

Causation and Responsibility for Omissions

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Abstract: There is a persistently troublesome puzzle concerning the transmission of moral responsibility from actions and omissions to outcomes. On the one hand there are cases of action in which responsibility appears to transmit to an outcome despite the fact that the agent could not have prevented the outcome. On the other hand there are similar cases of omission in which responsibility *does not* appear to transmit to an outcome. One seemingly plausible solution to this puzzle is to posit an underlying *causal asymmetry* between the action cases and the omission cases. I argue that this solution fails. I then discuss John Martin Fischer's asymmetric account of responsibility for actions and omissions. I argue that his account does better than the causal account, but that a symmetric account on which alternative possibilities are always required for responsibility does better still.

Key words: moral responsibility, omissions, principle of alternative possibilities, Frankfurt cases

I: THE PUZZLE

Consider the following case:

Sharks: John is walking along the beach and sees a child drowning in the water. John believes that he could rescue the child without much effort. Due to his laziness, he decides not to attempt to rescue the child. The child drowns. Unbeknownst to John, there is a school of sharks hidden beneath the water. If John had jumped in and attempted to rescue the child, the sharks would have killed him and his rescue attempt would have been unsuccessful.¹

1. This case is drawn from Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 125.

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In **Sharks** it seems clear that John is not morally responsible for *the child's death*. His responsibility for *failing to jump into the water* does not lead us to judge that he is responsible for this outcome.

Now consider this case (structurally identical to a Frankfurt-style case):²

Hero: John sees a child drowning in the water and decides (without deliberating much) to rescue the child, and he successfully does so. Unbeknownst to John, a benevolent observer was monitoring his thoughts. If John had seriously considered refraining from rescuing the child, the observer would have caused him to immediately experience an irresistible (control undermining) urge to rescue the child.³

In Hero it seems that John *is* responsible for the survival of the child. But, just as in **Sharks**, there is nothing John could have done in order to prevent the outcome. Given this, our differing reactions to these two cases call for explanation.⁴

Perhaps the most initially promising explanation on offer is that the difference with regard to responsibility is underwritten by a causal difference. The idea is that in Hero John's actions cause the survival of the child. While in **Sharks** John's omission does not cause the death of the child. This causal asymmetry is then presented as the explanation of the difference with regard to responsibility.⁵ Let's call this explanation the **Causal Solution**.⁶ Here are the three key claims of the Causal Solution:

- (I) In **Sharks** neither John's omission nor anything else for which he is responsible causes the the death of the child.
- (II) In Hero John's actions cause the survival of the child.

And;

2. See Frankfurt 1969.

3. This case is drawn from Fischer and Ravizza 1991.

4. See Swenson 2015 for arguments that it is difficult to make sense of these differing reactions.

5. This sort of explanation has been defended by Sartorio (2005 and 2013) and also by Levy (2005). Levy deals with different (but structurally quite similar) examples. Cova (2017) gives a similar account which appeals to explanation rather than causation. I will argue against the causal account but I believe my argument could be modified in order to create trouble for Cova's account as well.

6. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) and Clarke (2011) present important purported solutions (distinct from the Causal Solution) which I cannot address here. I discuss these views in Swenson 2016.

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TR(Causal): An Agent's responsibility for X transmits to an outcome Y iff X causes Y (and the usual provisos obtain).⁷ ("the usual provisos" refers to cognitive requirements for responsibility)

These three claims underwrite the **Causal Solution**. I will argue that there are cases in which (i) an agent is responsible for an outcome and (ii) something the agent is responsible for causes the outcome just in case something John is responsible for also causes the child's death in **Sharks**. This will reveal that the conjunction of (I) and TR(Causal) is false: thus undermining the Causal Solution. I will then respond to two objections to my argument.

II: SETTING UP MY ARGUMENT AGAINST THE CAUSAL SOLUTION

Consider this case:

Self-Undermining Rescue: John is walking along the beach and sees a child drowning in the water. John believes that he could rescue the child without much effort. Due to his laziness, he decides not to attempt to rescue the child. The child drowns. Unbeknownst to John, if he had jumped into the water and begun swimming toward the child, it would have occurred to him that he was late for an appointment. John would have then freely (in the sense required for moral responsibility) decided to turn back to shore and he would not have rescued the child.

