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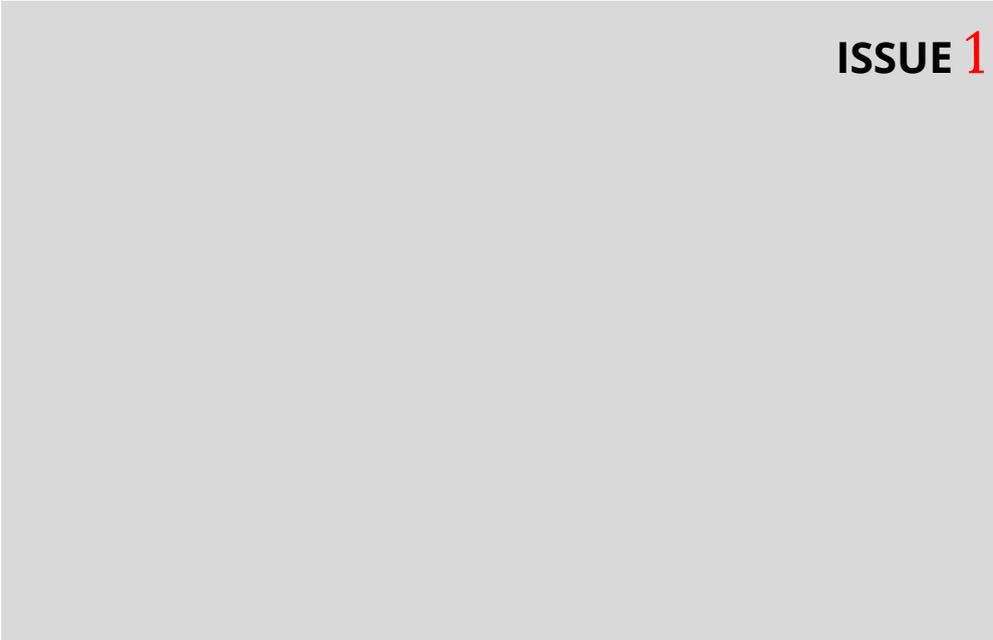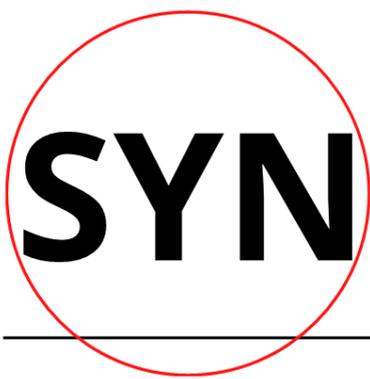
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Non-Existence:
Error and Fiction

List of contributions

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The Antinomy of Omissions

Abstract: This article deals with an antinomy regarding omissions: on the one hand, common sense, morality, and the law generally accept the idea that omissions can play a genuine causal role; on the other hand, most metaphysicians strongly deny that possibility because of their ontological status: how can non-being cause anything? An alternative view, inspired by Hilary Putnam's causal pluralism, in which the notion of causation depends on the explanatory context, is sketched. In this perspective, it will be argued that omissions can be seen as genuine causes notwithstanding their non-existence.

Keywords: *omissions, causal pluralism, Hilary Putnam*

1. *Omissions and their antinomy*

Actions are at the center of our existences. In a normal day, each of us performs a large number of them: a few are well thought out, several are intentional and a large number are automatic or almost automatic. However, whatever the number of actions we perform, it is certain that we "perform" a stratospherically greater number of omissions: to each action corresponds an enormous number of possible alternative actions that we omit to perform, and consequently never become actual. Now, for example, I am performing the action of writing on the computer, but alternatively I could have read *The New Times* online or begun to study Sanskrit or gone to buy a new hair dryer.

Every action that is potentially accessible to the agent but it is not carried out, is an omission; and the number of actions potentially accessible to the agent, and therefore of omissions, is endless. But there is more. In principle, even the actions we actually perform can be traced back to omissions: every action, in fact, is nothing but a non-omission or, if we want, the omission of a possible omission. By deciding to write on the computer, for example, I did not omit to write on the computer - that is, I omitted to omit to write on the computer. To make a long story short: a young resourceful ontologist could build an honorable career by tacking on an ontology in which omissions are among the basic categories and actions among the subordinate categories.

