Intentional Omissions

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Often when one omits to do a certain thing, one’s omission is due to one’s simply not having considered, or one’s having forgotten, to do that thing. When this is so, one does not intentionally omit to do that thing. But sometimes one intentionally omits to do something. For example, Ann was asked by Bob to pick him up at the airport at 2:30 am, after his arrival at 2:00. Feeling tired and knowing that Bob can take a taxi, Ann decides at midnight not to pick him up at 2:30, and she intentionally omits to do so. Other examples of intentional omissions include instances of abstaining, boycotting, and fasting.¹

Intentional omissions would seem to have much in common with intentional actions. But the extent of the similarity is not immediately obvious. Intentional omission has been recognized as a problem for theories of agency, but it is one on which, especially lately, little effort has been expended. My aim here is to advance a conception of intentional omission, address a number of claims that have been made about it, and examine the extent to which an account of it should parallel an account of intentional action. I’ll argue that although there might indeed be interesting differences, there are nevertheless important similarities, and similarities that support a causal approach to agency.

Although much of our interest in omissions concerns responsibility for omitting, my focus is on the metaphysical and mental dimensions of intentional omission. What sort of thing (if it is a thing at all) is an omission? What, if any, mental states or events must figure in cases of intentional omission, and how must they figure? Answers to these questions have some bearing on the moral issue, but the questions are interesting in their own right. And they stand in some degree of mutual independence from the moral issue, as there can be intentional omissions for which no one is responsible, and (on

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the assumption that we can be responsible for anything at all) we can be responsible for omissions that aren’t intentional.2

A preliminary distinction might help clarify the object of my attention. My focus is on cases about which it is correct to say that someone intentionally omits to do something. There are cases of another sort in which we might say that it is intentional of some individual that she doesn’t do a certain thing, but she doesn’t intentionally omit to do it. For example, wanting to ensure that he wouldn’t leap into the sea when he heard the Siren song, Ulysses had himself bound to the mast of his ship. As planned, he didn’t jump into the sea; but he nevertheless didn’t intentionally omit to leap in, for while he could hear the song, he tried his best to free himself and jump into the water.3 Intentionally omitting to \(A\) at \(t\) would seem to require, at least, that one is not at \(t\) trying to \(A\).4

1. Omissions and Actions

Let us call actions of a familiar sort, such as raising one’s arm, walking, or speaking, “positive actions.” It is on positive actions that action theory has, understandably, largely focused. How are omissions related to positive actions? For one thing, when one intentionally omits to \(A\), is one’s omission identical with some intentional positive action that one then performs?

Perhaps sometimes it is. Imagine a child crouching behind a chair and holding still for several minutes while playing hide and seek.5 The child’s holding still is arguably an intentional action; 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, at least much of which arguably results from the child’s intending to hold still. The child’s not moving is an intentional omission. And perhaps the child’s not moving in this case is just her holding still.6

It might be objected that the child might have not moved even if she hadn’t intentionally held still—she could have been frozen stiff. But we may grant this possibility without accepting that the child’s holding still (that particular event) is distinct from her not moving, just as we may grant that on some occasion when I walked slowly, I might have walked without walking slowing, without thereby committing ourselves to the implausible view that I performed two acts of walking when I walked slowly.

On a minimizing view of act individuation, when one flips the switch, turns on the light, illuminates the room, and startles the burglar, one might perform only one action, which might be intentional under some of these descriptions and unintentional under others (Davidson 1980: 4–5; cf. Anscombe 1957: 46). Having flipped the switch, it might be said, there is nothing further that one must do to turn on the light, etc.

One competing view takes actions to be instantiations of act-properties, and holds that actions are nonidentical if they are instantiations of different
act-properties (Goldman 1970: 10). Such an account will take one’s turning on the light and one’s startling the burglar to be different actions. But even this second view may count the walking and the walking slowly as one action, for an instantiation of a given act-property can be designated by each of several different expressions (cf. Bennett 1988: 93). And, similarly, either of these two views may count the child’s holding still as identical with her not moving.

An extreme maximizing view combines the second account of what an action is with the claim that we have the same act-property only when we have the same act-description. On such an extreme view, it will be the case that no omission (nothing described as an omission) is identical with any positive action. Setting aside such a view, we may allow that in some cases there is such an identity.

A further consideration favors this allowance. One might for a time plan not to $A$, but then change one’s mind and decide to $A$. An agent in such a case who realizes that she has a tendency to absent-mindedly revert to abandoned plans might form an intention not to omit to $A$ as well as the intention to $A$. She might then not just intentionally $A$ but also intentionally omit to omit to $A$. In such a case, her omission would seem to be just her action of $A$-ing.

But in many cases—perhaps in most—one's intentionally omitting to $A$ at a certain time isn’t identical with any positive action that one then performs. Ann intentionally omits to pick up Bob at 2:30. Suppose that, though feeling too tired to go out, Ann is at home playing piano from 2:00 to 3:00. Her playing piano, let’s imagine, keeps her neighbor awake. It isn’t Ann’s omitting to pick up Bob that keeps the neighbor awake (cf. Lewis 2004: 282; Sartorio 2009: 518). Her omitting to pick up Bob isn’t her playing piano, nor does it seem to be any other positive action that Ann performs. And there are similar reasons in many cases of intentional omission for denying the identity of the omission with any positive action that one then intentionally performs.