In **Self-Undermining Rescue** it seems that John *is* responsible for the child's death. After all, the only obstacles standing in the way of his rescuing the child are his own free choices. (His actual sequence choice to not jump into the water and the alternate sequence choice he would have made to turn back.) Denying that John is responsible for the death in **Self-Undermining Rescue** leads to very counterintuitive results. Consider this conversation:

A: "You promised to water my plants. So you're responsible for their deaths."

B: "Actually I'm not. If I had started driving to your house in order to water them, I would have (unbeknownst to me at the time) freely decided to turn back anyway. So my omitting to start driving does not render me responsible for the death of the plants."

Surely something is wrong with B's speech! B is responsible for the deaths of the plants and John is responsible for the death of the child.⁸

7. TR(Causal) was introduced by Sartorio 2005: 468.

8. One might worry that actualism, which maintains that what one should do now depends on what one would freely do in the future, is in tension with the claim that John is

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One might worry that I cannot build facts about what John would have freely done into **Self-Undermining Rescue**. (In my usage “A acted freely” means “A acted and possessed the sort of control necessary for moral responsibility.”) Incompatibilists say that if it is causally determined that an agent does X, then she does not freely do X. On incompatibilist accounts of acting freely it is at least somewhat plausible that there are no facts about what agents would freely do in non-actual circumstances.

I am primarily interested in showing that compatibilists cannot make use of the **Causal Solution**.⁹ If acting freely is compatible with causal determinism, we should not have trouble accounting for the fact that John would have freely turned back.¹⁰ So I will assume compatibilism in much of what follows.

I now want to endorse the following claim:

Causal Symmetry: John’s omission causes the death of the child in **Self-Undermining Rescue** if and only if his omission also causes the death of the child in **Sharks**.

This claim may not be quite as obvious as the claim that John is responsible for the child’s death in **Self-Undermining Rescue**. But I think we nonetheless have strong reason to accept it. The difference between the two cases is that in **Self-Undermining Rescue** it is a (non-actual) free choice of John’s that would have undermined his rescue attempt. But when it comes to the purely causal question, I do not think that it matters *what sort of event* would have prevented “John’s jumping into the water” from altering the outcome. It seems to me to be neither here nor there whether the preventing event would have been an internal failure of John’s or an external intervention (the shark attack).

Examining cases that are not loaded with normative import may help to draw out the relevant intuition. Consider this pair of cases:

Case 1: Andrew’s car fails to start. He thus misses a meeting at which he was supposed to provide coffee. As a result Neal is deprived of coffee. Had the car started started, its internal security system would have malfunctioned halfway to his destination and shut the car down. Thus, had it started, Neal would still have been deprived of coffee.

responsible for the death in **Self-Undermining Rescue**. However, Timmerman and Swenson (2019) show that actualists can accommodate this judgment.

9. This is because I ultimately want to conclude that the **Sharks** case makes trouble for certain pro-compatibilist arguments that appeal to Frankfurt-style cases.

10. We can stipulate that in all the nearby worlds in which John jumps into the water, it is causally determined that he freely decides to turn back; perhaps because a powerful goddess has an interest in ensuring that John doesn’t rescue the child.

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Case 2: Andrew's car fails to start. He thus misses a meeting at which he was supposed to provide coffee. As a result Neal is deprived of coffee. Had the car started, a computerized traffic control system would have misidentified Andrew's car as a stolen vehicle and shut the car down (via satellite link to the car's internal computer). Thus, had it started, Neal would still have been deprived of coffee.

Here it seems quite clear that a strong causal symmetry holds. If we say that the car's failure to start is not a cause of Neal's being deprived of coffee in Case 2, we should say the same thing in Case 1. In Case 1 the preventing event would have been an internal failure of the car. While in Case 2 the preventing event would have been an external intervention. But this doesn't seem to matter. The causal efficacy of "the car's failure to start" in Case 1 should stand or fall with the causal efficacy of "the car's failure to start" in Case 2.

Given this, I see only one potentially plausible reason for rejecting *Causal Symmetry*. Namely the claim that *facts about moral responsibility partially determine which events count as causes*. I will discuss this objection in Section IV.

III: MY ARGUMENT AGAINST THE CAUSAL SOLUTION

Here is my argument:

(P1) In **Self-Undermining Rescue** John is responsible for the child's death.

(P2) If John is responsible for the child's death in **Self-Undermining Rescue** it is in virtue of his omitting to jump into the water (in order to attempt the rescue of the child).