Someone could object, however, that these are nothing more than the typical concoctions of hard analytical philosophy but do not show at all that omissions are a phenomenon that philosophers interested in the really relevant phenomena should be concerned with. To be interested in omissions – our objector could continue – is like being interested in *impossibilia* or, to go on the classic, in angelology: bizarre things, that are perhaps good for rabid ontologists or old-fashioned theologians but have no connection with what one really cares about. In reality, however, things are not like that. (Strictly speaking, they are not like that even for the *impossibilia*, but this is not the place to discuss this issue.)

That omissions are an important phenomenon in our existence, for example, is clearly indicated by the law, which punishes the omission of official acts (when public officials omit to perform a legally required act), failure to report (when doctors fail to report that they have provided assistance in situations that appear to be criminal), the omission of official duties (such as when public officials omits to take steps to restore an interrupted service), and failure to assist (when, for example, one fails to notify the competent authority of the discovery of persons in need who were lost). Moreover, what are, if not omissions, the felonies committed by those who do not pay their taxes or by those who – in violation of, say, Article 364 of the Italian Penal Code – do not report particularly serious crimes, such as kidnapping, of which they became aware?

And what about the redacted parts in certain documents (i.e., the cases in which, by making a deed public, the authority omits certain data, for brevity or out of respect for the privacy of the persons involved or to protect the investigation in progress or for other reasons, perhaps unspeakable)? It should also be noted that omissions have important moral, as well as legal, implications: how many human relationships are based on the fact that we fail to say everything we really think about each other? And how often are we morally responsible for some kind of omission, such as when we don't spend enough time with our children or when we fail to tell a spouse that they don't have long to live?

And isn't it true that regret – a feeling that permeates our lives from the beginning, or almost to the end – often depends on the fact that on certain occasions we could have behaved differently from what we did? To put it another way: not infrequently we regret having failed to do what we could (or should)

have done. At the political level, on the other hand, we can think of the etiquette of diplomacy, in which omissions with respect to burning issues are routine: as when, for example, in an international forum where a brutal dictator is present, the other participants carefully avoid mentioning the issue of human rights. Finally, we can mention the contribution that to the theme of omissions is offered by Catholic penitential theology: according to it, one falls into the sin of omission when one does not do what the divine law would require them to do.

For this discussion, it is very important to note that in many cases we commonsensically attribute causal power to omissions: an omission, we think, can cause the failure of an engagement, the collapse of a business, or the death of a person. On the other hand, jurists themselves have coined the category of "omissive causation", precisely to account for cases in which omissions act as causes, generating legally relevant consequences.

There are very good reasons, then, to think that omissions play an important role in our lives. One might therefore expect philosophers to have dealt extensively with this issue and to have recognized its importance. Instead, this does not happen, or has happened only recently (Bernstein & Goldschmidt 2021). The positive exception is represented, besides legal philosophy, by the few moral philosophers who in the last decades have discussed the possibility that events caused by actions (such as drowning someone or practicing active euthanasia) and those caused by omissions (such as not rescuing someone who is drowning or letting a terminally ill person die) have the same moral consequences. According to some philosophers, actions and omissions are morally indistinguishable if they are followed by the same consequences (Rachels 1975, Glover 1977, Honderich 2002, Harris 2011); according to others, in the case of omissions there is instead a lower level of responsibility (Foot 1977, Haidt & Baron 1996). At any rate, none of the authors who have addressed these issues have denied that there are cases in which omissions are morally relevant.

However, if some practical philosophers (i.e., some philosophers of law and moral philosophers) have treated omissions as a relevant and genuine phenomenon, philosophers of a theoretical orientation have dealt with this issue much less and, when they have, it has generally been to sanction their substan-

