Reconciling omissions and causalism

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Abstract

If causalism is a complete theory of what it is to behave intentionally, it also has to account for intentional omissions. Carolina Sartorio (2009) has developed a powerful argument, the Causal Exclusion for Omissions, showing that intentional omissions cannot be explained by causalism. A crucial claim in the argument is that there is a causal competition between a mental omission and the mental action performed instead. In this paper I reject the argument by demonstrating that there is no causal competition ever between an omission and the action performed instead. I propose what I call the Realisationist Conception of Omissions, which consists in considering omissions as multiply realisable absences whose realisers are specific positive actions. I further argue in favour of the Determinationist Conception of Omissions, according to which the relation between omissions and their realisers is a determinable/determinate relation. Since there can be no causal preemption between a determinable and its determinates, there can be no causal preemption between omissions and the actions performed instead, and causalism is safe. I also show that this view of omissions has some other independent advantages – like for example that of solving the problem of the spatio-temporal localisation of omissions.

Keywords

Action, omission, causal exclusion, realisation relation, determinable, determinate, causalism

Carolina Sartorio (2009) has developed a powerful argument, the Causal Exclusion for Omissions (CEO), showing that causalist theories of intentional behaviour cannot accommodate intentional omissions. Sartorio claims that there are such things as *intentional* omissions, and that the only plausible way for causalists to explain what it is to intentionally omit to do *x* requires saying that my intentionally omitting to do *x* is caused by my intending to omit to do *x* (or, by some closely related intention). But there is a better candidate as a cause of my omitting to do *x*: my omitting to intend to do *x*. If CEO stands, causalism is not a complete theory of what it is to behave intentionally. In this paper I try to defend causalism from CEO, showing that we can reconcile causalism and omissions.

My strategy will consist – first – in introducing a new metaphysical account of omissions; and – second – in showing that such conception entails that there is no causal competition between my omitting to intend to do *x*, on the one side, and my intending to omit to do *x*, on the other side. If I am right, then, CEO cannot be a threat for causalism.

1. The Realisationist Conception of Omissions

Once we agree to set aside the view that there is nothing that is an omission, a minimal characterisation of omissions everyone can agree about is to consider them to be non-actions. It seems perfectly sound to say that my omitting to perform action A_1 is my not performing A_1, which in turn can be said to be a non-action of mine.[1]

In spite of their being non-actions, however, omissions seem to need positive actions to occur in order to occur in turn. Take, for example, my omitting to go to New York next Monday. It is impossible for me to

[1] Although I am not focusing in this paper on the issue of what it is for an omission to be intentional, I take it to be impossible for an omission to be intentional if the corresponding non-action is non-intentional, and vice versa. See Clarke (2010: 159) for the rival thesis that it is possible for me to *intentionally* not perform an action, while still *non-intentionally* omitting to perform the same action.

omit to go to New York next Monday unless I positively perform some specific action next Monday that is incompatible with my going to New York.[2] Omissions seem to need to occur *in some particular positive way* – where *the particular positive way* in which the omission occurs is specified by the particular positive action that is performed instead of the action omitted. I take this to be equivalent to saying that omissions need specific positive actions to *realise* them. Call it the Realisationist Conception of Omissions (RCO).

On this view, it is impossible for my omitting to perform A_1 to occur without occurring in a particular positive way – that is, it is impossible for my omitting to perform A_1 to occur without being realised by some particular positive action of mine.[3]

I can realise my omitting to go to New York next Monday in many different ways, i.e. by watching television all day in my apartment in San Francisco, or by going to Seattle, or to Paris, or to London, or to any other place; yet I must realise my omitting to go to New York in some specific way in order for it to occur, and it is impossible for me to omit to go to New York without realising it by one specific positive action or another.

I express this idea by characterising an omission to perform A_1 as a disjunction of specific positive actions $A_2 \vee A_3 \vee A_4 \vee \ldots \vee A_n$, where each action appearing in the disjunction is a possible realiser of the omission. Therefore, omissions turn out to be multiply realisable. According to RCO, whenever I omit to perform A_1 I need to positively perform some specific positive action A_i appearing in the disjunction which the omission is equivalent to.[4]

It is worth stressing that it would be wrong to consider the omission to be *identical to* the particular positive action that is performed instead of the omitted action. For example, it would be wrong to consider my

[2] See Brand (1971: 49) for the similar idea that *S* refrains from performing A_1 if and only if (*i*) it is not the case that *S* performs A_1, and (*ii*) there is some action that *S* performs, A_2, such that *S* performs A_2 in order that *S*'s performing A_2 prevents *S*'s performing A_1.

[3] I am assuming here for simplicity's sake that one omission is always realised by just one positive action. Actually many omissions turn out to be realised by *a conjunction* of positive actions. I will come back to this fact in the last section of the paper. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) have developed a similar view in which omissions are taken to be *constituted* by actual bodily movements. A major shortcoming of their account, as opposed to mine, is that "a large class of omission is apparently left out of their view" (Clarke 2014: 21): in fact all omissions of mental acts (like, for example, my omitting to recall the dates of the Napoleonic battles) seem to need a positive mental act – though no actual bodily movement – realising (or, constituting) them. I will turn back on omissions of mental acts later in the paper.

[4] One may object that the occurring of a particular positive action of mine A_i incompatible with my performing A_1 is just a necessary condition of my omitting to perform A_1, and does not necessarily *realise* it. My answer is that – while characterising omissions as absences of actions requiring the occurring of such an incompatible action as a necessary condition would leave the metaphysical nature of omissions undetermined – RCO provides a satisfactory metaphysical account of omissions that does *explain* why the necessary condition holds.

omitting to go to New York next Monday as identical to my going to Rome next Monday. The reason is that my omitting to go to New York next Monday can obviously occur also if I do not go to Rome next Monday. This is not different from saying that my omitting to go to New York next Monday is multiply realisable – and as such it cannot be identical to any specific realiser. Clarke (2014: 22) baptises *act-identification* the approach according to which "the "negativity" of negative acts lies entirely in linguistic expression used to designate them, not in the things designated", which turn out to be concrete particulars. The general argument against act-identification is similar to the one first used by Putnam (1967) in philosophy of mind against identity theories. Clarke himself discards this view as untenable because *most of the time* the omission and the particular positive action that is performed instead do not have the same causes and effects, or are not done for the same reasons, or do not share the properties they should share (e.g. they are not equally difficult) – modal properties included. However, Clarke admits that "about a few cases, act-identification seems correct. 'The child's not moving' does seem to designate her act of holding still" (*ivi*, 27).