In a case in which one’s intentional omission isn’t itself some positive action that one performs, must one intentionally perform some other positive action during some relevant time period? Suppose that it is $A$-ing during the interval $t$ that one intentionally omits. Must one have intentionally performed during $t$ some positive action other than $A$-ing?

We are almost always, during our waking lives, intentionally doing something. Besides performing overt bodily actions, we attend to things, concentrate, try to think of or remember something, etc. So it might come close to a trivial truth that when one intentionally omits to $A$ at $t$, one is, at $t$, intentionally doing something else. But it isn’t a truth. Ann intentionally doesn’t pick up Bob at 2:30. This might be so even if she went to bed at 1:00, is sound asleep at 2:30, and isn’t intentionally performing any positive actions at that later time.
A related claim is that refraining from $A$-ing requires performing some other action to prevent oneself from $A$-ing (Brand 1971: 49). One might take refraining to be something different from intentionally omitting, though I doubt that ordinary language precludes an overlap. In any case, the claim is mistaken about refraining. I might comply with instructions to refrain from touching a freshly painted object until it’s dry. There might be several things I do while refraining, but there need be nothing that I do in order to prevent myself from touching the object (cf. Vermazen 1985: 103; Walton 1980: 322).

If no positive action is required at $t$, and none need be performed in order to prevent oneself from $A$-ing, does intentionally omitting to $A$ at $t$ nevertheless require that one intentionally perform some positive action at $t$ or earlier, such that one believes one can’t both intentionally do that then and $A$ at $t$ (as Zimmerman [1981: 547] claims)? When I comply with the instructions not to touch the painted object, I might remain standing where I am—within easy reach of the object—my arms hanging freely at my sides, whistling a tune. I needn’t believe that my standing there whistling is incompatible with my touching the object (obviously it isn’t). 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.

If intentional omissions are not always identical with positive actions, and if one need not, at any relevant time, perform any other positive action when one intentionally omits to $A$, are intentional omissions nevertheless acts, even if “negative acts”? One might take them to be such because, one holds, they fulfill intentions and forming an intention is an act (McIntyre 1985: 93). But intentions can be nonactively acquired as well as actively formed in making decisions. (See, for example, Audi 1993: 64 and Mele 2003: 200–1.) One might wish to call even nonactively coming to have an intention a “mental act,” but we should not lose sight of the difference between such an occurrence and an intentional action.

We might decide to call intentional omissions “acts of omission” simply because they’re intentional, or on the grounds that (we think) they express intentions. (Whether intentionally omitting requires having a pertinent intention is a question I’ll address below.) There is warrant for this choice of terminology, as what is done intentionally is, in some sense, a manifestation of agency. (I’ll return to this point in section 6.)

Still, we ought not assume that intentional positive actions and such negative acts are thoroughly alike. The question of whether there are in fact significant differences arises at several points in the discussion to follow. Since it will be convenient to have an economic way to refer specifically to positive actions, henceforth when I use ‘action’ or ‘act’ without qualification, I intend positive action. Using the terms this way is, of course, meant to be consistent with what I observed in the preceding paragraph.
2. Absences

When an omission isn’t itself an action, what is it? It would seem to be an absence, an absence of an action. Ann’s intentional omission is the absence of an action by her of picking up Bob at the airport at 2:30.

What is such an absence? One might take it to be a negative event, or a negative state of affairs, or the instantiation of a negative property. Any such view is problematic, for there are good reasons to deny the existence of such negative entities. (See, for example, Armstrong 1978: 23–29.)

One alternative view holds that when one omits to do a certain thing, one stands in the not-causing relation to a certain (positive) event. For example, “when I refrain from shooting a child, it might be appropriate to say that I stand in the ‘not-causing’ relation to the event, ‘the child’s being shot by me’” (Fischer 1985–1986: 265). Aside from quarrels about a relation of not-causing, the suggestion is objectionable on the grounds that no one stands in any genuine relation to any nonexistent thing; relations require relata (Lewis 2004: 283). Typically, if one refrains from shooting a child, there is no event that is the child’s being shot by oneself.

Omissions aren’t, of course, the only sort of absence. The world is missing certain events, states of affairs, objects, and properties. Arguably, the absences of these things aren’t queer sorts of entities; they aren’t beings or things at all, simply absences of things (Kukso 2006: 29; Lewis 2004: 282). The view is available, and with much to recommend it, that when Ann doesn’t pick up Bob, her omission is such an absence, and nothing more, even if more is required for it to be an intentional omission.

It can seem puzzling just when and where omissions occur. Does Ann omit to pick up Bob at midnight, when she decides not to pick him up, or at 2:30, when she isn’t at the airport to pick him up, or during some portion, or all, of the interval from that earlier time to the later one? Does her omission take place at her house, where Ann is located throughout that interval, or at the airport, or along the route that Ann would have taken had she gone to pick up Bob? If omissions (those that aren’t actions) are absences, and absences aren’t things, then (these) omissions don’t occur anytime or anywhere. There isn’t an action by Ann at 2:30 of picking up Bob at the airport. The time and place in question are some pertinent time and place at which there isn’t such an action. That there isn’t such an action at that time and place is what it is for there to be such an absence.

Which absences of actions are omissions? Some philosophers (e.g., Fischer [1985–1986: 264–65]) take it that there is an omission anytime an agent does not perform a certain action. Somewhat less generously, others (e.g., Zimmerman [1981: 545]) hold that there is an omission whenever (and only when) an agent is able to perform some action $A$ and does not $A$.

