the persisting intention not to A manifest themselves in a coherent way and (b) in some of the cases, these changes or the persisting intention do causal work relevant to the fact that J does not A. Perhaps, for example, after briefly considering the question of whether to A, J rejects the possibility. Or perhaps J entertains the prospect of A-ing but forms an intention to B because J realizes this will keep her from A-ing – will allow her to more easily fulfill the intention not to A. I do not say that in the actual case the question of whether to A becomes salient – even if it does not, J can be disposed not to A in the right way. Nor do I say that in *every* such case (in the set of cases) J does not A.

Plausibly, in some cases J will realize that A-ing is preferable and will thus cancel the intention not to A, and proceed to A. Just as softly striking a fragile vase (and thus failing to break it) fails to falsify the fact that the vase is disposed to break if struck, J's A-ing in some relevant cases fails to falsify the fact that J was disposed not to A. What we need to secure the existence of the disposition is the possibility that in some cases in S the causal work of the intention not to A is responsible for the fact that J does not A.

The above discussion makes plausible the following causal condition on intentional omission.

*Causal condition 4.* Necessarily, an agent J intentionally omits to A only if an intention of J's with relevant content (or the intention's acquisition) non-deviantly causes in J a disposition not to A (where non-deviant causation here involves the intention's making changes to J's cognitive and motivational systems that are coherently related to the intention).

If this condition succeeds, then we have a viable causalism about intentional omission. Admittedly it departs from causalism about intentional action in a certain way. In section 2 I noted that I agreed with Sartorio's claim that a viable causalism about intentional behavior would be disjunctive. Here we see the nature of the disjunction. Unlike intended intentional actions, for intended intentional omissions, the intention need not cause the omission. Even so, the intention should do causal work in virtue of its representational content. *Causal condition 4* gets the nature of the causal work right.

At the beginning of this section I claimed that Sartorio's and Clarke's accounts shared a central weakness. With *Matching condition (omission)* and *Causal condition 4* on the table, we can see what it is. Both accounts run afoul of the matching condition, because both accounts mislocate the role of causation for intentional omission. Sartorio gives no essential role to intentions.<sup>14</sup> As a result, she lacks the resources to explain the intentionality of an intentional omission. Clarke gives a causal role to intentions, but does not specify any way in which what the intention causes contributes to the omission's intentionality. As a result, the causal work Clarke assigns to intentions is explanatorily unhinged from the intentional omissions in question.

*Causal condition 4* does not share these problems. This is some reason to find it promising. But there are a number of other reasons too. First, it is consistent with plausible views about the nature of omissions (they are absences) and about the causal status of absences (they have none).

Second, it better explains the difference between cases like *Appropriate* and *Inappropriate* than does Clarke's view (i.e., *Causal condition 3*). In so doing, it cashes in on Clarke's insight that the accord of Diana's behavior with her intention and the influence of the same intention should be linked in some way.

Suppose that Diana's intention worked normally in one case (*Appropriate*), and in another a chip in her brain prevented the intention from disposing her not to jump in (*Inappropriate*). It is clear that Diana intentionally omits in *Appropriate*, and clear that she does not intentionally omit in *Inappropriate*. And it is clear why: the causal work of the intention was precluded in *Inappropriate*.<sup>15</sup>

Third, this condition is sensitive to the disanalogy between the functional roles of proximal intentions to A and proximal intentions not to A. Unlike intentional actions, intentional

omissions do not require proximal intentions. But we do form proximal intentions not to A. Plausibly, we do so as an extension of the general usefulness of forming distal intentions not to A. For both types of intention not to A, the relevant causal work is the same. *Causal condition 4* maintains that for both types of intention, this causal work is of central importance to the intentionality of the omission in question. This condition explains why distal intentions not to A can render omissions intentional even if they never become proximal intentions not to A.

## 6. Conclusion

Causalism about intentional action enjoys wide support. If the arguments offered above are right, causalism about (intended) intentional omission should as well. This is so even if, as seems plausible, many omissions are best thought of as absences, and even if absences are neither causes nor effects. I have argued that the intentionality of a certain recalcitrant class of intentional omissions – namely, those not identical with or redescribable as intentional actions – is explained in part by the fact that an intention with relevant content does causal work that depends in an important sense on its representational content. In short, it is because an intention not to A disposes an agent not to A that the agent’s not A-ing is intentional.

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<sup>2</sup> Although I do not discuss causal deviance in detail here, it is the source of considerable controversy in action theory. For various attempts to account for the non-deviant causation of action, see Bishop (1989), Mele (1992), or Schlosser (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Philosophers differ on the exact relation between intention and intentional action. According to the Simple View, an agent cannot intentionally A unless she intends to A (McCann 1986). Another prominent view, the Single Phenomenon View, holds that in order to intentionally A an agent must execute *some* relevant intention, even if it is

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not an intention to A (Bratman 1984). On either view, the presence of an intention with relevant content is necessary for intentional action.