An advocate of RCO could object that, on closer inspection, my omitting to move cannot be identified to my holding still. For, there are ways in which I omit to move that, strictly speaking, do not require my holding still. In fact I can realise my omitting to move, for example, by my watching a movie in a cinema being completely absorbed by the story; and we may refuse to say that, in such a circumstance, I would also be *performing the action of holding still* (which instead the child performs when she omits to move while playing musical statues). In other words, my being motionless is a condition that, even when it is freely engendered by me, can be produced by some action other than my holding still. On this view, I can omit to move without holding still; *all* omissions are multiply realisable, then, and there is no counterexample to this general claim.

A different option for the advocate of RCO is to agree with Clarke that 'my omitting to move' "does seem to designate" my act of holding still, and to argue that this fact does not undermine RCO, along the following lines. Of course we must admit that particular positive actions come in different levels of determinateness, so that both my going to the USA, and my going to New York next Monday afternoon flying British Airways, do qualify as particular positive actions of mine. Yet some actions, such as my moving, are so general – and cover such an unusually extensive range of possibilities – that *omitting* to perform one of these actions can

contingently only be realised by performing one very specific residual action (provided that you choose a certain level of determinateness to describe it). However, the fact that very few omissions are so comprehensive that they happen to be realisable (under a certain level of determinateness) only by *one* particular positive action cannot be considered as an argument against RCO. In fact it remains a general truth that all omissions *are realised* by the actions performed instead, rather than being identical to them. It is just that some actions are so general that the set of the realisers of the corresponding omissions, under a certain level of determinateness, is a singleton. In other words, all omissions can be characterised as disjunctions of actions realising them, as previously said; few of these disjunctions, however, may accidentally consist of just one disjunct.

If persons were necessarily performing actions the whole time they exist (whenever one wants to stipulate they start to exist and finish to exist), the view according to which omissions are realised by specific performed actions would be compatible with the view that persons can be omitting to do something at every instant they exist. Independently of what we think that an "action" is, however, we must admit that people do not perform actions the whole time they exist. For one thing, we would not say that people act while they sleep; and it is controversial whether sleeping itself can be considered as *an action* (at least in those cases in which it is the result of one's non-intentionally dozing off rather than the effect of one's deliberately going to bed. Imagine someone planning her day and including "I will sleep from 2.00 to 3.00" in a list of the actions she intends to perform. In such cases, to sleep seems to be an action). But people do happen to go through periods during which they perform no action – for example when they are in a coma or in a permanent vegetative state, or when they faint. RCO can deal with this fact in two different ways. According to the first solution, because omissions are only realised by specific performed actions, people who are not acting are not omitting to act either. So people fallen into a coma as a result of car accident are not omitting to go to work; only agents can omit to do something, and these people are (temporarily) non-agents. According to the second solution, omissions are realised by specific performed actions the whole time people do perform some action; when no action is performed, however, omissions are realized by people's happening to be in whatever condition or state that make them unable to act – like for example their being sleeping or anaesthetised. One reason to embrace this solution is that, if I intentionally go to bed at 8.00 after deciding not to go to the cinema at 9.00, we may want to say that I am intentionally omitting to go to the cinema at

9.00. If this is supposed to be correct, then it should also be correct to say that – in case I non-intentionally doze off at 8.00 – I will non-intentionally omit to go to the cinema at 9.00. By conceding that in both cases my omitting to go to the cinema at 9.00 is realised by my being sleeping at 9.00, RCO vindicates our intuition in a natural way. The basic idea under RCO is that an omission must happen in some specific way if it must happen at all – such *specific way* being normally constituted by the action that is performed instead of the omitted action. But the omissions, if any, occurring during a period in which we are not acting must happen in some specific way too. Because our happening to be sleeping, fainted or anaesthetised – in general, our happening to be in whatever condition or state that make us unable to act – is either what we are *doing* at that moment or, at least, the event best resembling it, RCO can posit that an omission occurring in a portion of time during which we do not act is realised by that specific positive event. Note that this position is consistent with assuming that the realisation relation can only obtain between two items that occur simultaneously.

Saying that omissions need to be *realised* by specific positive actions amounts to saying that omissions are not mere absences of actions. Rather, they are absences of actions that must come in a specific form and occur in a specific way. This is coherent with – and is even an explanation of – the fact that we do not normally acknowledge the status of 'omissions' to the absences of actions performed by people who no longer exist, do not exist yet or will never come to existence.

On the other hand, under RCO *all* absences of actions that are positively realised by the occurring of one of their realisers are ipso facto omissions. Thus my performing a positive action such as, for example, my jogging in the park now, is sufficient to ground the occurring now of all the omissions of mine that include that particular action among their realisers. It turns out that, in virtue of my jogging in the park now, I am also omitting now to take a flight to New Delhi, tile a bathroom floor, stick a stamp on a letter, and so on. Contrary to appearances, however, this implication of RCO is not problematic. Note that the omissions we are considering are not necessarily intentional. Thus – provided that I have intended to omit to work on my paper and am jogging in the park instead – it seems adequate to say that there is only one *intentional* omission of mine that is realised by my jogging in the park now, that is, my intentionally omitting to work on my paper now, a plethora of non-intentional omissions of mine being realised by the same act at the same time.

It might be objected that the profusion of omissions acknowledged by RCO as realised by each action of mine is contradicted by the normal use of the term 'omission' in English. In fact we are normally parsimonious in how we ascribe omissions and even non-intentional omissions; and we would not spontaneously say that, if I have intended to omit to work on my paper today and am jogging in the park instead, I am also omitting to perform plenty of other actions, especially so with regards to those actions that nobody – me included – ever considered I might perform today. Imagine that I was supposed to attend my child's school play today, but I forgot. If I had not forgotten, I would not have jogged in the park, and I would have attended the school play instead. I think we would normally describe this situation by saying that I have intentionally omitted to work on my papers, and I have non-intentionally omitted to attend the school play. We would not subscribe to the point of view according to which my omitting to attend the school play is just another (non-intentional) omission among many others, such as my omitting to take a flight to New Delhi (supposing that I have nothing to do with New Delhi), tile a bathroom floor (supposing that I have never considered to tile any bathroom floor) and so on. Since the latter is the view entailed by RCO, it seems that RCO cannot account for our normal practises of ascribing omissions.