Whether omitting to $A$ requires that one be able to $A$ is a complicated matter, for there are several different sorts of thing each of which may fairly
be called an ability to act. Arguably, some type of ability to do other than what one actually does is ruled out if determinism is true. Some other types of unmanifested abilities, such as talents or skills, general capacities, or powers to do certain things, are plainly compatible with determinism. Similarly, it seems that in cases of preemptive overdetermination, in which an agent does a certain thing on her own, but would have been made to do it anyway had she not done it on her own, some type of ability to do otherwise is precluded, while the agent might nonetheless retain a capacity or power to act that, it is ensured, she won’t exercise.10

It hardly seems to follow from the truth of determinism that no one ever omits to send holiday greetings, wear their seat belts, and so forth, or that we never abstain, boycott, or fast. It doesn’t seem credible that omitting to A, or that intentionally omitting to A, requires that one have any sort of ability to A that would be ruled out by determinism. And agents in cases of preemptive overdetermination might omit to do things that, in some sense, they’re unable to do.11

On the other hand, lacking an ability of another sort can seem to preclude one’s intentionally omitting to do a certain thing. We might plausibly judge that an agent who intended not to get out of bed, and who didn’t so act, didn’t intentionally omit to get out of bed if, unbeknownst to her, she was paralyzed and wouldn’t have risen from bed even if she had tried (Ginet 2004: 108).12 I suspect that it would be a delicate matter to say exactly what type of ability to act is required for omission, or for intentional omission, and I’ll not attempt that project here.

Although for some purposes we might wish to say that there is an omission whenever an agent doesn’t perform a certain action that she is, in a relevant sense, able to perform, we don’t commonly use the term so broadly. Setting aside cases of intentional omission and those in which it is intentional of some agent that she doesn’t do a certain thing, in ordinary contexts we tend to take ‘omission’ to be applicable only when an action isn’t performed despite being recommended or required by some norm (not necessarily a moral norm) (cf. Feinberg 1984: 161; Smith 1990; Williams 1995: 337). We may sensibly count as omissions only those absences of actions that satisfy some such restriction (as well as whatever ability requirement is appropriate).

In any case, since the focus here is on intentional omissions, the absences that count will be restricted in a different way. Only absences of actions in cases in which the agents have certain mental states are intentional omissions.

3. Intentions

At least generally, in cases of intentional action, the agent has some intention with relevant content. Typically, when I intentionally walk, I intend to walk. However, arguably, even if intentionally A-ing requires having an intention, it
doesn’t require intending to $A$ (or having an intention to $A$). While walking, I might intentionally take a certain step, without intending specifically to take that step. It might suffice that while taking that step I intend to walk then, I’m a competent walker fully capable at the moment of exercising that competence, there’s no obstacle requiring any special adjustment of my walking, and my taking that step results in a normal way from my intending to walk then. (On this type of case, see Mele 1997: 242–43; I’ll describe below some further cases in which, apparently, one can intentionally $A$ without intending to $A$.)

Does intentionally omitting to $A$ require having some intention with relevant content? If so, what content must the intention have? And when must one have the intention?

Suppose that one intentionally omits to $A$ during $t$. Must one (as Ginet [2004] maintains) intend throughout the interval $t$ not to $A$?13

No. Some actions require preparation, and preparatory steps must sometimes be taken by a certain time prior to the action in question. If I am to attend a meeting in a distant city on Monday afternoon, I must earlier book a flight, get to the airport, and so forth. Suppose that having decided not to attend, I intentionally don’t perform such preparatory actions. Having forgone the preparations, I have no further need of the intention not to attend, and with other things on my mind, I may dispense with it. (The claim isn’t that the intention couldn’t be retained, only that it need not be.) Nevertheless, when I don’t show up at the meeting, I might intentionally omit to do so.14

Does intentionally omitting to $A$ during $t$ require having, at some relevant time, an intention not to $A$? Several writers (e.g., Ginet [2004] and Zimmerman [1981]) have claimed that it does, but again the claim appears mistaken. An intention with some other content might do.

Suppose that Charles wants to abstain from smoking for a week, but he thinks it unlikely that he’ll succeed. Cautious fellow that he is, Charles forms only an intention to try not to smoke. He plans to spend time with friends who don’t smoke, to chew gum to diminish his desire to smoke, and so forth, which he hopes will enable him to resist the temptation. Suppose that Charles then makes the effort and succeeds, and there’s nothing magical or fluky about his success: his plan works just as he hoped it would. Charles omits to smoke because he tries not to smoke. He intentionally omits to smoke for a week, even though he didn’t have an intention not to smoke for a week.15

The case parallels one of action in which, though thinking success unlikely, one intends to try to $A$, one makes the effort, and one unexpectedly succeeds. If the success isn’t a fluke, one might then have intentionally $A$-ed without having intended to $A$ (cf. Mele 1992: 131–33).

It might be objected that Charles has it as his aim or goal that he not smoke, and to take something as an aim or goal is to intend that thing.16 But one can have something as a hoped-for goal without intending that
thing. Arguably, there is a negative belief constraint on rationally intending, such that it isn’t rational to intend to \( A \) while believing that one probably won’t succeed.\(^{17}\) Given his expectations, Charles might take abstaining from smoking for a week only as a hoped-for goal, intending no more than to try his best.

