

§1 Omissions

Omissions = the failure of an event of a certain type to occur

Examples: Billy's not throwing; the absence of a screw from the bridge; students' failure to come to the class

1. Causation by omission

Example. Suzy's failure to throw a stone at the bottle is among the causes of the unshattered state of the bottle.

2. Causation by prevention (of omissions)

Example. Billy prevents the shattering of the bottle by catching Suzy's stone before it reaches the bottle.

3. Causation by double prevention

Example. Suzy's throw shatters the window. Hilary's distraction prevents Billy from preventing Suzy's stone from shattering the window.

§2 The status of omission-involving causation

Ordinary causation = relation between ordinary events that involves some continuous process connecting the events.

Options:

1. Omission-involving causation is just like ordinary causation.
2. Omission-involving causation is different from ordinary causation.

§3 Arguments that omission-involving causation is different from ordinary causation

Argument 1: From events and relations

P1 Ordinary causation is a relation between events.

P2 Omissions are not events.

C1 So, omission-involving causation is not ordinary causation because it is not a relation between events.

Argument 2: Infection through the normative

P3 Ordinary causation is (relatively) insensitive to normative consideration.

P4 Omission-involving causation is heavily sensitive to normative considerations.

C2 So, Omission involving causation is different from ordinary causation.

Argument 3: From the ontological primacy of ordinary causation

P5 Omission-involving causation is derivative from ordinary causation.

P6 If Omission-involving causation is derivative from ordinary causation, then it is not of the same kind.

C3 So, Omission-involving causation is not of the same kind as ordinary causation.

Argument 4: Argument from Eliminativism

P7: There is no omission-involving causation.

P8 There is ordinary causation.

C4 So, omission-involving causation is different from ordinary causation.

§4 Omission-involving causation and redundancy

Observation:

- It is very easy to come up with a case of redundant causation (preemption, overdetermination) for ordinary cases of causation.
- But it is hard to find a case where an omission is a cause of some effect, yet the effect does not counterfactually depend on the omission.

Redundancy assumption:“(a) When two events C and D occur at the same time, and (b) event E occurs at some later time, and (c) when in addition E depends on neither C nor D taken alone, but does depend on the two taken together—that is, had neither C nor D occurred, E would not have occurred—then (d) at least one of C and D must be a redundant cause of E.” (Paul & Hall 2013: 187)

- Redundancy assumption is false (or at least not clearly true) for omission-involving causation.
- Example of redundant preemption: Suzy throws a rock at a window, and Billy blocks the rock; but if he had not blocked it, the window still would not have broken, since it is protected by a high, thick, sturdy wall. It does not seem that Billy’s block prevents the window from being broken.
- If both Billy’s blocking and the existence of the wall had failed to occur, then the window would not have shattered. Yet, it is unclear which, if any, of the two events is a cause of the window’s not being broken.

§5 Trouble with causation involving omissions

Transference account: Causation consists in the transference of a quantity from C to E.

- Problem: Omissions do not participate in energy/ momentum transfer.

Minimal sufficiency accounts: C is a cause of E just in case C belongs to a set of co-occurring events that is minimally sufficient for E.

- Cannot account for any omission-involving causation

Counterfactual accounts

- Can nicely handle omission-involving causation

Intrinsicness thesis

- Cases of double-prevention show that the intrinsicness thesis conflicts with the thesis that counterfactual dependence is sufficient for causation.