tial irrelevance.[1] More specifically, the most heated theoretical discussion has concerned the ontological status of omissions: are they facts, states of affairs, *possibilia*, non-abstract states of affairs, *sui generis* objects, particular features of space-time regions, or nothing more than pure non-entities or absences (Clarke 2014, Silver 2015, Nelkin & Rickless 2015)? These conceptions differ widely: some treat omissions as non-entities, others as abstract ontological oddities. The most important thing to note, in any case, is that many of these conceptions deny any causal power whatsoever to omissions: and, in this way, they place themselves in a diametrically opposed position with respect to common sense, law, and morality, which, as we have seen, tend to consider omissions as possible causes of changes in the world, and sometimes even very relevant changes. As an example, let us consider the conception according to which omissions are merely potential events (events that could have happened, but in fact did not happen and will not happen): in this perspective, omissions are mere non-entities or absences. And the *communis opinio* of metaphysicians with respect to absences is strongly skeptical: one cannot attribute any causal power to what has not happened and will not happen – in short, a non-entity. The celebrated Australian philosopher David Armstrong (1999: 177), for example, has written in this regard:

> Omissions and so forth are not part of the real driving force in nature. Every causal situation develops as it does as a result of the presence of positive factors alone.

This position, on the other hand, should not be surprising: much of contemporary metaphysics argues that anything lacking causal powers (abstract entities, absences, non-entities) cannot have a respectable ontological status. That is, according to a majority thesis, only "positive factors" – i.e., concrete substances and events that are able to generate changes in the world – can be taken seriously from the ontological point of view. In our ontology, then, there is no place for omissions (Beebee 2004, Moore 2009).

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[1] An important exception is represented by Sarah Bernstein (2016; 2021), who advocates a causalist view of omissions, framed in an ontological context in which there are different ways of non-being: *omissions*, in particular, do not exist in a different sense from mere *absences*; and some omissions do not exist in a contingent sense, others are simply impossible

The dynamic of this discussion is very similar to that of other contemporary philosophical discussions in the analytic world. Hartry Field, for example, has argued that mathematical judgments (e.g., "5 + 7 = 12") are all hopelessly false: and this is precisely because they refer to supposed abstract entities (such as numbers and sets) that, if they existed, would have no causal power. Thus, also Field accepts the thesis that existence implies the possession of causal powers; and for this he concludes that the supposed entities of mathematics are mere fictions. It follows, in his view, that utterances mentioning such entities are false for the same reason that utterances concerning fictitious entities in literature such as "Oliver Twist was born in London" are false (Field 1980; see also Balaguer 2009). In a similar vein, John Mackie (1977) stated that moral judgments are false: these judgments, in fact, refer to alleged entities (i.e., the Good) that in reality are ontologically unacceptable because, if they ever existed, they would be "queer" - strange, bizarre - exactly because they lack all causal powers. And so, according to Mackie, since moral entities do not exist, all judgments that refer to them (i.e., moral judgments) are false.

Let us now return to omissions. As mentioned, many philosophers think that omissions cannot be given a serious ontological status because they do not actually have any causal powers. In this way, however, an obvious antinomy arises: how can one reconcile the common philosophical thesis that omissions have no causal powers (nor, consequently, a respectable ontological status) with the fact – empirically evident and also recognized by legal and moral philosophers – that they play a very relevant role in our lives? That is, to use a more synthetic formula, how can the "antinomy of omissions" be solved (or dissolved)?

2. Beyond the antinomy of omissions

Before addressing the antinomy of omissions, it is important to distinguish two kinds of omissions, intentional and unintentional, which have different relevance both in ordinary life and from the philosophical point of view. Unintentional omissions (those that the subject does not consciously make) are not of much relevance either to our lives or philosophically; intentional omissions, on the other hand, can have considerable existential and moral implications and pose urgent problems for philosophy.

Let us consider the issue more closely. An intentional omission is characterized by the fact that a particular action is not performed because the acting subject has intentionally decided not to perform it (Foot 1977, Sartorio 2009). This occurs, for example, when a witness intentionally fails to mention particular events that would be important for an investigation or when a relative decides not to tell a sick person how serious their condition is. In both cases, these are intentional omissions, for which one is morally responsible toward both oneself and the others (moreover, in some situations, one may also be legally responsible for this kind of omissions). It is intentional omissions, then, that give rise to the antinomy of omissions: on the one hand, they are of great importance to ordinary life; on the other, until very recently they have been substantially neglected by philosophy.