Some different cases also suggest that one might intentionally omit to \( A \) without intending to omit to \( A \). Suppose that while walking in the countryside you come to a fork in the path. You’re aware that the path on the left is more pleasant, and you realize that should you take the path on the right your walk will be less enjoyable. Suppose that you nevertheless decide to take path on the right (perhaps believing that path shorter), and you then do so, aware that in so doing you aren’t taking the left path. It seems that you needn’t intend not to take the left path in order for it to be the case that you intentionally don’t take (omit to take) that path.

As several theorists see it, one can carry out an intention to \( A \) and be aware that by \( A \)-ing one will do something \( B \), without then intending to \( B \), and yet intentionally \( B \). This might be so when one is aware of a reason not to \( B \) and one decides to \( A \) despite that consideration. For example, I might intentionally start my car in the morning despite being aware that (since my car is very noisy) by so doing I’ll disturb my neighbors’ sleep. I might then intentionally disturb them without having intended to do so (Ginet 1990: 76; cf. Harman 1997: 151–52).\(^{18}\) Examples such as that in the preceding paragraph make an equally strong case for the view that one can carry out an intention to \( A \) and be aware that, in intentionally \( A \)-ing, one will not do something \( B \), without then intending not to \( B \), and yet intentionally omit to \( B \).\(^{19}\)

Must any intention with relevant content figure in the history of an intentional omission? Suppose that I see a child struggling in a pond but intentionally omit to jump into the water to save the child. I don’t intend to jump in. Might it suffice for my omitting to jump in to be intentional that this omission results from my intentionally omitting to intend to jump in (as Sartorio [2009: 523] suggests)?\(^{20}\)

What would make it the case that my not intending to jump in is itself an intentional omission? One might say: “I voluntarily failed to form that intention, after deliberating about whether to do so, after considering reasons for and against doing so, etc.” (Sartorio 2009: 523). But the claim that my failure to intend was voluntary seems to presuppose that, rather than explain how, it was intentional. And that my not intending to jump in comes after deliberation about whether to do so, and after consideration of reasons for and against jumping in, does not suffice to make my not so intending intentional. I might have simply failed to make up my mind.

Suppose the case unfolds this way. I deliberate about whether to jump in or not, never making up my mind. As I continue deliberating, I realize that the child is drowning and I’m doing nothing to save her. In this version of
the case, do I intentionally omit to jump in to save the child despite having no intention with pertinent content?

Deliberating is itself activity, and typically it is intentional activity. (We can intentionally try to think of relevant considerations, intentionally turn attention to one thing or another, intentionally try to make up our minds.) I am engaged in that activity as I stand on the shore. Presumably, I intend to deliberate, or something of that sort, and as I watch the child drowning, I carry out an intention to continue deliberating, all the while aware that in doing so I am failing to rescue the child. My mental state includes an intention that is relevant to my omission. Just as, in the earlier case of the forking paths, your not taking the left path might be intentional even though you don’t intend not to take that path, so here my not jumping in might be intentional even though I don’t form an intention not to jump in. In both cases, one’s mental state includes some relevant intention, together with an awareness that, in acting as one intends, one won’t perform a certain other action that one has reason to perform.

Might some combination of wanting not to \( A \) and awareness that one is not \( A \)-ing suffice, as far as having the required attitudes goes, for intentionally omitting to \( A \)? Just as one can desire to \( A \) without being committed to \( A \)-ing, so one can desire not to \( A \) without being committed to not \( A \)-ing. And just as desiring to \( A \), together with an awareness that one is \( A \)-ing, does not suffice, as far as having the required attitudes goes, for intentionally \( A \)-ing, so it seems having the desire and the awareness is not enough for one’s omission to be intentional. Someone who sees the child in trouble might want not to jump in to help, and she might be aware that she’s not jumping in, but she might nevertheless not intentionally omit to jump in. She might not be committed to not jumping in, or to anything else at that moment.

If, as appears to be the case, intentionally omitting requires having an intention with relevant content, what content counts as relevant? The concept of intentional omission, like that of intentional action, is vague. There are cases in which the agent clearly has a relevant intention, cases in which the agent clearly does not, and cases in which it is unclear whether the content of any intention possessed by the agent is suitably relevant. In the last of these cases, it might be unclear whether the agent intentionally omits to act. Besides saying that, for intentionally omitting to \( A \), intentions other than one not to \( A \) can have relevant content, I doubt that there is much more to say on this point.

Several further observations can be made about intentions in cases of intentional omission. On a widely held view, the representational content of an intention to act is an action plan, and the attitudinal mode is that of being settled or committed: intending to perform an action of \( A \)-ing is being settled on or committed to \( A \)-ing (see, e.g., Mele 1992: chs. 8 & 9). When one intends not to \( A \), the content of one’s plan is not-to-\( A \). There is no need to see the attitudinal mode as any different from that of intending to act.
Sometimes, in intentionally omitting something, one performs some action as a means to that omission (e.g., chewing gum so that one won’t smoke). An intention to omit to \( A \) can include a more or less elaborate plan for so omitting. But there are cases in which one’s intention not to \( A \) need not include any plan at all about how not to \( A \). One need not always, in order to intentionally omit to \( A \), perform or intend to perform any action at all as a means to not \( A \)-ing.\(^{21}\)

Moreover (contrary to Wilson 1989: 137–42), no intention that one has in a case of intentional omission need refer to anything that the agent in fact does; the agent need not intend of some positive behavior in which she engages that it not be (or not include, or be done instead of, or be allowed not to be, or not allow her to perform) the omitted action (cf. Ginet 2004: 104–6). Ann intends not to pick up Bob at the airport. She need not also intend of her piano playing, or of her going to bed, or of anything else, any of the suggested things. (I might boycott veal for the remainder of my life, without intending of any particular thing I do—and certainly without intending of all of it—that it not be the purchasing of veal.)