<sup>4</sup> Randolph Clarke's (2010a) enlightening discussion of the nature of intentional omission is suggestive of some such conditions. For example, it is plausible that agents who intentionally omit to A must not try to A during some relevant window of time (159). It is also plausible that agents who intentionally omit to A must be in some sense able to A – it seems I cannot intentionally omit to jump over the moon (163).

<sup>5</sup> As Clarke points out, the example is Alfred Mele's (1997, 232).

<sup>6</sup> This would be true if the child's not moving (an omission) were identical with her holding still (an action). These might be separable, however. For consider a case in which the child intends not to move – but does not intend to hold still – at which point alien rays paralyze her. It might be that the child no longer performs the intentional action of holding still, while still intentionally omitting to move. After all, the alien rays free her of the need to hold still, but they do not contradict her intention not to move.

<sup>7</sup> One type of intentional omission, which I do not focus on here, seems to essentially involve action. Sometimes we intend not to A by B-ing. Suppose Jerry intends not to grab Charlotte's hand by shoving his hands in his pockets. If Jerry's intention triggers a bout of uncontrollable shaking that renders Jerry unable to grab Charlotte's hand, does he intentionally omit to do so? It is arguable that he does not. In this case the deviant causation afflicting Jerry's hand seems relevant to whether or not he omits intentionally. I say so because the representational content of Jerry's intention included an action-plan that involved his shoving his hands in his pocket in a certain way. When Jerry deviates from this plan it is arguable that his omission loses its intentionality. It might be, then, that for certain intentions to omit to A by B-ing (where B-ing is an action), one's intention must suitably guide one in B-ing (where guidance is construed causally), if the omission is to be intentional.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Sartorio's point about the bodily items' causal relevance is much less intuitive when an agent possesses certain false beliefs. We can see this by imagining a case in which an agent believes that the child is playing, and intends not to jump in and play with her. In this case, the agent's omission is not obviously a cause of the child's death. If this is right, then we might worry that Sartorio's analogy stalls from the outset.

<sup>9</sup> What counts as relevant content? Here I follow Clarke in assuming that the notion of relevant content, like the concept of intentional omission itself, involves an amount of vagueness. Some examples might help nonetheless. One way an intention might be relevant to an omission to X is if the representational content of the intention is an action-plan that involves omitting to X. But this is not the only way for an intention to have relevant content. For consider Clarke's example of Charles, a smoker. Charles is not sure that he will be able to refrain from smoking for a week, and since it is plausible to hold that one cannot intend to A (or not to A) while also believing that one will probably not A (or fail not to A), it is plausible to hold that Charles does not intend not to smoke. But Charles can intend *to try* not to smoke, and if Charles succeeds, it seems he intentionally omits to smoke.

<sup>10</sup> Although Clarke does not formulate a causal condition in exactly this way, *Causal condition 3* seems a fair interpretation of what Clarke (2010a) says. For example, he argues that "Relevant mental states (or events) must cause the agent's subsequent thought or action, even if they needn't cause the absence of some action" (168). And later he argues for the importance of non-deviant causation: "It seems that in a case of intentional omission . . . an intention with relevant content must play an appropriate causal role with respect to what happens" (171).

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify my view in what follows.

<sup>12</sup> Among the issues I need not settle are the following: whether a satisfying analysis of dispositions can be offered; what form such an analysis should take (i.e., whether the Simple Conditional Analysis is satisfactory, or whether some more sophisticated analysis is necessary (see Choi 2008; Manley and Wasserman 2008)); whether some properties have dispositional essences or not (see Bird 2007); whether dispositional properties should be understood as exclusively extrinsic, or whether some are intrinsic properties of their bearers (see Handfield 2009); whether dispositional concepts are essential to, or dispensable by, a mature science (see Cartwright 2009). For an accessible introduction to these and related issues, see Choi and Fara 2012.

<sup>13</sup> We need not require that the disposition not to A *necessitate* the omission to A. It sometimes happens that agents intend to A and then fail to A – sometimes they try and fail, and other times they change their minds about A-ing. The same is plausibly true regarding intentions not to A.

<sup>14</sup> As an anonymous referee points out, Sartorio admits that some intention might need to exist in order to render the crucial omission to intend intentional (see Sartorio 2009, 523). However, Sartorio does not commit to this possibility. Further, she denies that an existing intention needs to cause anything in order to render an omission intentional.

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<sup>15</sup> Suppose the intention caused the disposition, and then the chip took over Diana's behavior. We might say that in such a case, even though the intention does the required causal work, Diana does not intentionally omit to jump in. (Insofar as there is some time during which Diana is properly disposed, and during which Diana does not jump in, I'm not convinced we should say this. But I grant it for present purposes.) Is this a problem for *Causal condition 4*? I think not: *Causal condition 4* is only a necessary condition. An analysis of intentional omission will require other conditions (perhaps a condition requiring the agent's retention of control, for example).