

# Causation in Metaphysics and Moral Theory

by

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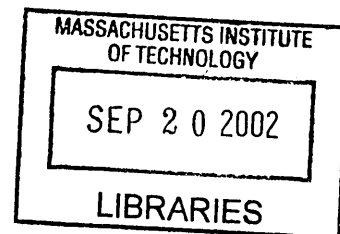
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## Abstract

**Chapter 1: The causal relata.** Ordinary talk suggests that entities from different ontological categories can cause and be caused: Kathy's throw, the fact that Kathy threw, and Kathy herself can all cause the window to break. But according to the majority view, causation exclusively relates *events*. This chapter defends the contrary view that the causal relata are as miscellaneous as ordinary talk suggests. A question remains: is there an ontological kind *K* such that causal relations on entities of that kind are somehow more fundamental than causal relations on the non-*K*s? I argue that there is such a kind: facts. I defend this claim against objections.

**Chapter 2. Causation by omission.** Ordinary talk also suggests that omissions can be causes. For example, if Barry promised to water Alice's plant, didn't water it, and the plant then dried up and died, then Barry's not watering the plant—his omitting to water the plant—is a cause of its death. But there are reasons to think that either there is no causation by omission, or there is far more of it than common sense allows. I argue that neither disjunct is acceptable, and propose that we avoid the dilemma by embracing the view that causation has a normative component. The proposal faces the objection that causation is a paradigmatic example of a natural, and so entirely non-normative, relation. I argue that the objection can be defused once we are clear about the kind of normativity that plays a role in causation by omission.

**Chapter 3. Causation and the Making/Allowing Distinction.** Common sense morality suggests that it can matter morally whether an agent *makes* an outcome occur or merely *allows* it to occur. For example, it is far worse to pinch your little brother than to allow him to be pinched. I argue against the assumption that the making/allowing distinction is exclusive: in fact, the categories of making and allowing overlap. I go on to offer a positive account of makings, and a positive account of allowings.

Thesis Supervisor: Edward Hall, Associate Professor of Philosophy

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I dedicate this thesis to Kathleen Peck. She almost went to graduate school in Cambridge, but became my mom instead.

## Chapter 1: The Causal Relata

The surface structure of singular causation sentences suggests that entities from different ontological categories can cause and be caused.<sup>1</sup> For example:

- That rock caused Alice’s fall.
- Bert’s lassitude caused his demise.
- The accident caused the traffic jam.
- Carlos caused Andrew’s hiccups.
- That it was raining caused Dirk and Fred to stay indoors.
- The leaky faucet caused that puddle.

These suggest that objects, facts, properties, people, and events are among the causal relata. So it seems at first that the following thesis is true:

MISC: The causal relata include entities from different ontological categories.

Is MISC true, or are the causal relata less various than they first appear?

In the literature on causation, many people say that the causal relata are events. Other people say the causal relata are facts, or states of affairs, or aspects.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter has three goals. One is to clarify the terms of this debate. Another is to defend the claim that the causal relata are miscellaneous against these more restrictive claims. And the third goal is to defend the view that—in a way to be explained—fact causation is ontologically more basic. At the end, I will address the connection, if any, between my view that the causal relata are miscellaneous and the problem of free will.

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<sup>1</sup> Sentences of the form ‘A caused B’ are “singular” or “token” causation sentences; I will restrict my attention to these. Attention to type causation sentences would provide even more variety; consider ‘lightning causes fire,’ ‘smoking causes cancer.’

I. This section provides a bit of background about the relata debate. In “Causal Relations” Davidson says that it is a “basic *aperçu*” that “causes are individual events, and causal relations hold between events” (1967, p.161). On the face of it, it looks as though Davidson means that causal relations hold ONLY between events. But if causal relations hold only between events, then it would seem that the following sentence is false:

(1) Gore caused the recount.

After all, Gore is not an event.

Someone who believes that the causal relata are only events might say that strictly speaking, (1) is false: strictly speaking, Gore did not cause the recount; instead, some event, appropriately related to Gore, caused it.

More plausibly, she might say that (1) is true: it is not that the causal relata are only events, instead, it is that they are ultimately, or basically, events. What it is for Gore to cause the recount, on this view, is for him to stand in some appropriate relation to an event that caused the recount. More generally, if x caused y and x is not an event, then x caused y in virtue of standing in some appropriate relation to an event that caused y.

A difficulty for this position—the view that all causes and effects are either events, or stand in appropriate relations to causes and effects which are events—arises when we consider that sometimes, people are causes by failing to do something. Consider:

(2) Gore’s failure to concede caused us unnecessary grief.

What is the event appropriately related to Gore’s failure to concede that stands in the causal relation to some event of our grieving? Perhaps Gore’s not conceding is itself an event—albeit a negative one. But

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<sup>2</sup> For the view that the causal relata are facts, see Mellor 1995 and Bennett 1988; for the view that they are states of affairs, see Menzies 1989; for the view that they are aspects, see Paul 2000.

plausibly there is no such event; Gore does not concede by doing something, but instead by not doing something.

Examples like (2) pose a prima facie difficulty for the view that the causal relata are either events, or stand in appropriate relations to events.

Some people have taken the difficulty posed by examples like (2) to motivate the view that the causal relata are facts, or anyway fact-like. On the face of it, someone who believes that the causal relata are facts will have an easier time defending her view in light of examples like (2). For while it is implausible that there are negative events, it is entirely plausible that there are negative facts. The friend of the view that the causal relata are facts could say about (2) that what it is for Gore's failure to cause us unnecessary grief is for that failure to stand in some appropriate relation to the fact that he failed to concede, which caused the grieving.

But many people find the view that the causal relata are facts to be barely comprehensible. How could a fact—an abstract entity that exists changelessly outside of space and time—stand in a causal relation?

We will return to this question in section III below. For present purposes, let us step back and ask whether, contrary to appearances, the causal relata are uniform in ontological kind.

**II.** It might seem obvious that lots of different kinds of entities can be causes and effects. For it might seem obvious that while events can be causes, people and physical objects can too. I argue for the claim that the causal relata are miscellaneous only because some philosophers have denied it. They have held instead that the following thesis is true:

SAME X: All causes and effects are of the same ontological kind.

Is there any reason to think that SAME X is true? In this section, I will consider three arguments for it.

(i) *The argument from analysis.* Much of the literature on what the causal relata are focuses on the project of giving a uniform analysis of singular causation. This might suggest that if for some ontological kind X, all singular causation sentences can be analyzed in terms of X causation, then the causal relata are, exclusively, the X's.

But in general, it does not follow for the fact that we can analyze all instances of a certain relation in terms of just one kind of thing that only one kind of thing can stand in that relation. To see this, consider the following analysis of the “near” relation on people:

Person A is near Person B' is true iff most of A's molecules are near most of B's molecules.

Suppose it is true that we can analyze all sentences about nearness between people in terms of the nearness of their molecules. It does not follow that people never really stand in the nearness relation to one another. And analogously, supposing that it is true that we can analyze all singular causation sentences in terms of causal relations between the X's, it does not follow that the only things that can stand in causal relations are the X's. If, for example, 'Gore caused the recount' can be analyzed as an instance of X causation, it does not follow that Gore—the man himself—does not stand in the causal relation to the recount.

(ii) *The argument from cause/effect indifference.*<sup>3</sup> MISC takes seriously the idea that the different things that we say can be causes and effects really can be. In particular, it takes seriously the idea that people can be causes. One way to motivate a restriction on the kinds of things that can be causes or effects is to appeal to the following plausible principle:

CAUSE/EFFECT INDIFFERENCE:

Whatever can be a cause can be an effect; whatever can be an effect can be a cause.

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<sup>3</sup> Carolina Sartorio suggested this argument to me in conversation.

CAUSE/EFFECT INDIFFERENCE, together with the intuitively correct claim that Gore can't be an effect, yields the conclusion that Gore can't be a cause.

But we need not accept either that people cannot be effects, or CAUSE/EFFECT INDIFFERENCE. First, it is not clear that people cannot be effects. Notice that while we do not often speak of people as effects, we do talk of other entities in their ontological category—namely, physical objects generally—as effects. For example, a leaky faucet can cause a puddle, and colliding plates can cause a mountain. As people belong in the category of physical objects with puddles and mountains, and puddles and mountains can be effects, it is hard to see why people cannot, on further reflection, be effects. It begins to look as though there is nothing deep underlying the intuition that people cannot be effects. So the friend of MISC should say: in fact, they can be.

Second, it is not clear that we must accept CAUSE/EFFECT INDIFFERENCE. Perhaps the only thing that motivates it is the idea that where there is a cause, there is an effect. For example, if people could not be effects, but could be causes, then people would be uncaused causes. This might seem to afford too easy a solution to the problem of free will. As I shall argue below, this does not solve the problem of free will: what matters is not whether some person is uncaused, but whether some event, of which the person is agent, is uncaused. More on this in section V below. For now, it should suffice to point out that provided that lots of different kinds of things can be causes and effects, we do not need to hold on to the idea that whatever can be a cause can be an effect.

(iii) *The argument from overdetermination.* Suppose a murder takes place: Al kills Bert. Three philosophers, Smith, Jones, and Green, meet to discuss the case. Smith says: "Al caused Bert's death." Jones says: "No, the fact that Al's bullet pierced Bert's heart caused Bert's death." Green says: "No, the heart-piercing event caused Bert's death." Now if people, events, and facts can all be causes—then the philosophers are all right: Al, the fact that the bullet pierced the heart, and the piercing were all causes. But if they are all right, then the death of the rival was *overdetermined*.