At least generally, when one intentionally omits to \( A \), for some relevant time period, one does not intend to \( A \). Certainly one might have earlier intended to \( A \) and have since changed one’s mind. And one might cease to intend to \( A \) and come to intend not to \( A \) without ever revoking one’s earlier intention. One might forget that one so intends, cease to so intend because one so forgets, and not remember the earlier intention when one later acquires the intention not to \( A \). Finally, just as one can have a nonoccurrent intention to act of which one is unaware and intentionally do something contrary to that intention, so one can have a nonoccurrent intention to \( A \) and yet intentionally omit to \( A \). Intentionally omitting to \( A \) does not strictly require (for any time period) not intending to \( A \).

4. Causes

On a widely held view of intentional action, mental states or events (or their neural realizers)\(^{22}\) play a significant causal role in each case of intentional action. It might seem that if many intentional omissions are absences, then such omissions aren’t caused by the agents’ mental states (or by events involving those agents).

The conditional might be affirmed on the grounds that absences can’t be causes or effects.\(^{23}\) The issue is a contentious one, with many writers on causation holding that absences can indeed cause and be caused. Even some (e.g., Kukso [2006] and Lewis [2004]) who take absences not to be entities at all hold that there can be causation of and by absences.

However, it has been argued (by Sartorio [2009]) that even if absences can be causes and effects, in a case of intentional omission, it isn’t the agent’s
intending something that causes her omission; it is, rather, her not intending something that causes the omission.

Suppose that Diana is standing by a pond eating ice cream when she sees a child struggling in the water. Diana decides not to jump in to save the child, she intentionally omits to jump in, and the child drowns. One might think that if absences can be caused, then Diana’s intending not to jump in is a cause of her not jumping in. However, the argument goes, it is instead her not intending to jump in that causes her omission.

The argument appeals to an analogy between what causes the child’s death and what causes Diana’s omitting to jump into the water. Suppose that, instead of jumping in, Diana remains on the shore and continues eating ice cream. Consider the following two candidates for causes of the child’s death: Diana’s eating ice cream on the shore, and her not jumping into the water. Assuming that absences can be causes, clearly the latter causes the death; the child dies because Diana doesn’t jump in to save her. Moreover, Diana’s eating ice cream isn’t an additional cause of the death. The child dies because of what Diana doesn’t do, and not because of what she does instead. In fact, it’s irrelevant that Diana goes on eating ice cream; all that matters is that she fails to jump in to save the child.

Now, the argument continues, the question of what causes Diana’s not jumping in should be answered in an analogous way. Consider these two candidates: her intending not to jump in, and her not intending to jump in. Again, assuming that absences can be causes, the latter clearly causes Diana’s not jumping into the water; she omits to jump in because she doesn’t intend to jump in. And again, we shouldn’t say that her intending not to jump in also causes her omitting to jump in. She omits to jump in because of what she doesn’t intend, and not because of what she does intend. In fact, it’s irrelevant that she intends not to jump in; all that matters is that she doesn’t intend to jump in.

I don’t know whether absences can be causes or effects, and although I find the argument just presented less than fully convincing, I’m far from sure that it’s mistaken. I’ll suppose, for the sake of argument, that (many or all) intentional omissions that are absences aren’t caused by the agents’ mental states (or by mental events involving those agents), either because absences can’t be caused, or because absences of mental states or events cause these omissions. Still, I contend, the agents’ mental states (or mental events involving those agents) play a causal role in such cases, one that parallels, in interesting respects, the role they are required by causal theories of action to play in cases of intentional action. 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.

If Diana’s omission to jump into the water is caused by her not intending to jump in, the omission’s being so-caused evidently isn’t what renders it an intentional omission. There might be other folks on the shore who also
don’t intend to jump in, who also don’t jump in, whose not intending to
jump in is as good a candidate for a cause of their omission as Diana’s is of
hers, but who nevertheless don’t intentionally omit to jump in. Perhaps the
lifeguard fails to notice that the child is in trouble; perhaps someone else,
though noticing the trouble, doesn’t think of jumping in to help.

We’ve seen reason to think that in order to intentionally omit to \( A \), one
must have an intention with relevant content. As the story goes, Diana has
such an intention: in deciding not to jump into the water, she forms an
intention not to jump in.

Is it enough for Diana’s omission to be intentional simply that she have
this intention? Need the intention do anything at all? Suppose that, upon
deciding not to jump in, Diana immediately wonders what to do instead,
forms an intention to walk over to get a better view of the impending tragedy,
and then does so (eating her ice cream all the while). In the normal case,
we would take it that the intention not to jump in is among the causes of
this subsequent sequence of thought and action.\(^{26}\) Moreover, this causal role
seems more than incidental; if we suppose that the intention causes no such
things, then it no longer seems that we have a case of intentional omission.

Suppose that Diana’s intention not to jump in, whatever it is—some
distributed state of her brain, perhaps—comes to exist with the usual causal
powers of such a state but is from its start prevented from causally influencing
anything—prevented, that is, from manifesting its powers. Just after deciding
not to jump in, Diana happens to wonder what to do instead, decides to
walk over for a better view, then does so. Something causes this stream of
thought and action—perhaps a chip implanted earlier in Diana’s brain by a
team of neuroscientists, who just happen to have picked the present moment
to test their device—but her intention not to jump in isn’t a cause of any of
what Diana does. In this case, does she intentionally omit to jump into the
water?