This antinomy has much to do with the issue of causality. As we have seen, on the one hand, common sense, morality, and the law agree in attributing causal powers to omissions; on the other hand, many metaphysicians believe that omissions are causally inert and, for this very reason, deny them any ontological dignity. We are thus faced with one of the cases in which the intuitions on which the ordinary image of the world is based collide with the most sophisticated metaphysical theories. In cases of this kind, what the late Lynne Rudder Baker wrote may come to mind: «We should not lend faith to metaphysics that render ordinary but significant phenomena unintelligible» (2013: 73). In short, Baker argues, if a metaphysics fails to account for an existentially important phenomenon, so much the worse for that metaphysics. However, if we were to take Baker's suggestion too literally, we would soon run the risk of arriving at a sort of intellectual nihilism, in which common sense would win a priori over metaphysics. If we want to adequately contrast the conceptions that make existentially relevant phenomena incomprehensible – a point for which Baker argues convincingly (De Caro 2020b) –,without ending up with the very naïve view that commonsense trumps metaphysics in *all* cases, we must then proceed with caution, articulating conceptions that can legitimize the idea, implicit in common sense, that the phenomena that are essential for conceptualizing our lives

actually have ontological dignity.[2] In the present context, in particular, we need to identify a sensible alternative to the conceptions that deny omissions any causal power and, for that reason, delegitimize them ontologically. The keystone in this direction is represented, in my opinion, by the refusal of the monistic causal character of such conceptions, or at least of most of them.

In order to understand what problems causal monism encounters, it may be useful to consider one of its most influential versions, i.e., that incorporated by Donald Davidson (1970) in his famous "anomalous monism", the conception according to which every occurrence of a mental event is identical to an occurrence of a physical event, but no type of mental event is identical to a type of physical event. The crucial point here is that anomalous monism accepts the so-called "nomological principle of causality", according to which all causal relations (i) are relations between events and (ii) exemplify a physical law. In this perspective, it can happen that the occurrences of two different mental events are causally related to each other: but in order to understand which specific physical law is exemplified by that relation one has to consider the description of those events in the terms of the physical events to which (as occurrences) they are respectively identical. For a couple of decades, Davidson's conception seemed able to satisfactorily reconcile ontological physicalism and causal monism with anti-reductionism with respect to the mental. Later, however, Jaegwon Kim (1992) and others convincingly argued that, in fact, anomalous monism collapses onto epiphenomenalism, the discredited conception that mental events are devoid of any causal power (in the sense that no desire, belief, or intention of ours can ever cause anything). Kim's argument is simple. According to Davidson, in order for a relationship between events to be said to have causal character, it must exemplify a law of physics. However, this means that the events involved in that relation play a causal role only insofar as they are describable by means of physical predicates – which of course are the only predicates that can figure in physical laws (there are no physical laws that have use of predicates such as "belief", "intention", and "desire"). It is natural, on the other hand, to think that the predicates by means of which events are described refer to the

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[2] See De Caro (2016; 2016; 2020) for some defense of the idea that the ordinary view of the world (which is manifested in common sense) can be reconciled with the scientific view of the world in the context of a liberal naturalism.

properties of those events: and, consequently, it is because of the physical properties alone, and not also because of the mental properties, that the relation between those events exemplifies a physical law and can therefore be considered a genuine causal relation. However, Kim asks, in such framework what remains of the causal relevance of the mental? Actually, nothing, because nothing can be caused by the mental properties of events: everything is caused solely by their physical properties. Kim's argument is convincing, and Davidson's attempts to defend himself on the basis of his peculiar theory of events are, according to most critics, not persuasive (Heil & Mele 1993). In this regard, what is important to note here is that it is precisely the causal monism inherent in the "nomological principle of causality" that produces the collapse of Davidson's anomalous monism onto epiphenomenalism.

This example how desirable it is to abandon causal monism, accepting instead causal pluralism. Of course, another problem that immediately emerges is what version of causal pluralism one should accept (Godfrey-Smith 2009, Hitchock 2007, Psillos 2009); however, what is important to note here is that if one abandons the idea that there is only one kind of causality, many of the seemingly irresolvable problems faced by contemporary philosophy (such as free will, mental causation, or the possibility of singular causation) begin to seem more approachable; and this is true, in my opinion, also in dealing with the antinomy of omissions.