But consider that what makes the difference between my non-intentionally omitting to attend the school play, on one side, and my non-intentionally omitting to take a flight to New Delhi or tile a bathroom floor, on the other side, is that I had decided to go to the school play, or else that there is a requirement calling for my going to the school play. Now, acknowledging a non-intentional omission only if the subject had finally decided to perform the omitted action, or, only if there is "some norm, standard, or ideal that called for" one's performing it (Clarke 2014: 29), is not the only way for a metaphysical view of omissions to account for our ordinary practises of ascribing them. It seems equally acceptable, as RCO does, to posit that, in virtue of the occurring of a positive action, all the non-intentional omissions realised by it also occur; and that only *some* of them are normally explicitly ascribed to people in virtue of their being psychologically, socially, or morally relevant (where psychological relevance is obtained in virtue of, among other things, being surprising to the subject and contrary to her plans; social relevance is obtained in virtue of violating a social requirement of some sort; and moral relevance is obtained in virtue of violating a moral requirement).

I take it that, by appealing to intentionality, on one side, and to psychological, social and moral relevance, on the other side, it is perfectly possible for RCO to account for all kinds of difference among omissions that

may ultimately make a difference in our linguistic practises concerning them. Therefore I consider RCO to be a satisfactory metaphysical view of omissions, also in face of common linguistic practises concerning them.[5]

2. The Determinationist Conception of Omissions

It is tempting to look at the relation between an omission and each of its realisers as a *determination relation*. In fact, we find that the relation between an omission and each action realising it meets the necessary requirements for any relation to be a determination relation. According to Yablo (1992, p. 252), for example, the following relation among properties must hold in order for the properties to be in a determination relation:

P determines *Q* iff: for a thing to be *P* is for it to be *Q*, not *simpliciter*, but in a specific way.

Firstly, note that we can easily change our talking about omissions and actions realising them into a talking of *properties* consisting in *omitting to perform action A_1*, on the one side, and *performing action A_2* realising the former property, on the other side.[6] Secondly, we obtain that my performing action A_2 is for me to omit to perform action A_1, not *simpliciter* (in the sense that my going to London is not identical to my omitting to go

[5] RCO seems to entail that, among all the omissions realised by my jogging in the park now, there are also the absences of those actions that I would not have been able to perform, in any case or in that particular situation. Thus my jogging in the park now realises – among other things – my omitting to fly to the constellation of Lyra now. While some may accept this consequence, others will rebut that one omits to perform action A_1 only if she *is able* to perform action A_1 (Feinberg 1984, p. 160; Bach 2010, p. 52; Clarke 2014, p. 90). It is possible to opportunely modify RCO so as to incorporate this limitation. For example, consider the disjunction of specific positive actions of mine $A_2 \vee A_3 \vee A_4 \vee \ldots \vee A_n$ such that a necessary condition for me not to perform action A_1 is my positively performing some disjunct A_i. We may establish that my performing A_i counts as realising my *omitting* to perform action A_1 only if it is not impossible for me (that is, I have both the ability and the opportunity) to do something different from $A_2 \vee A_3 \vee A_4 \vee \ldots \vee A_n$ in the first place. In fact the fundamental idea under RCO is that my omitting to perform A_1 cannot but come in a certain way, that is, in virtue of my performing either A_2, or A_3, or A_4, or …, or A_n; and this in turn is grounded on the non-empty truth that, should I perform no action included in the set $\{A_2, A_3, A_4, \ldots, A_n\}$, I would necessarily perform action A_1. But if it is impossible for me to perform action A_1, then the latter requirement turns out either false or emptily true – and in this case we might conclude that my performing A_1 has not been realised, and consequently has not occurred.

[6] Since the property of *omitting to perform action A_1* is identical to the property of *non-performing action A_1*, shifting to a talk about properties seems to require conceding that negative properties exist. If one concedes this, however, my account of omissions as multiply realisable determinables whose determinates are specific positive actions also opens the door for a general account of negative properties as multiply realisable determinables whose determinates are specific positive properties. Nonetheless we may also say that there are not negative properties, and that '*omitting to perform action A_1*' actually refers to the positive property – say – of *being a subject omitting to perform action A_1* (and, accordingly, '*performing action A_2*' refers to the property of *being a subject performing action A_2*).

to New York), but in a specific way (in the sense that my going to London is a specific way for me to be omitting to go to New York). So it seems we can say that my going to London *determines* my omitting to go to New York.

Yablo also specifies that, from a metaphysical point of view, the "central idea" for a relation to be a determination relation is this (*ibidem*):

P determines *Q* only if:

(i) necessarily, for all *x*, if *x* has *P* then *x* has *Q*; and

(ii) possibly, for some *x*, *x* has *Q* but lacks *P*.

Once again, the relation between omissions and actions realising them meets the requirement, since necessarily, for all *x*, if *x* is going to London then *x* is omitting to go to New York; and possibly, for some *x*, *x* is omitting to go to New York without going to London. Following Yablo, it is also important to remark that we are not excluding that my omitting to perform action A_1 can ever necessitate my performing some action; we are just excluding, quite differently, that my omitting to perform action A_1 can ever necessitate my performing an action *so* specific that my performing that action, in turns, necessitates my omitting to perform action A_1. Call this conception of omissions the Determinationist Conception of Omissions (DCO). DCO is one of the specific forms that RCO can assume.

According to DCO, an omission is a determinable whose determinates are its realisers. The relation between my omitting to go to New York and my going to London is the same as between my being tall and my being 190cm tall. Just as I cannot be tall without having "a specific height within a certain range of specific heights" (Crane 2008, p. 18), I cannot omit to go to New York without performing some specific positive action realising my omission. We can express this fact by opportunely adapting to the case of omissions and their realisers what Yablo calls "the standard equation for determinables and determinates generally" (1992, p. 256). What we obtain is this:

Necessarily, someone is omitting to perform action A_1 iff she is also performing an action A_i that is a determination of that omission.