(Why accept (P2)? (P2) is plausible because John's omitting to jump into the water is the only significant volitional activity of John's in the actual sequence of events. Surely the fact that he would have freely turned back does not explain his responsibility. Agents are not normally responsible for outcomes because of what they would have done.)

From (P1) and (P2) we can infer:

(C1): John is responsible for the child's death in **Self-Undermining Rescue** in virtue of his omitting to jump into the water (in order to attempt the rescue of the child).

Given (C1) there are two possibilities: (i) John's omission causes the child's death or (ii) John is responsible for the death in virtue of the omission even though his omission did not cause it. Thus it follows that:

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(C2) Either John's omitting to jump into the water causes the child's death in **Self-Undermining Rescue** or an agent can be responsible for an outcome in virtue of an omission even if the omission did not cause the outcome.

And given *Causal Symmetry* we can substitute **Sharks** for **Self-Undermining Rescue** in (C2)'s first disjunct. This gives us:

(C3) Either (a) John's omitting to jump into the water causes the child's death in **Sharks** or (b) an agent can be responsible for an outcome in virtue of an omission even if the omission did not cause the outcome.

With (C3) in hand, either it follows that TR(Causal) is false and responsibility can transmit from X to Y in the absence of X's causing Y. Or it follows that John does cause the child's death in **Sharks**. The truth of (C3) thus undermines the **Causal Solution**. Recall that the **Causal Solution** requires the truth of both of the following:

(I) In **Sharks** neither John's omission nor anything else for which he is responsible causes the the death of the child.

TR(Causal): An Agent's responsibility for X transmits to an outcome Y iff X causes Y (and the usual provisos obtain).

If (a) is true and John's omission does cause the child's death in **Sharks** then clearly (I) is false. But if (b) is true then responsibility can transmit to an outcome in the absence of causation and TR(Causal) is false. Thus, the Causal Solution appears to fail. We need to appeal to something besides the mere lack of causation in order to account for John's non-responsibility in **Sharks**.

Note that an account which appealed to the agent's possession of alternative possibilities would fare much better here. There is not a causal difference between **Sharks** and **Self-Undermining Rescue**. But the agent does possess different abilities. In **Sharks** there is no sequence of actions John has the ability to perform that would result in the survival of the child. But in **Self-Undermining Rescue** there is a sequence of actions John has the ability to perform that would result in the survival of the child. He could jump in and then decide not to turn back.¹¹

IV: OBJECTIONS

I will now consider two objections to my argument against the Causal Solution. First, Carolina Sartorio has responded to a previous objection to the

11. I take this to be further evidence for the claim, defended in Swenson 2019, that we should give an error theory for our intuitions about cases like Hero and endorse an alternative possibilities requirement for responsibility.

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Causal Solution (raised by Randolph Clarke) by appealing to responsibility for disjunctive facts. Clarke (2014) has presented an apparent counterexample to TR(Causal):

Forgotten Planted Sharks: Yesterday John negligently released the sharks into the water, he has now forgotten that the **Sharks** are present. Today he sees that the child is drowning but does not attempt a rescue. If John had jumped in and attempted to rescue the child, the sharks would have killed him and his rescue attempt would have been unsuccessful. (Clarke 2014: 146)

Here it seems plausible that John is responsible for the child's death. Furthermore, it seems that neither John's failure to attempt the rescue nor his releasing the **Sharks** causes the death. Do we have a counterexample to TR(-Causal)? Clarke reports (on the basis of correspondence with Sartorio) Sartorio's position that the following disjunctive fact causes the child's death in **Forgotten Planted Sharks**:¹²

DJF: Either John releases the sharks or he doesn't attempt a rescue.¹³

Furthermore, John is responsible for DJF so long as the following principle holds:

DisjunctiveR1: If A is responsible for both disjuncts of a disjunctive fact then A is responsible for the disjunctive fact.

DisjunctiveR1 is very plausible. And despite the apparent strangeness of disjunctive causes, I think Sartorio's response to Clarke has a lot going for it.

One might similarly object to (P2) of my argument on the grounds that (in **Self-Undermining Rescue**) John is responsible for the child's death, not in virtue of omitting to jump into the water, but in virtue of his responsibility for a disjunctive fact such as:

DFR: Either John doesn't jump into the water or he decides to turn back to shore.