According to the argument from overdetermination, if Al's bullet, the fact it pierced the heart, and the event consisting in the bullet's piercing the heart were all causes of the death, then the death would have been overdetermined. But the death of Bert was not overdetermined; it was just an ordinary case. According to the objector, denying SAME X yields the result that an ordinary death was overdetermined. And so, the argument goes, lest we falsely find causal overdetermination where there isn't any, we must maintain SAME X.

We can explain what is wrong with the argument from overdetermination by attending more carefully to what it means to say that an event is "overdetermined." The standard example of a case of overdetermination is a death caused by two simultaneous heart-piercing shots. Each shot is part of a causal chain that, independently of the other, is sufficient to bring about the death. It is important that the shots are parts of independent causal chains; contrast the pair of simultaneous heart piercing shots that overdetermine the death with two causes of Bert's waking up that do not overdetermine it: his setting the alarm, and the alarm's ringing. Each of these events is part of a causal chain sufficient for Bert's waking up, but they do not overdetermine it; the explanation of the difference is that they are not parts of independent causal chains.

Now we are in a position to see that while Al, the fact that his bullet pierced Bert's heart and the piercing are all causes, they do not overdetermine the death of Bert. They are not part of independent chains that compete for causal status. Why is it that we do not have three candidate causes competing for causal status in the Al case; on what grounds can we claim that these are part of independent chains? Intuitively, they do not compete because they are too intimately linked: Big Al and his bullet bear too intimate a relation to one another to compete for the status of cause. This sort of claim is familiar from the literature on epiphenomenalism, Kim argues that mental and physical events do not overdetermine physical effects because they stand in supervenience relations that do not obtain in the standard overdetermination cases.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Kim 1993 and also Yablo 1992.

The important thing for our purposes is that the lack of competition between AI and his bullet due to the intimacy of their involvement constitutes at least a rough reply to the argument from overdetermination. We needn't deny either that AI really caused the death, that the bullet really did, or that either one of them really did. The point about no competition allows us to say: AI was a cause, the bullet was a cause, the event was a cause *and* the three of them don't compete.

**III.** Let us take stock. On the face of it, the causal relata are miscellaneous. And there does not seem to be a compelling philosophical argument for the claim that they are not. But perhaps the causal relata are less miscellaneous than they first appear. In particular, it might be that people and objects and events can all be causes, but that facts cannot. David Lewis says:

I have met the friends of 'fact causation' more than half way; but I refuse to concede that facts—true propositions—are literally causes. (1999a, p. 31)

Here is Helen Steward expressing the same idea:

...since facts cannot literally do anything, since (quite plausibly) they cannot literally be the bearers of causal power or causal efficacy, they cannot stand in relations to one another that deserve to be called causal. (1997, pp. 186-7)

It is tempting to respond to the claim that facts cannot literally be causes by saying that the burden of proof lies with the objector: she must explain why not. But I think that we can make a good guess at what she would say: she would say that facts cannot literally be causes, because facts—taken to be true propositions—are abstract, and abstract objects are causally inert. Call this *the argument from abstractness*: facts cannot be causes because they are abstract, and abstract objects do not enter into causal relations.

My response to this objection is to consider different versions of the argument from abstractness by considering different answers to the question: in virtue of what are abstract objects causally inert? I

argue that there is a version of the argument that tells against some abstract objects being causes, but that this is consistent with the thesis that some facts are causes.

(i) *Causes are pushers and shovers.* A first pass at why abstract objects seem ill-suited to stand in causal relations starts with the intuition that causation is a relation of pushing, shoving, knocking, and bumping. Some people do think that causes and effects are pushers and shovers. But the pushers and shovers are, on the face of it, physical objects. And clearly, the causal relata include more than just physical objects: paradigm examples of causation include rocks causing windows to shatter and bullets causing people to die; but shatterings and deaths are not physical objects. The objector might reply that the pushers and shovers include events as well as physical objects, but clearly do not include facts.

In response to this suggestion, Bennett argues that events are on par with facts with respect to pushing and shoving: they don't do any. His example is an explosion. Bennett says that the idea that pushing is done not by the molecules involved in explosions, but instead by explosions themselves, is "just the afterglow of ignorance about what an explosion is" (1988, p. 22).

We do not have to decide whether Bennett is right that events are never pushers: it is enough that some causes are not related to their effects in a pushing and shoving way. Some events clearly cause their effects without pushing them or shoving them: for example, my turning off the heat caused my house to cool off, but my turning off the heat was not related to the cooling in a pushing or shoving way. Further, some omissions seem to be causes, and whatever pushing and shoving amounts to, it is clear that omissions are not causes in a pushing or shoving way. The idea that causation relates only pushers and shovers might look plausible on consideration of a limited range of examples, but does not look plausible when one looks further.

(ii) *Causes are in the natural world.* Strawson suggests that abstract objects cannot be causes for the following reason:

Causality is a natural relation which holds in the natural world between particular events or circumstances, just as the relation of temporal succession does or that of spatial proximity. (1986, p. 155)

True: temporal succession cannot be a relation on facts; nor can spatial proximity. It seems that those must relate events or physical objects. Hands can be next to one another but not facts about hands; an arrival can occur before a dance, but as facts don't occur at all they can't occur before one another. The question is: is causation like temporal succession and spatial proximity in the relevant way? On the face of it, it doesn't seem to be. On the face of it, causation relates all different kinds of entities, as is illustrated by the examples with which we began.

Furthermore, 'naturalness' doesn't seem to be doing much work. On the face of it, unnatural things, like angels or disembodied minds, might bear spatial relations to one another; goblin battles might stand in relations of temporal succession to one another. Perhaps by 'natural' Strawson only means 'not abstract.' But then the suggestion that causes must be in the natural world does not help with our question: why can't abstract objects be causes?

(iii) *Causes must come into and go out of existence.* A closely related but different idea is that facts cannot be causes because they cannot come into or go out of existence: in order to be a cause something must exist at some time(s) and not at others. I think that we can deal with this objection rather quickly, because while facts are indeed not that kind of thing, it is not at all clear why it matters. If we were to find out that Gore were some eternal being who has and will always exist, that would not detract from his claim to having caused the recount.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The claim that going into or out of existence is relevant looks somewhat more plausible if we consider an eternal event: say, a democratic convention that had always been occurring and would never end. Sure, it might be irritating, boring, etc. But could it be the whole eternal thing that is efficacious? Wouldn't it be the case that the eternal event was only efficacious in virtue of some efficacious temporal part of it that occurred entirely within a temporal region preceding our irritation and fatigue? I am hard pressed to deny this. But it only shows that an event that didn't come into or go out of existence could only be efficacious insofar as its parts were.

This idea—that causes and effects must be the kinds of things that can go into and out of existence—might be a red herring. For on closer inspection, it comes down to the intuition that causes and effects must involve a change, to which we will turn below.

(iv) *Causes must have a detailed intrinsic nature.* Facts do not have a detailed intrinsic nature, or so we may suppose. Though the fact that I didn't call my mother on Sunday might disappoint her, and be all my fault, it lacks intrinsic detail.<sup>6</sup> But first, it is not obvious that facts are devoid of intrinsic detail: on some conceptions of what a fact is, at least some facts have constituents. If facts do have constituents, they might be said to have the detailed intrinsic nature of those constituents: facts about physical objects might be said to have the detailed intrinsic nature of those physical objects. The point is just that it is not entirely clear what it is to have a detailed intrinsic nature, and to that extent, there is room for facts to have an intrinsic nature at the end of the day.

But further, this view, like the view that causes must be pushers and shovers, seems fueled by a poor diet of examples. While some causes seem to be rich in intrinsic detail, like rocks and people, others do not. Some causes are omissions, and causation by omission is causation by something that lacks an intrinsic detail. Plausibly, other causes are aspects of events: the suddenness of a snapping; it is attractive to treat this as fact-like, insofar as it lacks a detailed intrinsic nature.

(v) *Causes involve change.* Perhaps the opponent of fact causation would say that the causal relata must involve change. Since facts do not involve change, they cannot be causes.

I take it that philosophers who think that causes must involve change have in mind by “involve change”, minimally, something like “involve a change in something-or-other.” It is worth pointing out in passing that it is highly controversial whether all events involve change: many philosophers hold that

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<sup>6</sup> See especially Steward 1997.

there are uneventful events, like the event consisting in my coffee cup's resting on my desk.<sup>7</sup> But suppose all events do involve changes. Should we agree that all causes must?

In a recent paper, Thomson motivates the claim that "causality seems to require occurrences" in the following way. Suppose some state of affairs—in Thomson's example, John's presence at our party—causes a commotion. For Thomson, states of affairs are like facts in that they do not change: they "lie there, placidly, quietly, and changelessly" (p. 17). The state of affairs consisting in John's presence at our party existed well before the commotion. So intuitively, in order for it to have caused the commotion, "something had to happen, some change, to get the commotion to ensue" (p. 4).

On Thomson's view, causation relates entities that are not themselves occurrences, but only derivatively. For a thing that is not an event to be a cause is for it to stand in the right sort of relation to a change. What the right sort of relation is will depend on the kind of thing we are interested in: more on this below. The general point is that even if we were to grant that causation must ultimately relate changes, it doesn't follow that all of the causal relata are changes. All that follows is that if *x* is a cause and *x* does not involve a change, then there is a change in virtue of which *x* is a cause.

(vi) *Causes have locations*. It might be that the worry about abstract objects is this: causes and effects must have locations. Abstract objects cannot be causes, because they do not have locations.

The first part of my response to this objection is that there are different ways of having locations, and, in a way, some facts have them. One way of having a location is by occupying it. Facts do not have locations in that way. But some facts do have locations in another way.