DCO – surprising as it is at first sight – can solve many problems affecting any theory of omissions. Before describing its advantages, however, it may be worth considering one possible objection.[7] DCO entails that my walking in San Francisco, whistling in San Francisco, and remembering Paula in San Francisco today at 11.00 are all determinates of my omitting to go to New York today at 11.00. But I might be performing these three different actions at once. So, if we embrace DCO, we must concede that several determinates of a determinable can be co-instantiated (or, can co-occur) *qua* determinates of one and the same token determinable, in spite of their being all on the same level of determinateness (as the three mentioned actions appear to be). Since nothing alike seems to happen in standard determinate/determinable relation cases (e.g., something that is uniformly red cannot be both uniformly crimson and uniformly cardinal at the same time), we should dismiss DCO. A good answer to this objection is appealing to the notion of the *determination dimensions* of a determinable, that is, the only features according to which that determinable can be determined (Funkhouser 2006). For example redness, like any colour, can only be determined with respect to hue, brightness, and saturation. Note that crimson and cardinal are different determinates of red differing along only one of the dimensions, that is, hue. If we pick a specific determinate of red along the hue dimension, then, we can further determine it by turning the brightness up and down. In other words, *very bright red* is a determinate of red, just like crimson and cardinal. The same can be said of *very vivid* (i.e. highly saturated) *red*. It follows that *very bright, very vivid crimson* is a determinate of red that can be read as the co-instantiation of three different determinates of red (that is, very bright red; very vivid red; and crimson). Now it is difficult to non-arbitrarily specify what are the determination dimensions of my omitting to do. But this is not the concern of this paper. It is reasonable to say, however, that my walking in San Francisco, whistling in San Francisco, and remembering Paula in San Francisco today at 11.00 are all determinates of my being in San Francisco today at 11.00 – and thus of my omitting to go to New York today at 11.00 – along different determination dimensions. For example, one could suggest that my walking in San Francisco is determined along the "motor activity" dimension (along which it gets distinguished from my running, riding a bike, swimming, or sitting in San Francisco); my whistling in San Francisco is determined along the "phonetic activity" dimension (along which it gets distinguished from my being silent,

[7] I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this objection.

talking, whispering, or singing in San Francisco); and my remembering Paula in San Francisco is determined along the "mental activity" dimension (along which it gets distinguished from my calculating, imagining, planning, or abducing in San Francisco). A very similar objection to DCO reads that a given determinate should not determine a plurality of determinables being on the same level of determinateness. But my going to Rome today at 11.00 determines my omitting to go to New York today at 11.00, my omitting to go to Seattle today at 11.00, my omitting to go to Los Angeles today at 11.00, and so on. Thus we should reject DCO. This objection can be answered in a very similar way. We may remark that, contrary to appearances, the same holds also in standard cases of the determinate/determinable relation. For example, *very bright, very vivid crimson* is a determinate of *very bright red*, *very vivid red*, and *crimson*. It is even possible for a property to be a determinate of infinitely many determinables that not only are on the same level of determinateness, but also are so along one and the same determination dimension (as it is the case for my omitting to go to New York, my omitting to go to Seattle, and my omitting to go to Los Angeles today at 11.00). Think of my being exactly 190cm tall, which determines my being under 191cm, my being under 192cm, my being under 193cm, and so on.

3. Excluding the Exclusion Principle

A first advantage of DCO is that omissions turn out to admit specific spatio-temporal locations.[8] In fact, it seems perfectly admissible to allow to an instance of a determinable the same spatio-temporal location of the instance of the one of its determinates that realises it; and, clearly, the particular positive actions determining omissions do admit specific spatio-temporal locations (I will turn back to the spatio-temporal locations of omissions in the last section).

Another advantage is that we obtain an immediate metaphysical explanation of the fact that, although we take omissions to be absences of actions, we normally allow that not every absence of action gives rise to a corresponding omission. For example, we normally allow that, on the one side, provided that my action of going to New York is absent today, my omission to go to New York occurs today; and, on the other side, in spite of Julius Caesar's action of going to New York being absent today, Julius Caesar's omission to go to

[8] On the difficulty to allow specific spatio-temporal locations to omissions see, e.g., Clarke (2010; 2014).

New York does not occur today. Some scholars have tried to explain this fact by claiming that omitting presupposes the existence of an agent that could have performed the action that is omitted.[9] But why is such a requirement to be presupposed? Moreover, if this or any other similar requirement must be added to the mere characterisation of an omission as an absence of action, then arguably it is false that an omission is merely an absence of action. So the question arises of what exactly an omission is. DCO immediately explains why it is not sufficient to have an absence of action for having an omission, and why the existence of an agent is *de facto* necessary: if there were no agent, in fact, there would be no specific positive action that is in turn necessary for determining the determinable the omission consists in. So I take DCO to provide a clear metaphysical explanation of some facts that other accounts of omissions do not have an explanation of.[10]

One major problem for any theory of omissions is that it is not evident on what grounds omissions can cause. Some people are concerned about the fact that omissions are absences: how can it be that an absence of thing can cause something?[11] No doubt that an action is the kind of thing that can cause; but omissions merely being non-actions – these people argue – it is difficult to see how they can be acknowledged with authentic causal powers. DCO provides a good solution to these concerns. Since it is necessary for any omission to occur that one of its determinates occurs, and since there is no difficulty in attributing robust causal powers to its determinates, then at worst we can assume that omissions "inherit" the causal powers of their determinates. On this vision, omission can cause *via* the causing of their determinates. There is no need to deny omissions being absences, or to obscure the distinction between omissions and actions, in order to acknowledge omissions as causes.

[9] E.g. Zimmerman (1981).