The idea is that John is responsible for the death of the child because he is responsible for DFR and DFR causes the death of the child.

I don't think the appeal to disjunctive facts will provide a promising response to my argument. Let's assume that John is not responsible for the fact that he would have turned back had he jumped into the water. (We can stipulate that John would not have turned back because he had developed some bad character trait in the past. Rather, John would have acted out of

12. For a defense of the possibility of disjunctive causes, see Sartorio 2006.

13. As reported in Clarke 2014: 148.

character in deciding to turn back.) So John is only responsible for the first disjunct in DFR.

Given this, DisjunctiveR1 does not yield the result that John is responsible for DFR. A proponent of the **Causal Solution** could endorse:

DisjunctiveR2: If A is responsible for one disjunct of a disjunctive fact then A is responsible for the disjunctive fact.

But accepting DisjunctiveR2 would leave us without an explanation for John's non-responsibility in **Sharks**. Consider:

DFS: Either John doesn't jump into the water or he is killed by sharks.

In **Sharks**, John is responsible for one disjunct of DFS. And presumably DFS is just as good a candidate for being a cause of the death in **Sharks** as DFR is in **Self-Undermining Rescue**. So the Causal Solution cannot use DisjunctiveR2 to account for John's responsibility in **Self-Undermining Rescue** without yielding the wrong verdict in **Sharks**.

Second, one might object to *Causal Symmetry* on the ground that facts about responsibility play a role in fixing the facts about causation. Perhaps John's responsibility for the death in **Self-Undermining Rescue** makes it the case that his omission causes the death. But since, in **Sharks**, John is not responsible, his omission does not cause the death.

I don't much like the view that facts about causation depend on facts about responsibility.¹⁴ But whatever its merits in general, it cannot vindicate the Causal Solution. The Causal Solution purports to explain the facts about responsibility in cases like **Sharks** and Hero by appealing to facts about causation. If the relevant causal facts were in turn explained by the responsibility facts, we would be left with an unpleasant circularity.

Overall, I conclude that the Causal Solution is in trouble. Those who wish to accept the intuitive asymmetry between cases like **Sharks** and cases like Hero will need to look elsewhere.

V: TWO FISCHER-INSPIRED SOLUTIONS

John Martin Fischer has contributed a great deal of groundbreaking work to the literature on responsibility for omissions and responsibility for outcomes. Here I will consider his (2017) proposal regarding responsibility for omissions. Fischer distinguishes between two types of omissions. **Simple omissions** are "identical to, or fully constituted by, a bodily movement, where this can include the body's keeping still (or a part of the body's keeping still)." A **complex omission**, on the other hand, is "not identical to or fully constituted by (say) keeping my body still; it involves something more than the

14. Sartorio herself objects to this sort of view in Sartorio 2007.

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body—something about the relationship between the body and the external world.” (Fischer 2017: 156) With this distinction in hand, Fischer proposes the following account:

Fischer’s New Asymmetry Thesis (FNAT): Responsibility for actions and simple omissions does not require freedom to do otherwise, whereas responsibility for complex omissions does require such freedom.¹⁵

On Fischer’s account this asymmetry regarding responsibility is grounded in a metaphysical asymmetry. Actions exist; “they are present in the world, metaphysically speaking” (Fischer 2017: 158) And since simple omissions are identical to or constituted by actions (or bodily movements) they are present in the world as well. Complex omissions, however, are mere absences. And for Fischer, mere absences “are nothing in the world at all.”¹⁶ Since complex omissions are nothing at all, there is not, Fischer thinks an actual causal sequence leading to them. Thus the actual sequence account that Fischer accepts regarding responsibility for actions does not apply to complex omissions. This is what generates the asymmetry between actions (and simple omissions) and complex omissions.

Let us return to our original puzzle regarding Hero and **Sharks**. Since failing to save the child (in **Sharks**) is a complex omission, Fischer can get the intuitive result that John is not responsible for failing to save the child. Furthermore, it would be natural to extend Fischer’s view in such a way that it captures the intuitive result that John is not responsible for the child’s death either. Perhaps Fischer could maintain that in order to be responsible for the death, John would need to be responsible for the corresponding complex omission of *failing to save the child*. Since John is not responsible for that omission, he is not responsible for the death. In Hero, by contrast, John is responsible for the action *saving the child*. Thus he can be responsible for the survival of the child. Thus Fischer appears to have the resources to explain our intuitions about **Sharks** and Hero.