It seems clear that she does not. Her not jumping in is intended—and
she’s guilty of so intending—but she 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 she 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.

The case is analogous to one in which an agent intends to perform a
certain action, the appropriate bodily movement occurs, but the agent doesn’t
perform the intended action, because his intention is ineffective. Unaware
that my arm has become paralyzed, I might intend to raise it now. Unaware
that I currently so intend, my doctor might test the new motor-control
device that she implanted in me during recent surgery. It’s sheer coincidence
that the movement caused by the doctor accords with my intention, and I
don’t intentionally raise my arm.
Lest one think that Diana’s not jumping in fails to be intentional because, it might now seem, her omission doesn’t counterfactually depend on her not intending to jump in, suppose that the implanted chip has an unforeseen flaw: it will remain inert if, when the activation signal is sent to it, the agent in whose brain it’s implanted has just decided to jump into water. In any case, an omission’s being intentional doesn’t require that the omission depend counterfactually on the absence of an intention to perform the action in question. Diana might intentionally omit to jump into the water even if, had she acquired an intention to jump in, she might have changed her mind.

In some cases, the role played by an intention not to act might be less pronounced. Suppose that having decided not to jump in to help, Diana simply stays where she is and continues eating her ice cream. Arguably, an intention she already had—to eat the ice cream—causes her continuing activity. Nevertheless, there would seem also to be a causal role played by her newly formed intention not to jump in. That intention might play a sustaining role, contributing to her continuing to intend to stand there eating the ice cream, and thus to her continuing activity. As intentions usually do, this one could be expected to inhibit further consideration of the question that it settles—the question of whether to help the child. It thereby causally influences Diana’s flow of thought. And it might play a causal role that isn’t just a matter of what it in fact causes, that of standing ready to cause behavior in accord with its content, should that be necessary.

Generally, there is much less that an intention not to act must do in order to succeed than is required of an intention to act. Where A-ing is performing some positive action, A-ing generally requires that one’s behavior fall within some fairly narrow range of possible behaviors, while not A-ing generally requires only that one’s behavior remain outside—anywhere outside—some quite narrow range. Hence, the work demands on intentions not to act are usually comparatively light. They can generally succeed by doing relatively little. But if they had no work to do at all—or if in fact they typically did no work at all—it would be a wonder that we ever bother to form such intentions.

The similarity between intentional action and intentional omission appears to go further. In both cases, if one’s intention causes what it causes in some peculiar way, so that one has no control over what follows it, then we don’t have a case in which something is done intentionally. It’s a common observation in action theory that an intention might cause the intended behavior and yet that behavior not constitute intentional action, if the causal pathway is wayward or deviant. Something similar would seem to be so in the case of intentional omissions. Ann might intentionally omit to pick up Bob at the airport at 2:30 even if she’s asleep at 2:30, but we won’t have a case of intentional omission if her falling asleep happens this way: her forming the intention not to pick up Bob immediately (and unexpectedly) triggers a prolonged episode of narcolepsy.
If, in a case of intentional omission, an intention with relevant content must indeed play a causal role in the course of what does occur, then, in many cases at least, there is an important sense in which intentional omissions result from intentions not to act, even if such intentions don’t cause the omissions. Suppose that Diana’s standing on the shore eating ice cream at time $t$ is caused by (among other things) her intention (formed prior to $t$) not to jump in. It can’t be that at $t$ she’s standing on the shore and at $t$ she’s jumping into the water; the one precludes the other. Her not jumping in is a consequence of (it results from) her intending not to jump in, even if it isn’t a causal consequence. (Note that this holds as well if the omission, because it is an absence, can’t be caused by anything.)

A standard causal theory of action holds that, in a case of intentional action, an intention with relevant content must appropriately cause certain agent-involving events. It seems that in a case of intentional omission, likewise, an intention with relevant content must play an appropriate causal role with respect to what happens.

In the latter case, no specific intention is required, at no particular time, and what intention there is need not cause any specific type of thing—it need not, for example, directly cause any action. Still, there are imaginable cases in which no intention with relevant content is present at any pertinent time, or in which, though present, such an intention causes nothing, or causes what it does in such a way that control is lost. And in such cases, it does not seem that the omission is intentional. The apparent need for the appropriate causal effectiveness of a pertinent intention is nontrivial, and it constitutes an interesting and important similarity between intentional action and intentional omission.

5. Omitting for Reasons

Generally, intentional actions are actions performed for reasons. Likewise, typically when one intentionally omits to $A$, one omits for a reason. Ann omits to pick up Bob at the airport because she’s tired and (she knows) he can take a taxi. What, if anything, is the causal role of the reasons for which one intentionally omits?

According to causal theories of action, when one acts for reasons, the reasons for which one acts (or mental states with those reasons as their objects—for brevity I’ll henceforth ignore this alternative) are causes of one’s action. On the supposition that causal theories are correct about the role of reasons in cases of intentional action, in cases of intentional omission in which the omission is itself an action, the role of reasons is the same. On that same supposition, in cases of intentional omission in which the omission is not an action, reasons still seem to play a causal role.
Intentionally omitting to \( A \), it appears, requires having at some pertinent time an intention with relevant content. Reasons for which one intentionally omits to \( A \) would play the same role in causing such an intention as do reasons in causing the intention to act that one has when one intentionally \( A \)-s. (This is so in Diana’s case as well as in cases like that of the forking paths.)