[10] Indeed we normally allow that, in spite of my action of going to New York being absent today, my omission to go to New York does not occur today if yesterday I died of a sudden hearth attack. In other words, we do not normally conceive dead people to be omitting to perform the positive actions that are not performed by them as a consequence of their being dead. I take DCO to offer a clear metaphysical explanation of such a fact. Note that we may want to consider an absence of an action performed by a dead person as an omission under special circumstances. For example, provided that I committed suicide yesterday in order not to reveal important military secrets today, we may want to say that today I have (intentionally) omitted to reveal important military secrets. DCO can account for such special cases by treating them as it treats the case of my omitting to go to the cinema at 9.00 as a consequence of my being sleeping at 9.00. As previously said, my omitting to go to the cinema at 9.00 can be considered as realised, and determined, by my being sleeping at 9.00. Similarly, my omitting to reveal important military secrets today can be considered as realised, and determined, by my happening to be dead today – an event which is a consequence of a particular positive intentional action I have performed yesterday (my committing suicide). Generally speaking, I take RCO and DCO to be entirely at ease in metaphysically accounting for all our practises of ascribing, and omitting to ascribe, omissions.

[11] See e.g. Beebee (2004) for a defence of the thesis that absences cannot be causes.

Some other people, however, do not have any problem in attributing causal powers to omissions *qua* absences. Indeed there are good metaphysical and epistemological reasons for considering that absences can cause (Schaffer 2000; 2004). But if you think that omissions can cause by themselves *qua* absences, then you have to deal with another difficulty. The problem is that my omitting to perform action A_1, on the one side, and my performing action A_2 instead, on the other side, seem to compete in many situations for causing the same effect. Take, for example, the case in which "Jim spent the night previous to the exam partying instead of studying, and then he flunked the exam on the following day" (Sartorio 2009, p. 524). We have the following two causal claims:

(1) Jim's partying the night before the exam caused him to flunk it.
(2) Jim's omitting to study the night before the exam caused him to flunk it.

Both seem reasonably true. It is not prima facie the case, however, that they can be both true. In fact, unless we implausibly take an omission to perform A_1 to be identical to the action A_2 that is performed instead, we must consider that omitting to perform A_1 and performing A_2 are two different things. Thus, in particular, Jim's partying the night before the exam, on the one side, and Jim's omitting to study the night before the exam, on the other side, are two different things. Accepting both (1) and (2), then, would be accepting causal overdetermination. Of course, since this example generalises, what we actually bump into is *systematic* causal overdetermination – which is a highly questionable position indeed. An *exclusion principle* (Kim 1989, 1998; Yablo 1992) has often been invoked in order to run out such possibility. Here is the principle as it applies to properties:

Exclusion Principle: if a property *P* is causally sufficient for an effect *E*, then no property *Q* distinct from *P* is causally relevant to *E*.

So it seems that we have to choose between (1) and (2): both claims cannot be true. Nonetheless, it may be equally troublesome to justify our choice, since – as we noticed – both claims appear as being equally true.

If we embrace DCO, however, we can easily neutralize the Exclusion Principle in cases in which both an omission and an action seem to cause the same effect. In fact, there seems to be no tension between the two claims assigning a sufficient causal role with regards to the same effect to, respectively, a determinable and one of its determinates.[12] Consider Yablo's example (1992, p. 257):

> Suppose that the structures in a certain region, though built to withstand lesser earthquakes, are in the event of a *violent* earthquake – one registering over five on the Richter scale – causally guaranteed to fall. When one unexpectedly hits, and the buildings collapse, one property of the earthquake that seems relevant to their doing so is that it was violent. Or so you might think, until I add that this particular: earthquake was *barely* violent (its Richter magnitude was over five but less than six). What with the earthquake's *bare* violence being *already* causally sufficient for the effect, that it was *violent* made no causal difference.

It seems absurd to claim that, since it is the earthquake's determinate property of being *barely violent* that is causally relevant for the collapse, then the earthquake's determinable property of being *violent* is epiphenomenal. Moreover, since almost (if not all) determinates are amenable to further determination, then almost (if not all) determinates would be causally preempted by their own determinates, the result being that almost (if not all) properties would be causally irrelevant (Yablo 1992; Crane 2008).

The solution to this impasse consists in conceding that the Exclusion Principle does not apply when the apparent tension is between two claims assigning a sufficient causal role with regards to the same effect to, respectively, a determinable and one of its determinates. A determinable and one of its determinates cannot preempt each other. So the structure collapses both because of the earthquake's being *barely violent* and because of its being *violent*. Likewise, the effect that Jim flunked the exam was sufficiently caused by both Jim's omitting to study the night before the exam, and his partying that night. (1) and (2) can be both true. By adopting DCO, we can grant that omissions cause without any necessity to subtract causal relevance from actions. Thus a clear advantage of DCO is that we do not need to decide whether the "true" cause is the omission, or the action that is actually performed.

[12] See Yablo (1992); Funkhouser (2006).

No doubt that in some cases we will prefer saying that the "real" cause is the omission rather than the action, while in some other cases we will prefer saying that the "real" cause is the action rather than the omission. Yet what is important here is establishing that the omission and the action cannot causally preempt each other. Take, for instance, the case in which I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it (Sartorio 2009). I could jump in and save him. However, after deliberating about it for a bit, I omit to jump in, and I eat an ice-cream instead. I predict we will prefer to say that the "real" cause of the child's death is my omitting to jump in the pond rather than my eating an ice-cream. As an example of the opposite sign, consider the case of Northern Irish professional footballer George Best going bankrupt and famously describing his life this way: "I spent a lot of money on booze, birds and fast cars – the rest I just squandered". I predict we will prefer to say that the "real" cause of his going bankrupt is his wasting money rather than his omitting to put away money. But selecting just one causal claim is in no way necessary. We just prefer one claim over the other – just as we may prefer saying that:

(3) John's *being very tall* caused him to hit his head on the ceiling fan,

rather than:

(4) John's *being 218cm tall* caused him to hit his head on the ceiling fan.

The point is that, just as (3) and (4) do not causally compete against each other, also (1) and (2) do not causally compete against each other. In fact, just as *being 218cm tall* is a determinate of *being very tall*, in the same way *partying the night before the exam* is a determinate of *omitting to study the night before the exam*; *eating an ice-cream* is a determinate of *omitting to jump in the pond*; and, *squandering money* is a determinate of *omitting to put away money*. Since there is no causal competition between a determinate and its determinable, we can conclude that there is no causal competition between an action and the omission that it is a determination of.