It is time, therefore, to abandon the idea that there is one unitary and homogeneous causal history of the world: which is the idea that, as we have seen, led to the collapse of Davidson's anomalous monism. In short, it is necessary to conceive a satisfactory form of causal pluralism: and in this sense an interesting proposal by Hilary Putnam can help us. According to Putnam, who in this refers to an idea of John Haldane, «there are as many kinds of cause as there are senses of 'because'» (1999: 143). An example can help to clarify this thesis, which has at the same an Aristotelian and a pragmatist flavor. Let us imagine that an individual has a heart attack. One can ask oneself why this happened: but if this question is clear, it is not clear how one should answer it. There are, in fact, many types of legitimate answers, and in order to understand which is the most appropriate answer in particular case, one must consider the context in which the question is asked. If, for example, one wants to explain the heart at-

tack from a physiological point of view, the answer will be based on the reconstruction of the causal processes that led to the occlusion of an artery of the patient. If, however, it was the family doctor of the patient who had explain the sad event, the cause of the heart attack might be identified in the fact that the patient was not diligent in taking the drugs that had been prescribed to them. And so on: a medical statistician might refer to the hereditary risk factors in the family history of the patient, a family member might take responsibility for the event for not having been convincing enough in explaining to the patient what behaviors he should have avoided, etc. etc. All these explanations, it should be noted, have a causal character, but they are very different from each other: none is *the* correct explanation: all of them, however, taken in the right context, can be correct. It is therefore the context in which one tries to explain a given event that indicates what kind of causal explanation can be adequate. And this is true, it should be noted, even in the cases in which one wants to explain a certain omission: the idea that, for every omission, there is, in principle, an explanation that is more correct and fundamental than the others is – in the perspective outlined by Putnam – nothing more than the product of a monistic metaphysics that is as commonly held as unjustified.

In this perspective, explanation and causation are intrinsically linked: legitimate explanations are as numerous as the plausible causal histories that can be provided with respect to a given phenomenon (may it be an event, an action, or an omission). It is essential to note, however, that the constitutive link with the intentional notion of explanation in no way deprives causation of its objectivity: indeed, the correct causal explanations are only those that refer to how the world is really made (Putnam 1999: 137-150).

To understand how this applies to the antinomy of omissions, it may be useful to use a thought experiment. Let's imagine that a corrupt police officer, in charge of manning a checkpoint, intentionally omits to stop a group of bandits who are their accomplices and are going to carry out a robbery (which they actually do carry out). From the point of view of common sense, morality, and law, it is clear that, among the many correct causal explanations of why that robbery took place, there is also the one according to which the police omitted to carry out an action that they should have performed: and it is precisely by virtue of

this explanation – centered on an omission – that we consider the incrimination of the policeman to be just.

The metaphysical conception that denies causal power and ontological legitimacy to omissions is in stark contrast to the commonsense intuition that the cop should be indicted because the cop's omission was one of the causes of the robbery (how can you indict someone for something that does not exist, the metaphysician would say?). A form of causal pluralism *à la* Putnam, on the other hand, is perfectly in line with common sense intuition. Indeed, in the latter perspective, omissions are real causes to the extent that they are mentioned in one of the adequate explanations of a given phenomenon. And, in our case, the omission on the part of the policeman can be considered one of the causes of the robbery (and for this he can be legitimately indicted), because the explanation that mentions his omission offers an adequate answer to the question "Why did that robbery happen?".

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the "antinomy of omissions", the cognitive dissonance generated, on the one hand, by the idea of common sense, law and morality that omissions play a very relevant role in our existences and, on the other hand, by the view of many contemporary metaphysicians that omissions have neither causal relevance nor ontological dignity. This antinomy can be dissolved, I have argued, by renouncing the causal monism on which the conceptions that delegitimize omissions from both the causal and the ontological point of view are generally based. In this perspective, I have hinted that a promising option is Putnam's causal pluralism, which connects the notion of causality to that of explanation, without making it merely subjective.

The price to pay for a conception of this kind is, of course, the price that any form of pluralism has to pay – the loss of unity of the phenomena that one wants to understand. The possible dissolution of the antinomy of omissions, however, offers in my opinion an excellent reason to believe that such a price is not too high.

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