I’ve argued, further, that if in fact an intention with relevant content is required, then when one intentionally omits to \( A \), such an intention is a cause of one’s subsequent thought and action—it plays a causal role with respect to events that do occur. Reasons for which one omits to \( A \) would, on our supposition, play a similar role, by way of causing one’s intention. Even if one’s intention not to \( A \) (or other relevant intention) doesn’t cause one’s omission, there is causal work for the reasons for which one omits to \( A \).

6. Agency, Actions, and Omissions

Still, if for either of the reasons identified at the start of section 4, intentional omissions that are absences aren’t caused by the agents’ intentions, does this fact constitute trouble for “causalism as an attempt to explain what it is for an agent to behave intentionally” (Sartorio 2009: 513)? It presents no problem for causal theories of action. Such theories are not theories of omissions that aren’t actions, and they strictly imply nothing about such things.

We might sensibly construe agency more broadly as encompassing all that is done intentionally, and so as including intentional omissions. At least typically, things done intentionally fulfill intentions and are done for reasons. Such things may fairly be said to be manifestations of our agency. We might then wonder about the prospects for a causal theory of this broader phenomenon.

But with agency so construed, it should not be expected that it must be possible to construct a uniform theory of it, for the phenomenon itself lacks uniformity, including, as it does, actions as well as things that aren’t actions. It will be no fault of any theory of intentional action if it does not apply, in a straightforward way, to all of what is then counted as intentional agency. And a comprehensive theory of agency (if any such thing is possible) might play out one way in the case of action and another in the case of omission. If such an account has to have a disjunctive character, that need might accurately reflect the diversity of its subject matter.

We might nevertheless expect that the right account of intentional omission will resemble in important respects the right account of intentional action. If what I’ve said here is correct, the resemblance to causal theories of action is significant. But to the extent that omissions that aren’t actions are unlike actions, it should not be surprising that the similarity is imperfect.\textsuperscript{32}
Notes

1 The last two of these, and more, are mentioned by McIntyre (1985).

2 Some theorists (e.g., Bennett [2008: 49]) hold that one is responsible for something only if one is either blameworthy or praiseworthy for that thing. Plainly on this view there can be intentional omissions—those that are morally neutral or indifferent—for which no one is responsible. But there can be such omissions even if there can be moral responsibility for morally neutral things. Some agents (e.g., young children, or people suffering from certain mental illnesses) lacking some of the capacities required for responsibility nevertheless engage in intentional action and intentionally omit to do certain things. And while many theorists hold that responsibility for unintentional omissions must stem from something done intentionally, others (e.g., Smith [2005]) deny this claim. In sum, the relation between responsibility and what is done intentionally is both complex and contested. This fact constitutes one reason for taking a direct approach to the topic of intentional omission.

3 Cf. Mele 2003: 152 and McIntyre 1985: 47–48. McIntyre draws the distinction as one between intentionally omitting and its being intentional on one's part that one omits. Note that we might say that Ulysses intentionally prevented himself from jumping into the sea. We should then recognize that one can intentionally prevent oneself from doing a certain thing and yet not intentionally omit to do that thing. Finally, one might take this case to support the view that intentionally omitting to do something requires that one be able to do it. I briefly discuss such a requirement in section 2 below.

4 ‘To A’ is used throughout as a stand-in for expressions indicating types of positive action, such as to raise one’s arm or to speak.

5 The example is from Mele (1997: 232), though he employs it for a different purpose.

6 Note that the child doesn’t simply prevent herself from moving; she both intentionally holds still and intentionally omits to move. Unlike Ulysses, at the time in question she isn’t trying to do what she does not do.

7 This kind of case was suggested in conversation by Al Mele. Note that one can omit to intentionally omit to do something, and yet not do it. I might plan not to A, forget my plan, but also not think to do A (and thus not A).

8 But can’t we think about nonexistent things? Sure, but the intentionality or directedness of a thought isn’t a genuine relation (Brentano 1995: 271–74; cf. Molnar 2003: 62).

9 Fischer and Zimmerman make these claims with respect to a “broad” conception of omission; both recognize that there are narrower conceptions.

10 Cases of this sort are offered by Frankfurt (1969) to rebut the thesis that one can be responsible for omitting to do certain things even though they’re unable to do those things. See, for example, Byrd 2007; Clarke 1994; Fischer 1985–1986; Fischer and Ravizza 1998: ch. 5; McIntyre 1994; and Sartorio 2005. Participants in this debate evidently take there to be some type of ability to A that isn’t required for omitting to A.

11 Ginet takes the case to support his claim that intentionally not A-ing at t requires that one could have A-ed at t (or at least could have done something by which one might have A-ed at t). I’ve suggested that whether the requirement holds depends on which type of ability to act is being invoked.

12 To be precise, it is “intentionally not doing” that is the target of Ginet’s analysis. However, his examples are cases of what I’m calling intentional omissions.

13 McIntyre (1985: 79–80) discusses a similar case, though for a different purpose.

14 Al Mele suggested this case in conversation.

15 The objection was raised by a referee for this journal.

16 For discussion of such a requirement, see Mele 1992: ch. 8. Bratman’s video-game case (1987: 113–15) supports a different line of argument for the claim that one can take something
as a hoped-for goal, and try to achieve it, without intending it. The case also supports the view that one can intentionally \( A \) without intending to \( A \).