True, Yablo (1992: 259-273) has suggested that, although "any credible reconstruction of the Exclusion Principle must respect the truism that determinates do not contend with their determinables for causal

influence", we should distinguish among "causal influence" – "broadly conceived as encompassing everything from causal relevance to causal sufficiency" – and "causation". In his own words, "what distinguishes causation from these other relations is that causes are expected to be commensurate with their effects: roughly, they should incorporate a good deal of causally important material but not too much that is causally unimportant." According to Yablo, determinables and determinates do compete for the role of cause; when faced with such a competition, then, we should opt for the more proportional candidate and discard the other. Yablo adds that determinables often fare better on this competition than their determinates. It is evident that, if Yablo is right, we cannot conclude that (1) and (2), and (3) and (4), are all true at the same time. I interpret Yablo's view, however, as one that just ends up bowing down to the Exclusion Principle when there is an alleged determinable/determinate causal competition. We can be more Yablian that Yablo, and take a position that fully dismisses the Exclusion Principle in the determinable/determinate cases rather than reaffirming it. This requires conceding that (1) and (2), and (3) and (4), can be all true at the same time; and although we may *prefer* to focus on a causal claim rather than another depending on the specific epistemic contexts we happen to be in and the particular explanatory goals we happen to have, there is no requirement to discard any candidate in virtue of its being less proportional to the effect. Following Crane (2008), I take Yablo's argument that determinables should be more often preferred as causes as a Thesis whose Antithesis are the arguments developed by many philosophers according to which determinates – or even superdeterminates – should always win the battle (Armstrong 1997; Mellor 1995; Gillett and Rives 2005). I think we should *fully* reject the very presupposition producing the antinomy constituted by the Thesis and the Antithesis, and concede that the Exclusion Principle does not apply when there is an alleged determinable/determinate causal competition, even if it is reformulated as such: "if a property *P* is *the cause* of an effect *E*, then no property *Q* distinct from *P* is *the cause* of *E*." A determinable and one of its determinates, then, can be both *causes* of the same effect.

4. Rescuing causalism from CEO

This is how Sartorio (2009, p. 514) defines causalism – the theory she attacks by proposing CEO:

> Causalism, as a theory of what it is to behave intentionally, is the view that an agent behaves intentionally when certain events/states involving the agent's body (such as the agent's moving in a certain way) are appropriately caused (non-deviantly caused, or caused in the "normal" way) by certain mental events or states of the agent, in particular, the agent's intentions, belief and desire pairs, decisions, etc.

Now, how is CEO supposed to proceed? Sartorio considers that, in the case of the child drowning in the pond, we have two competing causal claims:

(5) My omitting to jump in the pond caused the child's death;
(6) My eating an ice-cream caused the child's death.

Since she takes omissions to be distinct from the actions that are performed instead of the actions omitted, she argues that the Exclusion Principle applies here. Thus – since we are required by the Exclusion Principle to choose between (5) and (6) – she assumes that we would definitely opt for (5).

But consider now the issue of what caused my intentionally omitting to jump in the pond. If causalism is a true and complete theory of what it is to behave intentionally, then necessarily the cause of my intentionally omitting to jump in the pond is some positive mental act. For simplicity's sake, we can identify this mental act with *my forming the intention to omit to jump in the pond* – whose equivalent formulations are '*my intending to omit to jump in the pond*' and '*my intending not to jump in the pond*'.

However, just as we distinguished between omissions and actions that are performed instead of the actions omitted, it seems that we must also distinguish between omissions to intend, on the one side, and acts of intending to do something instead of what we omitted to intend, on the other side. I think that Sartorio is absolutely right on this point: *my omitting to intend to jump in the pond* should be kept clearly distinct from *my intending not to jump in the pond*. But if this is true, then we have two new competing causal claims:

(7) My omitting to intend to jump in the pond caused my intentionally omitting to jump in the pond;
(8) My intending not to jump in the pond caused my intentionally omitting to jump in the pond.

Once again, the Exclusion Principle demands us to choose between them. At this point Sartorio argues that – just as earlier we took the omission rather than the action to be the cause of the child's death – on the same line of reasoning we should now take the mental omission rather than the mental action to be the cause of my intentionally omitting to jump in the pond. We should opt for (7), and discard (8). Since discarding (8) entails that causalism is not a true and complete theory of what it is to behave intentionally, then we should reject causalism.

Indeed CEO constitutes a powerful attack to causalism. Advocates of DCO, however, can easily reject the attack – what is a further advantage of DCO over other conceptions of omissions that apparently do not have any easy answer for rescuing causalism from CEO, at least if we assume causalism to be one of the best theories of intentional behaviour available in town.

As a preliminary consideration, advocates of DCO can reply that – as we have already shown – there is no real tension between (5) and (6). We are no longer required to choose between them. This might be a problem for CEO, because the fact that (6) was to be dropped in favour of (5) was used as an argument for dropping (8) in favour of (7). If dropping (6) appears no longer necessary, however, CEO seems to lack an important comparative reason to prefer (7) over (8).

More significantly, the DCO supporter can claim that there is no longer a real tension between (7) and (8) themselves, so that causalism is definitely safe. In fact it seems that – just as any omission – also a mental omission cannot occur unless it is realised in some specific way. RCO naturally extends to include mental omissions. I cannot omit to intend to jump in the pond unless I perform some particular positive mental act alternative to intending to jump in the pond.[13] I may realise my omitting to intend to jump in the pond, for example, by intending to walk away, or by intending to eat an ice-cream, or by perceiving attentively the singing of the birds, or by recalling the dates of the Napoleonic battles, and so on.[14] *This* disjunction of

[13] If we want to extend RCO as to allow that we can mentally omit also when we are passing through portions of time during which we do not mentally act (see Section 1 above), we must say that I cannot omit to intend to jump in the pond unless I perform some particular positive mental act alternative to intending to jump in the pond, *or* – if I am not mentally acting at all – I undergo some particular positive mental event alternative to intending to jump in the pond, like dreaming or hallucinating. We may even decide to allow that – in case I am passing through a portion of time during which I am experiencing no mental event at all, and yet I am alive – my omitting to intend to jump in the pond can be realised by my happening to be in whatever condition or state that make me unable to mentally act or to undergo any mental event. Such extensions of RCO, however, are in no way necessary.