Furthermore, Fischer, unlike the Causal Solution, can get the intuitive result regarding **Self-Undermining Rescue**. Since John does have the ability to rescue the child in **Self-Undermining Rescue**, Fischer could maintain that he is responsible for both the complex omission (failing to save the child) and the outcome (the child’s death).

So Fischer’s New Asymmetry Thesis has some clear advantages. But it does require accepting an odd, to my mind, asymmetry between the account of responsibility that applies to actions and the account that applies to com-

15. See Fischer 2017. This formulation is drawn from Cyr 2021.

16. Fischer 2017: 158. On this point, Fischer follows Clarke 2014.

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plex omissions. It also has an odd implication. Fischer himself points out that if (i) determinism is true and (ii) determinism rules out alternative possibilities, then it will turn out that agents will lack responsibility for complex omissions. Consider Fischer's example:

Just Like Sharks: "a case just like **Sharks** except there are no sharks lurking furtively in the water" (Fischer 2017: 160)

If (i) determinism is true and (ii) determinism rules out alternative possibilities, then it will turn out that in **Just Like Sharks** John is responsible for all of his actions and simple omissions, but is not responsible for failing to save the child. This makes Fischer's new asymmetry seem quite strange indeed.

Fischer has a nice way of reducing the intuitive strangeness of his view. He appeals to a distinction between the content of responsibility and the degree of responsibility (or blameworthiness and praiseworthiness). The content of responsibility is a matter of what the agent is responsible for: which events fall under the scope of his or her responsibility. The degree of responsibility is a matter of how praiseworthy or blameworthy the agent is. Fischer points out that he can maintain that John in **Just Like Sharks** is just as blameworthy as he would have been if he were responsible for failing to save the child (Fischer 2017: 160). The scope of John's responsibility can shrink without him becoming less blameworthy overall. This reduces the oddity of claiming that John is not responsible for failing to save the child in **Just Like Sharks**.

Fischer's response here is attractive because it fits with the intuitive verdict about **Sharks**. In **Sharks** it seems to me that John deserves just as much blame as if the sharks had not been present. His lack of responsibility for the death is just a matter of luck. And thus he does not get off the hook when it comes to the amount of blame he deserves. The scope or content of his responsibility shrinks without his degree of blameworthiness decreasing.

But if we accept this use of the distinction between content and degree, another option is open to us. Let's consider an alternative approach to our puzzle which, though Fischer himself would not be inclined to accept it, is inspired by Fischer's use of this distinction between content and degree. Recall again one of the cases that generated our original puzzle:

Hero: John sees a child drowning in the water and decides (without deliberating much) to rescue the child, and he successfully does so. Unbeknownst to John, a benevolent observer was monitoring his thoughts. If John had seriously considered refraining from rescuing the child, the observer would have caused him to immediately experience an irresistible (control-undermining) urge to rescue the child.

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Drawing on Fischer's work distinguishing between the content and degree of responsibility, I have argued elsewhere (Swenson 2019) that we can use this distinction to explain away our initial intuition that John is responsible for the survival of the child in Hero.¹⁷ We can say that the core intuition is that John deserves just as much praise as he would have if the benevolent observer were not on the scene. And that can be true even though the content or scope of John's responsibility shrinks because of the presence of the benevolent observer. We can deny that John is responsible for saving the child or for the child's survival. Instead of being responsible for saving the child, John is responsible for *saving the child on his own*. (Note that John could have avoided *saving the child on his own*.) This dovetails nicely with my judgment about **Sharks**. In both cases the loss of alternative possibilities reduces the content or scope of responsibility but does not alter the degree of responsibility. On this approach we can endorse perfectly symmetric requirements on responsibility. Responsibility always requires alternative possibilities. You are only responsible for an action, omission, outcome, or anything else when you could have avoided it.

So Fischer and I both make use of the distinction between content and degree in order to explain away some counterintuitive results of our views. But I do so in a way that allows us to maintain symmetric requirements for responsibility. While Fischer must posit an asymmetry between actions (and simple omissions) and complex omissions. I am inclined to think this gives my, Fischer inspired, view an advantage over Fischer's own asymmetric account.

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17. In Swenson 2019, I discussed a different, but structurally identical, case. For Fischer's original discussion of content and degree, see Fischer 1986. He also discusses this distinction in Fischer 2017.

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