Let us pause over what it is to occupy a region of space. On a somewhat stipulative understanding, object *X* occupies region of space *L* iff every part of *X* is contained in *L*, and every part of *L* contains some part of *X*. So, for example, the Statue of Liberty occupies a certain statue-of-liberty-

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Lewis 1986. For the opposing view, see Lombard 1986 and Thomson 2000.

shaped region of space: every part of the statue is contained in the region, and every part of the region contains some part of the statue.

Do events occupy regions of space? That depends on what events are. On Kim's view, events are triples of objects, properties, and times.<sup>8</sup> But on the face of it, no part of the triple occupies a region of space: triples are sets, and their members are not their parts. Of course a *member* of the triple occupies a region of space: namely the constituent object. But the constituent object is not a part of the triple. So if events are triples, then they do not have locations in the way that physical objects do: they do not occupy regions of space. But of course, Kim's events have locations: the location of an event is roughly the region of space occupied by its constituent object at the constituent time.

On Lewis's view, events are properties of spatio-temporal regions. But on the face of it, properties of spatio-temporal regions do not have parts that occupy regions of space, either. Nevertheless, Lewisian events can also be said to have locations: the location of a Lewisian event might be the region of which it is a property.

What about facts? How are they related to locations? On some views of facts, facts are true propositions. On a Russellian view of propositions, the proposition that Mont Blanc is snowy is the ordered pair consisting of the mountain, and being snowy. The mountain, on this view, is a constituent of the proposition, but it is not a part. So if events have locations by having objects as constituents, then facts have locations in the same way.

On other views of propositions they are sets of the worlds in which the proposition is true. Facts about Mont Blanc, on this view, do not have Mont Blanc as constituents. But they might nevertheless be said to have locations: so long as there is a natural and unique way to associate locations with propositions construed as possible worlds, we can say that they have, in some derivative sense, locations.

So there are different ways of having locations, and the fact that some *x* does not occupy a region of space does not rule out that it has a location in some other way. Given that there are ways of having a

location besides occupying a region, and that some things that have been thought unproblematically to be causes and effects have locations without occupying regions, it is less straightforward how the location objection is supposed to go: especially in the mouth of the event theorist.

One way to reply to this point is to say that even granting that some facts have locations in this derivative sense, events are importantly different with respect to locations. In particular, it is not true that all facts have locations: consider the fact that two plus three is five. That does not have a location, even derivatively. And surely, it cannot be a cause.

But the friend of fact causation need not be committed to the view that all facts can be causes. Instead, she might say that only facts that have locations can be causes. However, that would be too strong. For consider cases of causation by omission: some omissions may plausibly be associated with particular locations, but others not. For example, it might be plausible that Rover's not scratching at his fleas is located wherever Rover and the fleas are located. But other omissions do not seem to be associated with any particular location: Rover's not showing up to any of his competitions this year is less plausibly associated with any particular place.

In light of this worry, the following proposal does better. Some facts exist just in case things are a certain way in space-time. Take, for example, the fact that Bert kissed Alice on the top of Mont Blanc on Saturday, August 10, 2002. Obviously that fact exists iff things are a certain way in space-time: it is impossible to have the fact without the kiss, and impossible to have the kiss without the fact. Similarly, space-time has to be a certain way in order for it to be the case that Rover did not show up to any of his competitions this year. Contrast these facts with the fact that five is greater than three. The fact that five is greater than three exists independently of how things are in any region. Facts that exist independently of how things are in any region cannot be causes; only facts that depend for their existence on how things are in space-time can be.

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<sup>8</sup> More precisely, events are just those triples of objects, properties, and times such that the object has the property at the time. For a helpful discussion of Kim's view, see Bennett 1988, chapters five and six.



A worry for this proposal is that it lets too many facts in: it does not rule out that existential or disjunctive facts can be causes. But as Bennett has argued, there are reasons to think that existential and disjunctive facts are causes. Take a case of symmetric overdetermination: two switches are simultaneously flipped, and either flipping would have sufficed to start the motor. Plausibly, what started the motor was the fact that at least one switch was flipped.<sup>9</sup> More needs to be said, of course, but I take it that it is not entirely obvious that disjunctive or existential facts cannot be causes.

In conclusion, with respect to the location objection, the facts that depend for their existence on what is happening in the space-time fabric are not obviously more problematically causes and effects than are events are. Given the leading views of what facts and events are, some facts—precisely those that make good candidate causes—might be as intimately connected to space-time as events.

IV. In section II, I defended the claim that the causal relata are miscellaneous against the view that they must be uniform in ontological kind. In section III, I defended MISC against the claim that the causal relata do not include facts. Taking it that this constitutes an adequate defense of MISC, we can turn to a different question: are some of the causal relata more important, or more basic, than the others? One way of being more basic is by forming an asymmetric supervenience base. If fixing all the causal relations on the X's, for some ontological kind X, fixes all the causal relations that there are, and this is not true for any other ontological kind, then in this sense, the X's are most basic.

In this section, I defend the claim that, in the sense just explained, facts are the most basic causal relata. My support for this consists in an argument against the claim that all causation can be analyzed in terms of event causation, together with the suggestion that all the causation can be analyzed in terms of fact causation: for all the events there are corresponding facts but not vice versa.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bennett 1988, p. 140. This is a bit quick: for one thing, plenty of people are happy to say that each flip was a cause, taken separately. But the point here is just that it is *prima facie* plausible that facts like the fact that at least one switch was flipped can be causes.

<sup>10</sup> For brevity, I do only consider the views that the causal relata are events or physical objects: I do not consider the views that they are physical objects or people.

To see that it is not true that all causation can be analyzed in terms of event causation, recall our example from section I:

(2) Gore's failure to concede caused us unnecessary grief.

I said above that on the face of it, what caused the unnecessary grief isn't that some particular event *did* occur, but rather, that a particular kind of event *did not* – namely a concession. This poses a *prima facie* difficulty for the claim that all causation can be analyzed in terms of event causation.

There are several responses to this difficulty. Some argue that causation by and of omissions just *is* event causation: some events are omission events or failure events or *negative events*.<sup>11</sup> This strategy is unattractive for a number of reasons. The simplest, most intuitive among them is the fact that the alleged entities aren't enough *like* events to be events. For instance, they lack intrinsic natures and plausible spatio-temporal locations – things we'd expect respectable events to have. Further, while it is attractive to think of causation by omission and prevention as a species of causing, it is unattractive to think of it as causation by and of *things that happen*. Take the example of the prevention of an imminent collision. Intuitively, when you prevent an imminent collision at an intersection you do not cause an alternative event – albeit a negative one – to occur in the intersection instead of the collision. Instead, when you prevent a collision at an intersection, you make it the case that no event of a certain type – the collision type – *does* occur in the intersection.

Another strategy for maintaining the claim that all causation can be analyzed in terms of event causation that I will consider is Davidson's. He takes examples like (2) to motivate the claim that there isn't really any causation of or by omission. Davidson says about examples like (2):

the 'caused'...is not the 'caused' of straightforward singular causal statements, but is best expressed by the words 'causally explains.' (1967, pp. 161-162)

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<sup>11</sup> For a defense of this view, see Peterson 1989.

But this strategy is surely desperate. First, there isn't any evidence that 'caused' as it occurs in our ordinary causal talk is ambiguous between 'caused' and something else. And second, it is obscure why failures causally explain anything if they cannot cause anything.

Lewis has recently defended the claim that causation is a relation on events, and when there is causation by omission, that causation is *not a relation*. Here is Lewis:

when an absence is a cause or an effect, there is strictly speaking nothing at all that is a cause or effect. So sometimes causation is not a relation. (1999a)

To get a grip on what the view is supposed to be let us consider Lewis's example of being killed by being cast into a void (1999a, p. 1). Lewis points out that were you cast into the void, you would be killed in a matter of minutes by your own boiling blood and bursting bodily enclosures. Lewis says that if an absence causes, say, Gore's death, "*strictly speaking nothing*" causes it.

But this move—saying that sometimes, causation is not a relation—does not work. For, crucially, it is not part of the position that Gore's death was *uncaused*. That is, the death did not happen at random; to borrow Anscombe's expression, it was not "mere hap." So whether Lewis's move works depends on whether the following is intelligible: it doesn't follow, from the fact that *nothing* caused a death, that the death was *uncaused*. But this is of doubtful intelligibility at best. So this last strategy fails because its proponent needs, but does not make intelligible, this doubtful claim that when we have causation by an absence, causation is not a relation.

The last view I will discuss at greater length: Thomson (2002) defends a more plausible way to analyze causation by omission in terms of event causation. On Thomson's view, the causal relata are miscellaneous, but all causation is ultimately a relation on events. When Thomson says that all causation is ultimately a relation on events, she means that where *x* is not an event, for *x* to cause some outcome *o* is for *x* to be suitably related to some event *e* that causes *o*. What the 'suitable relation' is will depend on the kind of thing *x* is: for a person to cause *o* is for her to *be the agent of* some event that causes *o*; for an object to cause *o* is for some event *in that object's history* to cause *o*, and so on.

For Thomson, omissions are negative states of affairs. So for an omission to cause some outcome O is for a state of affairs to cause o. States of affairs are like physical objects and people in that for them to be causes is for them to be suitably related to events that are causes. But in the case of states of affairs, there is no one “suitable relation”: what counts as the appropriate relation varies with the kind of state of affairs” in question<sup>12</sup> (p. 10). The following three examples that Thomson gives illustrate the different ways that states of affairs can be related to the events in virtue of which they are causes. First, in the simplest kind of case, that a state of affairs obtains at or through a time guarantees that an event occurs at or through that time. For example, that the state of affairs consisting in Alice’s watering her flowers obtains at a time guarantees that an event consisting in her watering her flowers is occurring at or through that time. In this simple kind of case, the state of affairs causes the outcome O in virtue of the fact that the event that it guarantees causes O. The state of affairs consisting in Alice’s watering the plants is a cause of their growth in virtue of the fact that the event consisting in her watering the plant is a cause of their growth.