[14] For an attempt to offer a definition of a mental act and its varieties, see e.g. Proust (2001). I take *my intending to omit to jump in the pond* to be a positive mental act, and therefore a possible realiser of *my omitting to intend to jump in the*

mental acts is the disjunction which the mental omission is identical to – each disjunct being a mental act counting as a realiser of the mental omission.[15]

Moreover – just as we considered *my omitting to jump in the pond* as a determinable whose determinates are the specific positive actions that realise it – we can consider *my omitting to intend to jump in the pond* as a determinable whose determinates are the specific positive mental acts that realise it. In other words, also DCO naturally extends to include mental omissions. And since there is no causal competition between a determinable and its determinates, then there is no causal competition between *my intending not to jump in the pond* and *my omitting to intend to jump in the pond*. This is no different from saying that there is no causal tension between (7) and (8). Thus CEO is rejected, and causalism is safe.

A clarification is in order. If my omitting to intend to jump in the pond were non-intentional, then my omitting to jump in the pond – that is supposed to be caused by it – would be non-intentional too. But in the case in which my omitting to jump in the pond were non-intentional, CEO would not be an argument against causalism, since causalism is just a theory of what it is to behave intentionally, and cannot be accused of lacking an explanation with regards to non-intentional pieces of behaviour. Thus I take it that – if CEO has to be a threat to causalism at all – (7) needs to be reformulated into:

(7*) My *intentionally* omitting to intend to jump in the pond caused my intentionally omitting to jump in the pond.

However, as it is manifest, DCO's defence of causalism from CEO is independent from this specification.

5. Some possible objections

pond. Note that, although each omission needs to be realised by some positive action, it does not follow that each act of intending to omit needs to be realised by some act of intending to perform a positive action. In other words, when the omission is just part of the intentional content of a mental act, it obviously does not need to be realised. Also note that *my intending to omit to jump in the pond* is by no means considered as required by *my omitting to intend to jump in the pond* – not even by *my intentionally omitting to intend to jump in the pond* (see Sartorio (2009) and Clarke (2010) for support to the thesis that it is possible to intentionally omit to perform action A_1 without intending to omit to perform action A_1).

[15] Each mental act counting as a realiser of the mental omission is taken to be *incompatible* with the omitted mental action in the sense that it is *psychologically impossible* for the same subject to perform the two mental acts at the same time.

Note that the DCO's advocate does not have to maintain that an omission to intend to perform action A_1 can only be determined by a positive act of intending. Her main claim is different: she maintains that an omission to intend to perform action A_1 – as any mental omission – can only be determined by a positive mental act. I take DCO as being neutral with regards to the issue whether all mental acts require an act of intending. So DCO remains untouched by any case one may present in which an intentional omission to intend to perform action A_1 occurs without the agent's forming any intention – provided that a positive mental act that determines the omission occurs.

Consider, for example, the case in which I am passing by the pond, see the child drowning in it, and start deliberating about what to do. Imagine I can foresee that if I do not make up my mind fast about jumping in the pond, then I will intentionally omit to jump in the pond. Yet I do not form any intention whatsoever, and as a result I intentionally omit to jump in the pond.[16] One could claim that this is a case in which I omit to intend to jump in the pond – and arguably *intentionally* omit to intend to jump in the pond – without positively forming any intention. However, I do not consider this case as a counterexample to the DCO's account of intentional mental omissions. There is no doubt, in fact, that deliberating – or, trying to make a decision – is a positive mental act. And *this* particular occurrence of deliberating is the mental act determining my (intentionally) omitting to intend to jump in the pond in this case. Maybe that deliberating, or trying to make a decision, requires a positive act of intending to deliberate, or to try to make a decision. Yet DCO does not need to commit to such claims. And, all DCO's defence of causalism is committed to is that whenever *omitting to intend to jump in* occurs, necessarily some positive mental act determining it occurs too – just as whenever *being red* occurs, necessarily some specific determinate of *being red* such *being crimson*, *being scarlet* or *being carmine* occurs too.

One could object that RCO, as a broader view of omissions on which this defence of causalism relies on, must be rejected. Specifically, one could object that for some omissions it is not possible for us to identify any action realising them. Take, for example, my *omitting to marry in the past years*. One could argue that

[16] This case is discussed in Sartorio (2009: 527-28) and Clarke (2010: 165-66).

no positive action of mine realised it.[17] Or, consider my *omitting to intend to marry in the past years*. Also in this case, it might be argued that no positive mental action of mine realised it.

Let me first say that some omissions, like most actions, do easily admit a clear spatio-temporal location. Consider, for example, a football match being played at Wembley Stadium in London on May 20, 2018. Imagine that at 4.28pm an attacker falls to the ground after being challenged in the penalty area; the referee points directly to the penalty spot but *then* omits to whistle, so omitting to award a penalty to the team. I will assume that – just as it is admissible to assert that the attacker enters the penalty area at Wembley Stadium in London on May 20, 2018 at 4.28pm – it is equally admissible to assert that the referee omits to award the penalty at Wembley Stadium in London on May 20, 2018 at 4.28pm. Most, if not all, of the omissions of this kind are so in virtue of their being what we may call 'punctual omissions': they can be said to occur at specific *points* (as opposed to *areas*) in space-time.

Since at least some omissions exist that do admit spatio-temporal location, then it seems that any good theory of omissions should posit either that all omissions are spatio-temporally located – adding an explanation of why some of them do not *prima facie* appear to be so, as well as reasonable criteria for determining their spatio-temporal location – or that, while some omissions are spatio-temporally located, some other are not – thus introducing a suspect twofold ontology for omissions that would surely deserve a convincing explanation.