18 Some writers distinguish between “direct intention” and “oblique intention,” holding that although one might lack a direct intention to bring about certain consequences, one has an oblique intention to bring them about if one’s so doing is foreseen (or considered likely or certain). (The distinction stems from Bentham [1996 : 86].) An oblique intention is said to be “a kind of knowledge or realisation” (Williams 1987: 421).

Such a state differs importantly from what action theorists commonly call intention. The latter is typically distinguished by its characteristic functional role. Having an intention to perform a certain action at some point in the non-immediate future (a future-directed intention) tends to inhibit subsequent deliberation about whether to do that thing (though having such an intention doesn’t altogether preclude reconsideration); it tends to inhibit consideration of actions obviously incompatible with what is intended; and it tends to promote further reasoning about means to what is intended. When one becomes aware that the time for action has arrived, a future-directed intention to act tends to cause (or become) an intention to act straightaway. Such a present-directed intention tends to cause an attempt to perform the intended action. When carried out, a present directed intention typically triggers, sustains, and guides action, often in response to feedback. (Bratman [1987] and Mele [1992: part 2] develop this conception of intention.) So-called oblique intentions don’t play such a role in practical reasoning or action.

One might suggest that actions that are only obliquely intended can only be obliquely intentional. It is hard to see more to the claim than an acknowledgment that an action can be intentional even though the agent lacked an intention (of the sort just characterized) to perform it.

19 I’ve described several cases (that of an individual step taken while walking, that of trying to do something when one expects not to succeed, and that of foreseen consequences that one has reason to avoid) that have been taken to undermine a certain thesis about intentional action, viz., that intentionally \( A \)-ing requires intending to \( A \). As a referee observed, one might seek to defend that thesis by appealing to a distinction between an action’s being intentional (under some description or other) and its being intentional under a certain specified description. One might claim, for example, that while what I do when I take the step is intentional under some description (such as ‘walking’), it isn’t intentional under the description, ‘taking that step’. I don’t myself find this claim convincing. However, it isn’t my aim here to refute the indicated thesis. What I’ve aimed to do is present some forceful considerations that have been brought against it and show that there is an equally strong, largely parallel case to be made against the view that intentionally omitting to \( A \) requires intending not to \( A \).

20 Sartorio is mainly concerned to argue that no intention need cause an intentional omission. Though she seems doubtful that any relevant intention need even be possessed, she doesn’t commit herself on this latter question.

21 Sartorio (2009: 528, n. 22) suggests that “negative intentions” might have to be rejected, for “it’s hard to say what the plan might be in the case of omissions.” In some cases, one’s plan for not \( A \)-ing might be just not-to-\( A \).

22 Some causalists (e.g., Mele [1992: ch. 2]), in response to the problem of mental causation, hold that (roughly) it is enough for intentional action if the neural realizers of the agent’s mental states play the appropriate causal role, provided that what the agent does counterfactually depends, in a certain way, on her mental states. I’ll henceforth simplify the causalist view by omitting this variation.

23 Weinryb (1980) argues that omissions have no causal effects. Beebee (2004) argues that absences aren’t causes or effects.

24 For one thing, the argument relies heavily on explanatory claims. But true explanatory claims don’t always cite causes, even when the explanations are causal. On this point, see Beebee 2004.
25 As discussed earlier, Sartorio takes the omission to be intentional because, she says, it is caused by the agent’s intentionally omitting to intend to jump into the water. I’ve raised questions about how it can be made out that the agent’s not so intending is itself intentional.

26 Might an argument like the one sketched earlier in this section show that, in the normal case, it would be the absence of an intention to jump in, and not the intention not to jump in, that causes not just the omission but also the subsequent thought and action? Diana’s decision and her subsequent thinking might be brain occurrences, and (in our original version of the case) the production of the latter by the former might consist in just the sort of transfer of energy that we have in standard cases of direct causal production. Moreover, her decision seems as plainly a cause of her positive behavior in this version of the case as our intentions to act seem to be causes of our intentional actions. One might try pushing a standard argument against mental causation at this juncture, but the special argument focused on omissions seems inapplicable.

27 One might take a lack of counterfactual dependence as at least a defeasible reason for denying a causal relation. Then, if like Sartorio, one thinks that an intentional omission to A must be caused by the absence of a certain intention, one might take a lack of counterfactual dependence to count against the claim that the omission is intentional.

28 Bennett (1995: ch. 6) makes a similar point, albeit about what I take to be a different distinction, that between making happen and allowing to happen.


30 It’s an interesting question, and one that I can’t answer here, whether the required non-deviance in the case of intentional omission is susceptible to conceptual analysis. Given how little causal work might be required of one’s intention in such a case, there’s reason to doubt that causation “in the right way” is analyzable here in the same way that it is in the case of intentional action. Whether the impossibility of conceptual analysis would be fatal to a causal theory of intentional omission depends on what is to be expected of such a theory. (I’m grateful to a referee for raising this issue.)

31 One might (as a referee suggested) take Diana’s not jumping in to be a causal consequence of her intending not to jump in on the following grounds: her so intending causes her standing on the shore, and (one might hold) her not jumping in is a logical consequence of her standing on the shore. It would seem that, barring time travel, Diana’s jumping into the water at t is logically incompossible with her standing on the shore at t. However, it is far from obvious that an event causes the absence of whatever is logically incompossible with what that event causes.

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References