The next kind of case is not so simple: take the state of affairs consisting in Scott’s being the author of *Waverly*. The obtaining of that state of affairs obtains at or through a time does not guarantee that anything happens at or through that time. The fact that this state of affairs obtains only guarantees that an event consisting in Scott’s authoring *Waverly* occurred—it doesn’t guarantee that anything is happening at the times at which it obtains. In this case, the state of affairs is a cause in virtue of the event consisting in Scott’s writing *Waverly* being a cause. So if that state of affairs surprises Lisa, it does so in virtue of the event consisting in Scott’s writing *Waverly*.

In a third kind of case, the state of affairs is a cause because its obtaining explains an event’s causing an outcome. Here is Thomson’s example: Alfred wears a medal all day on July 13, 2001, and walks through a metal detector at noon, causing it to buzz. For the state of affairs that consists in Alfred’s wearing a medal to cause the detector to buzz is for there to have been an event e such that e caused the

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<sup>12</sup> Thomson also explains what the suitable relation comes to in cases in which a state of affairs is an

detector to buzz *because* e occurred while the state of affairs consisting in his wearing the medal obtained. In this case, e is Alfred's walking through the detector. So some states of affairs are causes in virtue of explaining why one event was a cause of some outcome.<sup>13</sup>

Thomson does not claim to have listed all the ways that a state of affairs can be a cause; she says, "I have no proof that for every state of affairs S such that S causes an outcome O, there is an available account of how it causes O that reduces its causing O to an event's causing O. But it seems to me very plausible that it is true" (2001, p.9).

Thomson notes that some simple kinds of cases seem at first to be difficult to assimilate to her account. The example she discusses is this: suppose a book is resting on a table top three feet off the ground. She says that "there surely is causation here"; in particular:

(T) the state of affairs that consists in the table-top's being three feet up from the floor  
causes

(B) the state of affairs that consists in the books being three feet up from the floor

On Thomson's account T's causing B can be analyzed in terms of event causation. The pair of events in virtue of which T causes B are:

(E) our knocking the book off the shelf

and

(E') the onset of B

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effect. I skip over her discussion of this for brevity.

<sup>13</sup> There are different kinds of explanation: among them, *causal* explanation. Thomson stresses that these occurrences of 'because' are not to be understood causally. That is, I do not here say that the fact that E occurred while S obtained caused E to cause D. The idea here is rather this: the fact that E occurred while S obtained *explains why* E caused D" (p. 12). This gets explained later: S is a *background condition* for E's causing D (p. 27). So S causes D in virtue of being a background condition for E's causing D.

E caused E'; T causes B in virtue of E causing E'. B is related to E' straightforwardly: E' is B's onset.<sup>14</sup> T is related to E in the following way: "E caused B because T obtained." Thus T is assimilated to the third kind of case discussed above: T is a cause in virtue of explaining why E caused B.

However, I think that this story of how the table's supporting the book can be reduced to event causation—where, again, events are changes—is not right. The reason is roughly this: the thought with which Thomson begins the section—that when a table-top supports a book, we surely have causation—remains, even if we suppose that the book has always been on the table. We can bring this out by comparing two worlds: one in which the book has always been on the table-top and one in which we knocked it off the shelf last week. It seems that if the two table-tops supporting the two books are just alike in their physical make-up, and the laws of the two worlds are the same, then the two worlds are alike in whether T causes B. Thomson would deny this: she says in a footnote that "if the book and table-top came into existence concurrently, then T did not cause B" (p. 18). But that seems wrong: what makes it the case that T causes B is just that the table-top supports the book; it doesn't matter whether the book came into existence concurrently with the table-top, or whether it got there by our knocking it off the shelf. If we agree with Thomson that when the book supports the table, we have causation, we ought not agree that we have causation only in virtue of the events that landed the book on the table.

I do not claim to have shown conclusively that it is impossible to reduce all causation to event causation. But I have argued that there is no good reason to think that facts cannot be causes, and that they seem to be a better candidate for forming an asymmetric supervenience base than events are. If facts can be causes then we have an excellent way of analyzing lots of otherwise difficult examples — examples like 'the fact that the bolt gave way so suddenly caused....' and 'the failure of the sprinkling system

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<sup>14</sup> The onset of a state of affairs is "its starting to obtain" (p. 13). This works, as Thomson explains, only if "the maximal stretch of time throughout which [the state of affairs] obtains is continuous, and is preceded by a time during which [the state of affairs] does not obtain." If this condition is not met, we need a more complex story, which Thomson provides (pp. 13-16).

caused...'. We can analyze these in terms of causation by facts. And if we can, as it seems we can, analyze all the causation that there is in terms of fact causation, then we have our supervenience base.

V. Is there a connection between my claim that agents can be causes, and the debate about free will? I have argued, among other things, that agents can be causes. Is there a connection between this claim and the problem of free will? One might think that there is: after all, "agent causation" is a slogan associated with one approach to the problem of free will (see, for example, Chisholm 1964, Clarke 1996). Theories of agent causation vary in detail, but agree in that they hold that a solution to the problem of free will hinge on the idea that free actions are actions caused by their agents.

My view that agents are causes might therefore seem to be of some use in solving the problem of free will. But unfortunately, as I shall argue below, this is not the case: my view has no bearing on the problem of free will. Nevertheless, it is of some interest to examine the connection, if any, between the view that agents can be causes and the free will debate.

Here, briefly, is one way of explaining the problem of free will. Suppose that we assume that every event is caused by some previous event, and that every action is an event. Given our assumptions, every actions is caused by previous events that are, in turn, caused by events before them in a chain stretching back long before any of us were born. If causes determine their effects, then all of our actions were causally *determined* to happen long before we were born.<sup>15</sup> But if everything that we do was causally determined to happen long before we were born, then it is hard to see how any of our actions could be free. One way of sharpening the problem is to point out that if none of our actions are free, then are seemingly absolved of any moral responsibility for the outcomes of our actions. How could anyone be responsible for the outcome of an action that was determined to happen long before her birth?

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<sup>15</sup> This makes some simplifying assumptions that are harmless for our purposes. To get that complete states of the world at earlier times determine complete states of the world at later times, we also need the assumption that the laws of nature are deterministic.

Chisholm responds to the problem of free will appealing to a theory of agent causation. On Chisholm's view, when an agent acts, she does so by causing a neural event in her brain that is not caused by any event:

[There is] some event A, presumably some cerebral event, which is caused not by any other event, but by the agent. Since A was not caused by any other event, the agent himself cannot be said to have undergone any change or produced any other event...which brought A about." (Chisholm 1964, p. 496)

So for Chisholm, when an agent acts—for example, when she waves her hand—the waving is caused by a neural event that is caused exclusively by the agent herself. This is the crucial component of Chisholm's view: when an agent acts, there is no event in virtue of which she causes the neural event that causes the action. The agent causes the neural event, full stop. Thus Chisholm's view is an incompatibilist view: on his view, the conditions necessary for free action are incompatible with the thesis that every event is caused by some previous event.

Ned Markosian has recently argued for a compatibilist theory of agent causation. He claims that part of what is controversial about theories of agent causation is the claim that agents can be causes at all: he takes it that "many people believe that this assumption is false...[and] some people even think it is unintelligible" (Markosian 1999). Further, he argues, the claim that agents are causes can help solve the problem of free will: on his view, an action A "is morally free iff A is caused by A's agent." So pace Chisholm, the theory of agent causation does not need the strong claim that morally free actions are caused *only* by their agents: it only needs the weaker claim that actions are caused by their agents.

Markosian argues for this claim by appealing to overdetermination cases of the kind discussed in section X above. Recall that in an overdetermination case, there are two independent causal chains, each of which is sufficient for bringing about some effect. In Markosian's example of overdetermination, two people, Kyra and Manon, cause their victim to fall into the water by throwing balls that simultaneously hit the target. (It only took one ball to do the job: if either ball had missed, the victim would have fallen anyway.) Markosian points out that the fact that a chain of events involving Kyra's ball caused the fall



does not detract from Manon's responsibility for the fall: intuitively, Manon is responsible or not independently of how things are with Kyra's chain of events. But if that's true, the argument goes, then by analogy, the fact that a chain of events involving Manon's ball also caused the fall does not detract from the claim that Manon is responsible for the fall. Sure, there was a chain of events that determined the fall, but that does not detract from the fact that Manon caused it, and so does not detract from the claim that he is responsible for it. On the assumption that responsibility entails freedom, Manon's action was free.

Markosian's argument requires the assumption that agents can be causes. On the view I am defending here, the claim that agents are causes is a straightforward, common sense view that is so far from unintelligible as to be almost undeniable. (Perhaps when Markosian says that this claim is controversial he is right on the sociological point: perhaps many philosophers deny that agents are causes. But if I am right, philosophers should not deny this.) So at first glance, my view could be regarded as supplying crucial support for Markosian's theory of agent causation: he says at the outset that he will not argue for the (allegedly controversial) claim that agents are ever causes. I have supplied that argument.