RCO's solution is the first one. All omissions turn out to be spatio-temporally located, although some locations are less intuitive to be determined than others. The main idea under RCO's solution to the dilemma of spatio-temporal location is that all omissions – including those that may seem to lack any positive action realising them, such as my *omitting to marry in the past years* and my *omitting to intend to marry in the past years* – actually do have their own realiser(s). The fact that every omission is positively realised by one or more action grounds the fact that every omission is spatio-temporally located – since the spatio-temporal location of the omission is determined by the spatio-temporal location of the action(s) the omission is realised by.

[17] Clarke (2014: 21) observes that "sometimes there's a lengthy period during all of which one neglects to do a certain thing", and suggests that there is "no principled way of selecting" only one or some positive actions realising such an omission.

It is not difficult for RCO to identify the positive actions realising punctual omissions. If, for example, what the referee does instead of giving the penalty is waving play on, then the positive action realising his punctual omission is his waving play on.[18] We can say that the referee's omission to award the penalty occurred at Wembley Stadium in London on May 20, 2018 at 4.28pm *because* the referee's action realising his omission – i.e. his waving play on – occurred at Wembley Stadium in London on May 20, 2018 at 4.28pm – where the "because" expresses a metaphysical grounding relation holding among the first and the second fact.

Now consider the non-punctual omission consisting in my *omitting to marry in the past years*. If we assume RCO, we can identify it with many different conjunctions of component omissions. One of these conjunction is, for example: *my omitting to marry during the last year*, and *my omitting to marry during the year before it*, and so on. Each of the omissions appearing in the conjunction can be identified in turn with a conjunction of component omissions. If we take, for example, *my omitting to marry during the last year*, we can identify it with the conjunction consisting in *my omitting to marry yesterday*, and *my omitting to marry the day before it*, and so on. If we iterate the process and substitute component omissions for composed omissions, what we finally obtain is a conjunction of *punctual* omissions to be identified with *my omitting to marry in the past years*. The conjunction of positive actions realising this conjunction of punctual omissions is the realiser of *my omitting to marry in the past years*.

As a result, my *omitting to marry in the past years* turns out to have an extended temporal location and a multiple spatial location. Indeed it is realised by many different actions, each occurring in one spatial location being part of the multiple spatial location where the omission occurs, and jointly covering the period of time over which the omission occurs.

We can conclude that – although non-punctual omissions do have much structurally different spatio-temporal locations from punctual omissions – all omissions do have spatio-temporal locations. And, this is in turn

[18] Note that, since an omission is spatio-temporally located where its realiser is, omissions turn out to be truly located in spatio-temporal locations they may not appear to be located in at first sight. Suppose, for example, that I promised my little son to bring him to the football match being played at Wembley Stadium in London on May 20, 2018. Nonetheless I break the promise, and I finish my work at my office instead. My *omitting to be at the football match with my son* is spatially located at my office where its realiser is located, and it is not spatially located at the Wembley Stadium in London, as it could appear to be. Thus I agree with Clarke (2014: 38) that we cannot generally locate omissions where the absent actions would have been.

metaphysically grounded in the fact that all omissions are realised by one or more actions – including those that may seem not so.[19]

Note that, if the positive action that I was performing five minutes ago was drinking a glass of water, then *my drinking a glass of water five minutes ago* realised *my omitting to marry five minutes ago* (the reason being that, in order for me not to marry five minutes ago, it was necessary for me to perform five minutes ago any other action but marrying). And since *my omitting to marry five minutes ago* is a necessary component of *my omitting to marry in the past years*, then *my drinking a glass of water five minutes ago* also partly realises *my omitting to marry in the past years* – in the sense that it appears in the conjunction of positive actions realising it.

The case of *my omitting to intend to marry in the past years* is not different. The conjunction of the positive mental acts realising it includes *my intending to drink a glass of water five minutes ago*, *my intending to pet my dog six minutes ago*, *my focusing attention on a difficult passage of an article seven minutes ago*, and so on. In fact it is trivially true that, had I not performed a mental act other than intending to marry at each instant of time in the past years, I would have intended to marry in the past years. Note that both RCO and DCO entail that whatever is caused by an omission is also caused by the conjunction of the positive actions realising – and determining – it. So, if my having long hair is caused by my omitting to intend to go to the barber's during the last six months, my having long hair is also caused by the conjunction of my intending to drink a glass of water five minutes ago, my intending to pet my dog six minutes ago, my focusing attention on a difficult passage of an article seven minutes ago, and so on.

To sum up, we can conclude that – although many omissions are realised by a conjunction of positive actions rather than by one single positive action – there is no good reason to presume that there are omissions which are not ultimately realised by positive actions. Therefore RCO – as well as DCO and the proposed solution to the apparent incompatibility between (7) and (8) – is not in danger; and we can successfully rescue causalism from CEO.

6. Conclusions

[19] Considering non-punctual omissions as being multiply realisable means considering them as identical to a conjunction of disjunctions of positive actions.

I suggested to see omissions as non-actions needing positive actions to realise them. On this account, I cannot omit to perform action A_1 unless I perform some positive action A_2 alternative to A_1. It is possible to consider any punctual omission as a disjunction of actions, where each action appearing in the disjunction is a possible realiser of the punctual omission. Since extended omissions turn out to be ultimately composed by punctual omissions, we can see an extended omission as a conjunction of disjunctions of actions, where each conjunct is a punctual omission, and each disjunct in the disjunction constituting that conjunct is a possible realiser of the punctual omission.

As a next step, I showed that it is admissible to interpret the relation between an omission and its realiser(s) as a determinable/determinate relation. On this view, an action realising an omission also determines it. Likewise, a mental action realising a mental omission also determines it.

Since it is a reasonable assumption that a determinable does not causally compete with its determinates, we can conclude that an omission does not causally compete with its realisers. What we obtain is a general account of the way in which omissions can cause in spite of their being absences. In particular, we can also conclude that a mental omission like *my omitting to intend to jump in the pond* does not causally compete with any of its realisers, included *my intending not to jump in the pond*. But if this is the case, then CEO seems to be no longer a threat for causalism. In fact, CEO only puts causalism in danger if it can be assumed that there is a tension between (7) and (8) – and that, if we want to say that *my omitting to intend to jump in the pond* causes *x*, then we must deny that *my intending not to jump in the pond* causes *x* either. Thus I conclude that, on the view of omissions I proposed, CEO is no longer a problem for causalism.

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