However, none of this helps with the problem of free will. The crucial analogy on which Markosian's argument depends does not hold. For while it is true that the chain of events involving Kyra's rock is irrelevant to the question of whether Manon is responsible for the fall, the chain of events involving *Manon's* rock has everything to do with the question of whether he is responsible. True: he caused some events in that chain. But only in virtue of the fact that he was the agent of some events in that chain: that is, only in virtue of the fact that some of those events were his actions. The trouble is that his actions were caused by events that happened before, and those by events before them, and so on, stretching back to before Manon was born. So we have not made any progress toward solving the problem of free will: Manon is a cause only in virtue actions that were determined to occur long before his birth.

(Of course, the fact that Manon's action was determined to happen might be consistent with its being free: this is what the compatibilist holds. But the compatibilist owes us an explanation of how that is. My point is that such an account has not been supplied.)

Returning to Chisholm: the feature of his theory that matters is not the claim that agents are ever causes, but instead, the claim that when agents are causes, they are causes not in virtue of any events in which they are involved. Returning to Chisholm's quote above, if we subtract the claim that no event causes A, then the theory is of no help. For if some event e causes A, then we are back where we started.

**VI.** I have argued that the causal relata are miscellaneous, and that facts are causes of the most basic kind. I have tried to clarify what the interesting questions about causal relata really are. I have suggested that the question of what the most basic causal relata are should be answered in terms of a supervenience claim: which Xs are such that causal relations on them determine all the rest? I have said that the most plausible candidates for the supervenience base are facts. I take it that plenty of good questions in this neighborhood have gone unanswered, but hope to have made progress nonetheless.

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## Chapter 2: Causation by Omission: a Dilemma

I. Some omissions seem to be causes. For example, suppose Barry promises to water Alice's plant, doesn't water it, and that the plant then dries up and dies. Barry's not watering the plant—his omitting to water the plant—caused its death.

But there is reason to believe that if omissions are *ever* causes, then there is far more causation by omission than we ordinarily think. In other words, there is reason to think the following thesis true:

DILEMMA     Either there is no causation by omission, or there is far more than common sense says there is.

One goal of this paper is to explain the reasons for believing DILEMMA. Another is to argue that DILEMMA really *is* a dilemma: that neither disjunct is acceptable. The final goal is to find a way of avoiding the horns. My proposal involves embracing the view that causation by omission has a *normative* component.

Recently the (ill-understood) notion of the normative has cropped up in surprising places. According to Kripke, for example, *meaning* is normative.<sup>16</sup> But even philosophers who agree with Kripke would probably find the claim that *causation* is normative far harder to swallow. For causation is commonly held to be a paradigmatic example of a natural and so entirely non-normative relation. This received view is what I am denying. I stress that I do not assume that the slogan that causation is normative is clear; a large part of my case for it will involve trying to make it clear.

First, some preliminary remarks. It does not matter for our immediate purposes what omissions are; what matters is that omissions, whatever they are, appear to be causes. Of course, whether they “occur” or “obtain” depends on what they are: if they are events then they occur; if they are states of

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<sup>16</sup> See Kripke 1982. See also Brandom 1994.

affairs, then they obtain. No matter. For brevity, I will say omissions “occur.” The scare quotes will be dropped from now on.<sup>17</sup>

It may only sound right to talk of an omission when someone has failed to do what she ought to have done. But I will use “omission” in the broadest way. On my use, omissions are related to event-types as follows: Barry’s not watering the plant, for example, occurs iff no event of a certain type—a watering of the plant by Barry—occurs, throughout some contextually specified period of time. So, in general, an omission *o* occurs iff *no* event of a certain type  $C_o$  occurs. (I will mostly leave tacit how, in any given example, the relevant type  $C_o$  is to be specified.)

The focus of this chapter is only on the causation of events by omissions. I address neither what it is for an event to cause an omission, nor for one omission to cause another. I will call sentences stating that a particular event was caused by a particular omission, for example “Barry’s not watering the plant caused its death”, *o-sentences*.

**II.** The first task in this section is to present the motivation for:

**DILEMMA**     Either there is no causation by omission, or there is far more than common sense says that there is.

The second is to argue that DILEMMA is aptly named.

The basic argument for DILEMMA can be illustrated by example: Barry promises to water Alice’s plant, doesn’t water it, and the plant then dries up and dies. Other people who have never heard of Alice or her plant did not water it either. Carlos (who lives far away in Australia) did not water it, Dirk did not water it, Eric did not water it, and so on.

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<sup>17</sup> They do not seem to be events; they are not events if all genuine events are located. According to Thomson 2001, omissions are states of affairs. But for our purposes it does not even matter whether there *are* any omissions—provided that this does not prevent sentences like “Barry’s not watering the plant caused its death” from being true.

According to common sense, Carlos's (Dirk's, Eric's,...) not watering the plant were *not* causes of its death. But if Barry's not watering the plant caused its death, and Carlos's (Dirk's, Eric's,...) did not, then there must be some feature of Barry's case, absent from Carlos's (Dirk's, Eric's,...), that makes a causal difference. But what could that be? Barry, unlike Carlos and the rest, *promised* to water the plant; Barry, unlike them, was a salient candidate, in the circumstances, for watering it. But how could these features be relevant to causation?! Since there do not seem to be any *other* features that could ground a causal difference, it follows that *if* Barry's not watering the plant caused its death, then Carlos's (Dirk's, Eric's,...) not watering the plant *also* caused its death. Generalizing this reasoning, DILEMMA is true.

As the basic argument just explained appeals to no specific theory of causation, it does not adjudicate between the disjuncts of DILEMMA. But some argue for DILEMMA by arguing for one of its disjuncts. It will be helpful to mention three such arguments.

The first is due to (or inspired by) David Lewis. The Lewisian argument for DILEMMA is an argument for its second disjunct—that there is far more causation by omission than common sense says there is. The crucial premise is that it is sufficient for an omission *o* to cause an event *e* that *o* occurs, *e* occurs, and the occurrence of *e* counterfactually depends upon the occurrence of *o*. That is, it is sufficient for *o* to cause *e* that if a  $C_o$ -type event had occurred, *e* wouldn't have.

Given that premise, the argument for the second disjunct of DILEMMA is simple. Return to Barry, Carlos, Dirk, et al. The plant died; Carlos didn't water it. If Carlos had watered the plant, it wouldn't have died. Therefore, Carlos's not watering the plant caused its death, and similarly for Dirk, Eric, and the rest. So there is much more causation by omission than common sense says there is. Hence, DILEMMA is true.

The other two arguments for a disjunct of DILEMMA are arguments for its *first* disjunct—that there is no causation by omission. The first argument appeals to the premise that the causal relata are exclusively events, and to the premise that no omission is an event. The second argument appeals to the premise that some kind of physical connection (perhaps a transfer of energy) must hold between cause and effect, and to the premise that such connections do not hold between omissions and events.

Of course, those who argue for DILEMMA by arguing for one of its disjuncts do not think DILEMMA is a dilemma. But they need to explain why common sense is wrong about causation by omission. Those who argue for the second disjunct—that there is far more causation by omission than we thought—need to explain away our inclination to *deny*, for example, that Carlos’s not watering the plant caused its death. Those who argue for the first disjunct—that there is no causation by omission—need to explain away our inclination to *assert* that, for example, Barry’s watering the plant caused its death. I shall now argue that DILEMMA really is a dilemma by objecting to some attempted explanations.

First, take the attempt to explain away our inclination to deny that Carlos’s not watering the plant caused its death. Following suggestions of Jonathan Bennett and David Lewis, we might appeal to pragmatics. Bennett says that “[i]n general, truths about causes will be assertible only if they report causes that are salient—that is, stand out as notably significant, surprising, or the like” (1995, p. 133). And Lewis says: “there are ever so many reasons why it might be inappropriate to say something true. It might be irrelevant to the conversation, it might convey a false hint, it might be known already to all concerned...” (2000, p. 196).

According to this pragmatic approach, it is true that Carlos’s not watering the plant caused its death, but it is inappropriate to mention this fact. Mentioning it would violate conversational maxims—for example, the maxim that one’s contribution to conversation be relevant.

Notice that Bennett and Lewis hold that the datum to be explained is that uttering some true o-sentences would be “inappropriate”. As Lewis puts it: “...we sometimes refuse to say that an absence caused something, even when we have just the right pattern of dependence” (2000, p. 196); and: “if there is any [causation by omission] at all, there is a lot of it—*far more of it than we would normally want to mention*” (2000, p. 196, my italics).

But I think that they are wrong about what needs to be explained, in two ways. First, it isn’t just that we refuse to utter o-sentences that are, on this view, true; we will also utter their negations. If the datum to be explained were just that we don’t utter certain truths, then the situation would be parallel to one that arises in Grice’s defense of the causal theory of perception. There, Grice needs to establish that

when he is “confronted by a British pillar-box in normal daylight at a range of a few feet,” it is true that the pillar-box looks red to him (1961, p. 227). He anticipates an objection: in such a situation, “there would be something at least *prima facie* odd about my saying ‘That looks red to me.’” In reply, he gives a pragmatic explanation of the oddness: saying “That looks red to me” would conversationally imply that either the pillar-box isn’t red, or that there is some doubt about whether it is (p. 227). Grice employs the pragmatic strategy to show why it would be inappropriate to say “That looks red to me” even though it looks red to him.

So the datum Grice seeks to explain is that we do *not* utter certain truths, not that we *do* utter certain falsehoods, and he is right about the datum. But Lewis and Bennett are, I think, wrong about the datum in the omissions case. Here, the datum is not just a refusal to assert that Carlos’s not watering the plant caused its death: Alice, if asked, would assert that Carlos’s not watering her plant was *not* a cause of its death. Admittedly, sometimes pragmatics can explain why speakers make false assertions: for example, in a context in which a group of hungry philosophers are deciding where to eat, Professor Jones might assert that there are no Indian restaurants around here, even though there is one that, for reasons it would take a long time to explain, prohibits philosophers. Jones’ false assertion was considerably more helpful than the truth.<sup>18</sup> But while pragmatics can sometimes explain false assertions, there is no such obvious pragmatic explanation in the omissions case.

The second way in which Bennett and Lewis are wrong about what needs to be explained is that we do not just verbally behave as if, but instead actually believe that Carlos’s not watering the plant did not cause its death. The explanandum is not merely that we do or do not utter certain sentences: we need an explanation of *error*. For example, pragmatics might explain why I say “I don’t like you, I love you!” even though it isn’t true that I don’t like you. But pragmatics would be hard pressed to explain my being confused about whether I like you or not.

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<sup>18</sup> Further, the need to adapt pragmatic explanations to situations in which speakers utter the negation of “p,” where “p” is (allegedly) just odd to say, has been widely recognized: one suggestion is that what the speaker means to deny is not that p, but that “p” is assertible.



A natural way to reply to this second criticism is to claim that convicting people of error about causation is not such a bad thing because many people are confused about causation. The reply would continue by pointing out that many people would deny that Caesar's birth, or the big bang, are causes of Caesar's death. Arguably, people who deny that Caesar's birth caused his death simply haven't thought the matter through. If this diagnosis of confusion is correct, then we should expect people to agree that the birth caused the death once convinced that causation is transitive, and that a causal chain connects the birth to the death.

But for this reason, the diagnosis of confusion seems incorrect in the omissions case. Pointing out that if Carlos had watered the plant it wouldn't have died—that “we have the right pattern of dependence”—does *not* make clear that Carlos's not watering the plant was a cause of its death; it merely casts doubt on the sufficiency of the counterfactual criterion. So we have yet to find an explanation, acceptable to the friends of the second disjunct of DILEMMA, of why we are inclined to deny that Carlos's not watering the plant caused its death.

Now let us turn to the attempt, by friends of the first disjunct, to explain away our inclination to assert that Barry's not watering the plant caused its death, and (as they would say) similar falsehoods. The most promising approach appeals to Davidson's (1967) distinction between *causation* and *causal explanation*. On Davidson's view, no omission is a cause, but some omissions causally explain events (1967, pp, 161-162). Helen Beebee has recently pursued this approach. On her view, because we conflate causation with causal explanation, we mistakenly count these omissions as causes. She says that: “common sense does not, for the most part, respect this distinction [between causation and causal explanation], so...it has a tendency to treat something as a cause of an event if and only if it figures in an adequate explanation of it.” (Beebee 1999, p. 11)

On this view, when we mistakenly think “o caused e” is true, this is because “o figures in the causal explanation of e” is true. How do omissions causally explain events without causing them? Beebee's idea—drawn from Lewis's theory of causal explanation (1986)—is that “to cite an omission in an explanation is to say something—albeit something negative—about the causal history of the event to

be explained” (Beebee 1999, p. 11). The idea seems to be that *o* explains *e* iff the fact that *o* occurred (together, perhaps, with the fact that *e* depends on *o*) rules out some hypothesis about the causal history of *e*. In particular, Barry’s not watering explains the plant’s death because the fact that the omission occurred tells us the death could have been, but was not, prevented by an event of the plant-watering-by-Barry type.

The main problem with Beebee’s suggestion is that she needs to give an account of causal explanation that has the result that *Carlos’s* not watering the plant does *not* causally explain its death. For, if *Carlos’s* not watering the plant does causally explain the death, common sense should agree that this omission causes the death, and common sense does not agree. But Beebee’s account as stated does not have the desired result. If Barry’s not watering is citable in an explanation for the reason Beebee gives, then *Carlos’s* not watering should be equally citable, in which case (given the alleged confusion over Davidson’s distinction) we should assert that *Carlos’s* not watering was likewise a cause.

Another difficulty for the view is that Barry, and not *Carlos*, is *responsible* for the death. Causation and responsibility are linked, albeit in some hard to spell out way; intuitively the fact that Barry, and not *Carlos*, is responsible is linked to the fact that Barry’s not watering, and not *Carlos’s*, is a cause. But this link disappears if neither omission is a cause, and the two differ just in that one and not the other is explanatory.

Let me sum up. I have presented the basic argument for DILEMMA, and some more specific arguments for its disjuncts. Further, I have argued that both disjuncts are problematic. The friend of the second disjunct—that there is much more causation by omission than common sense allows—cannot convincingly explain why we utter the negations of many true *o*-sentences. The friend of the first disjunct—that there is no causation by omission—cannot convincingly explain why we utter many false *o*-sentences. Therefore, DILEMMA is a dilemma.

The rest of this paper explores a way of avoiding it. If we could develop an analysis of causation by omission that respects common sense, then there would no longer be any error to explain. Accordingly, in the next sections I shall assume that our intuitive judgments are correct, and try to give an

analysis of causation by omission that respects them. In section V, we will return to the question of whether our intuitive judgments are in fact correct.

I stress that the proposals discussed in the next sections are not proposals for analyzing causation generally, but are proposals for analyzing causation of events by omissions. I also stress that of these proposals, only the first purports to be reductive; the others help themselves to causal notions. Section III runs through several proposals that fail, while IV introduces one that does better.

III. Let us begin by reviewing a proposal for a reductive analysis of causation by omission that we have already in effect seen to be incorrect (at least, under our assumption that the judgments of common sense are to be respected). The proposal is that, where  $o$  is an omission and  $e$  is an event:

#### COUNTERFACTUAL PROPOSAL

$o$  causes  $e$  iff  $o$  occurs,  $e$  occurs, and if a  $C_o$ -type event had occurred, then  $e$  would not have occurred.

Recalling the discussion of the Lewisian argument for DILEMMA in the previous section, this proposal fails to supply a *sufficient* condition for  $o$  to cause  $e$ . It is true that if Carlos had watered the plant, it would not have died. So if COUNTERFACTUAL PROPOSAL supplies a sufficient condition, Carlos's not watering the plant caused its death. Yet according to common sense, it doesn't: Carlos has never heard of Alice or her plant, and he lives far away in Australia.

However, it might be that COUNTERFACTUAL PROPOSAL supplies a *necessary* condition for  $o$  to cause  $e$ : certainly the death of Alice's plant counterfactually depends on Barry's omission, which was a cause. Of course, in general we do not expect counterfactual dependence to be necessary for causation: cases of causal preemption and overdetermination refute this claim. But finding counterexamples to the necessity of counterfactual dependence when one of the relata is an omission is less straightforward.

One counterexample might be this. In our first case, Alice asks Barry to water her plant, he doesn't, and it then dries up and dies. But now suppose that if Barry *had* watered the plant, Bertha, who

hates the plant, would have doused it with acid after the watering. In that case, the death doesn't counterfactually depend on Barry's omission. But Barry's not watering the plant caused its death: after all, the plant dried up and died, and Barry was supposed to water it.

However, in order to secure the claim that the plant's death doesn't counterfactually depend on Barry's omission, we need the assumption that the actual death (from lack of water) is the same event as the death that would have occurred had the plant been doused with acid. But that is not so clear. To avoid the issue of whether the plant dies the same death in each case, we might suppose instead that Alice asked Barry to turn on the sprinkler system, which waters the plant, and then turns off automatically. As before, Barry doesn't do it. But if he *had* done it, the plant would have died anyway, because the sprinkler system would have malfunctioned before even a drop reached the plant. In this case, it is tolerably clear that the plant actually dies the same death that it would have died had Barry shown up. Unfortunately, it is also less clear in this case that Barry's not turning on the sprinkler is a cause of the plant's death.

So while there are prima facie preemption cases where an omission is a cause, decisive counterexamples to the necessity of counterfactual dependence are harder to find in the omissions case than they are in the events case. No matter: difficulties concerning preemption and overdetermination afflict accounts of causation generally, so we need not attempt to settle the matter here. Let us instead simply restrict the domain of our analyses to cases in which  $e$  counterfactually depends on  $o$ ; we only need this restricted set of cases to motivate our particular problem concerning DILEMMA.

In fact, in the examples given so far, omission  $o$  causes event  $e$  only if: had an event of type  $C_o$  occurred,  $e$  would not have occurred because an event of type  $C_o$  would have *prevented* it. Let us restrict our cases to those in which an event of type  $C_o$  would have prevented  $e$ , had  $o$  not occurred. Of course, prevention is a causal notion, but as we are not trying to give an analysis of causation by omission in non-

causal terms, we can help ourselves to it. For brevity, when an event of type  $C_o$  would have prevented  $e$ , had one occurred, let us say that the event-type  $C_o$  is a *would-be preventer* of  $e$ .<sup>19</sup>

Our problem, then, is this: an event  $e$  has many would-be preventers. Would-be preventers of the plant's death include, for example, the event-types Barry's-watering-the-plant, and Carlos's-watering-the-plant. Our task is to discover the basis on which common sense singles out the omissions of some of these would-be preventers as causes of  $e$ .

Consider yet again Barry, Carlos, and the plant. Presumably Barry is the man who would have watered the plant, if anyone had. After all, Carlos has never heard of the plant and lives in Australia. So perhaps Barry's not watering the plant is a cause because the event-type Barry's-watering-the-plant is the "closest" would-be preventer—that is, an event of *that* omitted type would have prevented the death, if anything had. As I shall say, the event-type Barry's-watering-the-plant is a *proximate would-be preventer* of the death. It will be helpful to put this proposal in terms of closeness of possible worlds, as follows.

Where  $o$  is an omission and  $e$  is an event:

#### PROXIMATE WOULD-BE PREVENTION PROPOSAL

$o$  causes  $e$  iff  $o$  occurs,  $e$  occurs, and in the closest world to the actual world in which  $e$  gets prevented, an event of type  $C_o$  prevents  $e$  (i.e.  $C_o$  is a *would-be preventer* of  $e$ , and moreover a *proximate would-be preventer* of  $e$ ).

Provided that Barry's watering would have prevented the death, *if anything had prevented it*, his not watering the plant counts as a cause.

PROXIMATE WOULD-BE PREVENTION PROPOSAL faces some minor difficulties: as it stands, it yields the result that if Barry and Amanda both promised to water the plant, but there is a slightly better chance that Barry will water it than there is that Amanda will, then Barry's failure is a

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<sup>19</sup> I am using "prevention" in the widest sense: on my use,  $x$  can prevent  $y$  either by *cutting off a process aimed at  $y$*  (as when the server prevents a glass from shattering by catching it) or merely by (roughly speaking) *not lending its support to  $y$*  (as deciding to go to Rome prevents the traveler from going to

cause, but Amanda's isn't. Intuitively, if both Barry and Amanda made promises, then both failures are causes. This problem might be fixed by saying that  $o$  causes  $e$  iff  $o$  occurs,  $e$  occurs, and in *one of the closest worlds* in which  $e$  gets prevented,  $C_o$  prevents it.

But as the proposal also faces some major difficulties, we needn't examine this fix more closely. To see this, suppose Larry is an inveterate liar who deliberately makes promises to water plants because he wants to see them die. If Larry promised to water the plant, his omission caused its death. But, we may suppose, the event-type Larry's-watering-the-plant is not a proximate would-be preventer of the death. For if anything had prevented the death, it would have been a watering by Alice's neighbor Andrew, who came very close to passing by her window, and who, had he done so, would have noticed the drooping plant and broken in to water it. So PROXIMATE WOULD-BE PREVENTION PROPOSAL does not supply a necessary condition.

Neither does the proposal supply a sufficient condition. Suppose Alice goes on vacation without arranging for the care of her plant: she was going to call Andrew, but forgot. So the closest world in which the death of the plant gets prevented is a world in which she does call Andrew, who, being utterly reliable, waters it. PROXIMATE WOULD-BE PREVENTION PROPOSAL yields the result that Andrew's not watering the plant caused its death: in the closest world in which the death gets prevented, a watering by Andrew prevents it. But while Alice's not arranging for the care of her plant is a cause of its death, it does not seem that Andrew's not watering it, given that she didn't ask him, was.

So PROXIMATE WOULD-BE PREVENTION PROPOSAL fails. Importantly, the counterexamples concern what *ought* to have happened. Larry the inveterate liar (morally) *ought* to have watered the plant. And it isn't true that Andrew (morally) *ought* to have watered it. So perhaps we should consider the idea that causation by omission can be analyzed in terms of a moral ought. Since it is presumably moral agents, not event-types, to whom the moral ought applies, perhaps we should say this:

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Paris). While the distinction between cutting off and not lending support may matter elsewhere (see for

## MORAL OUGHT PROPOSAL

$o$  causes  $e$  iff  $o$  occurs,  $e$  occurs,  $C_o$  is a would-be preventer of  $e$ , and the agent  $A$  of  $o$  (morally) ought to have prevented  $e$ .

But while this proposal might supply a *sufficient* condition for  $o$  to cause  $e$ , it obviously does not supply a *necessary* condition. For example, some omissions that do not involve agents are causes: Kathy's alarm clock's not ringing caused her late arrival, and that omission lacks an agent. And there are counterexamples involving agents: it is not the case that the hit man (morally) ought to have prevented Mr. Big from boarding the plane; nevertheless his not shooting Mr. Big was a cause of the boarding.

A different proposal is suggested by Bennett's remark, quoted in section II: we will mention that something is a cause only when it is "significant, surprising, or the like" (1995, p. 133). We generally expect people to keep their promises and we generally expect alarm clocks to work properly. So Barry's not watering the plant (unlike Carlos's not watering it) and the alarm clock's not ringing are to some degree unexpected or surprising. And perhaps this is why we single out these omissions as causes.

Of course, there could be causation by omission even if there were no people to do any expecting: the absence of rain could cause the plants to die even if there weren't any people. So in formulating this proposal we should appeal to a notion of idealized expectation, of what it would be *reasonable* to expect, that doesn't depend on what anyone actually expects. The proposal, then, is this:

## REASONABLE EXPECTATION PROPOSAL

$o$  causes  $e$  iff  $o$  occurs,  $e$  occurs,  $C_o$  is a would-be preventer of  $e$ , and it was reasonable to expect (in some idealized sense) that an event of type  $C_o$  would have prevented  $e$ .

Unfortunately, we can add to the story of the inveterate liar Larry to make him, again, a counterexample. When Alice goes on vacation having asked Larry to water her plant, he creates a substantial amount of misleading evidence that innocent Iris will water the plant. Given the evidence, then, it is more reasonable

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example Mackie 1991, Mackie 1992, and Lombard 1990), it does not matter here.

to expect that Iris will water the plant than it is that Larry will. So REASONABLE EXPECTATION PROPOSAL does not supply a sufficient condition: Iris's not watering the plant is not a cause, though it was reasonable to expect that an event of this type would prevent the death. Nor does it supply a necessary condition. We can suppose that there is plenty of evidence that Larry lies and so plenty of evidence that he won't water the plant; nevertheless, his not watering it was a cause of its death.

The deep difficulty for the proposal is that while what it is reasonable to expect is relative to what evidence is available at a given time, the facts about causation by omission are not.

Let us recapitulate. We have restricted our attention to cases in which  $e$  counterfactually depends on  $o$ . We strengthened counterfactual dependence to this: if  $o$  causes  $e$ , then  $C_o$  is a would-be preventer of  $e$ . The problem with PROXIMATE WOULD-BE PREVENTION PROPOSAL is that it is entirely non-normative: it completely overlooks the sensitivity of our judgments about causation by omission to considerations of what ought (in some sense) to happen. The problem with MORAL OUGHT PROPOSAL is that it uses a normative notion that applies much too narrowly: there are cases of causation by omission that have nothing to do with morality. REASONABLE EXPECTATION PROPOSAL uses a normative notion—specifically, an epistemically normative notion—that at least is not too narrow. But there are counterexamples to both directions.

Still, our discussion of failed analyses tentatively suggests a way to make progress: find some sort of normative notion that is broader than the moral ought, and more carefully targeted than reasonable expectation.

IV. I suggest that the normative notion we want is one that naturally emerges from the failures of the previous attempts: a notion of what is *normal*. In this section, I attempt to explain what this notion is. Then, I put it to work in an account of causation by omission, showing how it can accommodate a variety of cases.



Two things should be stressed at the outset. First, I am only offering an outline of a proposal—filling in all the details has yet to be done. Second, although my use of the word “normal” may be unfamiliar, I intend to use it to express a familiar *notion*.

The notion of the normal I have in mind is highly abstract and applies very generally: to actions, the behavior of artifacts, and the behavior of both biological and non-living systems. It may be illustrated by means of examples. It is normal for  $x$  to  $\phi$  iff  $x$  is *supposed* to  $\phi$ . People are supposed to keep their promises (it is normal for them to keep their promises); alarm clocks are supposed to ring at the set time (it is normal for them to ring at the set time); hearts are supposed to pump blood (it is normal for them to pump blood); the rain is supposed to come in April (it is normal for it to come in April); water is supposed to flow downhill (it is normal for it to flow downhill).

This list might not yet serve to make the notion seem familiar; to some it might seem implausible that there is any interesting substantive similarity between the sense in which water is “supposed to” flow down hill and that in which people are “supposed to” keep their promises. Here it is helpful to think of what is normal as being imposed by certain *standards*, with the standards varying from case to case. So, for example, there are certain *artifactual* standards governing what things like alarm clocks are supposed to do, and if an alarm clock does not ring at the set time then it violates these standards. It is malfunctioning, or not working properly, with respect to these standards. There are certain *biological* standards governing what organs like hearts are supposed to do, and if a heart does not pump blood then it violates these standards. Again, it is malfunctioning or not working properly with respect to these standards. There are even *physical* standards governing the natural world. Laws of nature, and regularities in general, set standards for weather and for stuffs: rain that comes in May rather than April, or water that flows uphill, violates these standards.

It is useful to compare the notion of the normal that I am trying to elucidate to the notion of *correctness*. The notion of the normal is like that of correctness in that it is both normative and of very general application: chess moves, dance steps, quiz answers, beliefs, baseball pitches, ways of beating

eggs and stitching hemlines can all be correct or incorrect. Further, something is correct or not relative to certain *standards*, with the standards varying from case to case. There are *chess* standards governing the movement of the rooks (moving a rook diagonally is moving it *incorrectly*), and there are *culinary* standards governing the beating of eggs (beating eggs with a spoon is beating them *incorrectly*).

Further, although the standards of correctness are sometimes imposed by us (as in the examples of chess and cooking), they sometimes are not. A belief is correct iff it is *true*, but this standard of correctness is imposed by what beliefs are, rather than by us. Likewise for my notion of the normal: the standards according to which  $x$  is supposed to  $\phi$  are sometimes set by us (as in the case of alarm clocks), and sometimes set by the world (as in the case of hearts and the weather).<sup>20</sup>

I stress that the normal overlaps with, but is not constitutively tied to, statistical regularities, or to what usually happens. What is normal can be *unusual*: for example, it is normal for tadpoles to grow up to be frogs, even though they usually get eaten first, and it is normal even for unreliable alarm clocks to ring on time.

Although the normal is not constitutively tied to regularities, regularities can impose standards of normality. For example, Kathy always keeps quarters in her pocket as change for the payphone. This (non-accidental) regularity imposes a standard; relative to it, Kathy's not having quarters in her pocket is abnormal. Accidental regularities can also impose standards: if Kathy just always happens to have quarters in her pocket, this imposes a standard relative to which the absence of quarters can be judged abnormal.

A complication arises because incompatible standards will often apply to the same situation. So we must relativize what is normal to *some* standard in force. To see this, consider the lobsters in the tank at Frank's Fish. According to the standards set by biology, it is normal for the lobsters to be at the bottom of the ocean: that is where they are supposed to be. But the tank at Frank's Fish is designed for lobsters: lobsters are supposed to be in it. So, according to the standards set by the practices at Frank's Fish, it is

normal for the lobsters to be in the tank. Relative to one standard the situation is normal; relative to another, it is not.

Larry the inveterate liar provides another example. Relative to the standards set by morality, it is not normal for Larry to lie about his age. But relative to the standards set by Larry's frequent and non-accidental lying, it is normal for Larry to lie.

A similar complication arises with the notion of correctness. Suppose a bank customer asks Paul the teller to tell him the combination of the bank's safe and Paul replies truthfully. Then, according to the standard set by the practice of questions and answers, Paul's answering truthfully is correct. But according to the standard set by the bank, his answering truthfully is incorrect: according to that standard, Paul should have lied about the combination of the safe.

It is helpful also briefly to compare and contrast my notion of the normal with Ruth Millikan's notion of the "Normal" as explained in her book *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories*. The word "Normal," as Millikan uses it, is a technical term that is part of an apparatus intended to solve the problem of explaining how misrepresentation is possible. Millikan explicitly defines what is Normal in non-normative, naturalistic terms (see Millikan 1984).

Like Millikan, the notion I am appealing to is not the statistical notion of what is usual. But in contrast to Millikan, I neither intend to introduce a technical notion nor to analyze the notion of the normal into non-normative components. Further, as I have explained, my notion, unlike Millikan's, is not restricted to biology, though it often applies where Millikan's does in biological cases. In my sense, and in Millikan's, it is normal for hearts to pump blood, it is normal for chameleons to match themselves to their environments, and it is normal for hens to lay eggs.

Assuming that the notion of the normal has now been illustrated enough to seem familiar, let us put it to use in specifying, of the many *would-be preventers* of *e*, those whose omissions *cause e*.

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<sup>20</sup> Here I have been helped by Rosen's discussion of correctness in his 1999.

Some of the would-be preventers  $C_o$  of  $e$  are such that, relative to some *actual* standard  $S$ , had  $e$  been prevented, it would have been normal for an event of type  $C_o$  to have prevented  $e$ . That is, in the closest worlds in which  $e$  is prevented, it is normal that it is prevented by an event of type  $C_o$ , relative to some *actual* standard  $S$ . Let us say that these would-be preventers of  $e$  are *normal would-be preventers* of  $e$ .

Note that  $C_o$  is a normal would-be preventer of  $e$  if it would have been normal for an event of type  $C_o$  to prevent  $e$  according to *some* standard set by the actual situation—not *all* or *most* standards. We already illustrated why that is so with Larry the liar: his not watering the plant caused its death because of the standard set by the practice of promise keeping, even though, in the situation, his not watering the plant *was* normal—relative to standards set by Larry’s past behavior. We can illustrate this from the other direction: on his birthday, Larry didn’t lie about his age, for once, when asked. According to standards set by the practice of questions and answers, that is perfectly normal. But according to the standards set by Larry’s past behavior, it is not. That Larry’s behavior is not normal according to one standard is enough: Larry’s not lying about his age for once caused Harry’s placing a forty-first candle on the cake.

So our first pass at an account is this:

#### NORMAL PROPOSAL (first pass)

$o$  causes  $e$  iff  $o$  occurs,  $e$  occurs, and  $C_o$  is a normal would-be preventer of  $e$ .

There is an initial difficulty with this suggestion. Suppose Barry’s not watering the plant causes its death, which causes the death of a bug that feeds on the plant. It is not clear that there is some standard imposed by the situation relative to which, had the bug’s death been prevented, it would have been normal for a watering of the plant by Barry to have prevented it. The standards imposed by the fact that Barry promised to water the plant seem to be the only candidates, and they do not indicate it would have been normal for a watering by Barry to have prevent the bug’s death.

Since we are not trying to analyze causation by omission in non-causal terms we can solve this difficulty by appealing to transitivity. Although  $C_o$  is not a normal would-be preventer of  $e$ , it *is* a normal would-be preventer of another event  $e^*$ , which in turn causes  $e$ . So the second-pass proposal is:

NORMAL PROPOSAL (second pass)

$o$  causes  $e$  iff  $o$  occurs,  $e$  occurs, and either  $C_o$  is a normal would-be preventer of  $e$ , or there is some event  $e^*$  such that  $e^*$  causes  $e$ , and  $C_o$  is a normal would-be preventer of  $e^*$ .

The analysis makes use of the notion of an event causing another event, but there is no harm in that, as our analysis does not purport to be reductive.

Let us now run through some more examples. First, take Larry the inveterate liar. According to some standard—the one imposed by his frequent lying—the event-type Larry’s-watering-the-plant is *not* a normal would-be preventer of the death. But according to another standard—that imposed by the institution of promising—it is. By this standard, given Larry’s promise, it would have been normal for a watering-by-Larry to prevent the death. So, according to NORMAL PROPOSAL, Larry’s not watering the plant is a cause of its death.

Second, forgetful Alice. Alice goes on holiday without arranging for the watering of her plant. Her not arranging for its care caused the plant’s death. But is the event-type Alice’s-arranging-for-the-watering-of-the-plant a *normal* would-be preventer of the death? I think so. Houseplants, like carpets and bicycles, are associated with standards of care and maintenance. Houseplants are supposed to be watered (if only by proxy), just as carpets are supposed to be vacuumed, and bicycles are supposed to have properly inflated tires. Of course, the “supposed to” is not a moral “supposed to”: there is nothing morally wrong about Alice’s not watering her plant, not vacuuming her carpet, or not pumping up her bicycle tires, just as there is nothing morally wrong with the alarm clock’s not ringing at the set time. But it would have been normal for a ringing of the alarm clock at 7am to wake Kathy and prevent her lateness, and for similar reasons, it would have been normal for an arranging-of-a-watering by Alice to prevent the death of her plant. Contrast Andrew—whom Alice would have called, had she remembered. His omission

isn't a cause, and given that Alice didn't call him, there is nothing in the situation that would mark his watering the plant as normal.

Third, Alan the environmentalist. Suppose Alan takes a liking to a plant growing in a nearby forest, and hikes through the trees to water it every week. Last week he forgot, and as there was a lack of rain, the plant died. Alan's not watering the plant was a cause of its death. This might be thought to raise a problem for NORMAL PROPOSAL: it might seem implausible that the relevant standard can be found. After all, the plant does not belong to Alan, nor is it a semi-artifact like a house or garden plant. But the case is easily accommodated, for a disruption of a regularity is also a departure from what is normal. Alan usually turns up every week to water the plant. Once this regularity is in place, we have a standard relative to which it would have been normal for a watering of the plant by Alan to have prevented its death, had it been prevented. So when Alan forgets to make the trip, the event-type Alan's-watering-the-plant is a normal would-be preventer of the plant's death, as NORMAL PROPOSAL predicts.

Finally, consider little Theodora's coming to believe that Big Bird has not wandered into her yard. That belief was caused by Big Bird's not wandering into her yard. Assuming that her belief was prevented somehow, was the event-type Big-Bird's-wandering-in supposed to prevent it? We may imagine that there is no standard set by the situation according to which it would be normal for Big Bird to wander in. Nevertheless, Big Bird's omission is a cause. Relative to the standards set by the nature of belief, it is normal for beliefs to be true, and a false belief is abnormal: it is normal that p's being true prevents belief in not-p. So, relative to these standards, Big Bird's wandering in is a normal would-be preventer of Theodora's coming to believe that Big Bird has not wandered in.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This case may seem to call into question the sufficiency of NORMAL PROPOSAL. Suppose Theodora comes to believe that Big Bird has not wandered in by reading it in a fake newspaper, though if Big Bird had wandered in, that would have prevented her from believing that he had not. The event-type Big-Bird's-wandering-in is a normal would-be preventer of Theodora's coming to believe that Big Bird has not wandered in, but is Big Bird's not wandering in a cause? If it isn't, there are various possible repairs. For example, we could add to the proposal the requirement that there is no event e# such that: (i) e# causes the effect e; (ii) the omission o does not cause e#; and (iii) e# does not "screen off" e from o. But I think there is no need for any repair: both Big Bird's not wandering in and Theodora's reading the fake newspaper are causes of her belief.

V. The preceding two sections assumed for convenience that common sense was correct about causation by omission. I argued that NORMAL PROPOSAL is correct, *if* common sense is. Now let us ask: is common sense correct?

In section II, we gave the basic argument for:

DILEMMA     Either there is no causation by omission, or there is far more than common sense says there is.

DILEMMA has it that either way, common sense is wrong. The argument of the previous section might be thought to sharpen and strengthen the basic argument. For surely the notion of the normal cannot figure in an analysis of *causation*. First, this notion seems too *heterogeneous*: the standards relative to which something is normal can be drawn from morality, physics, cooking, and so on. The notion also seems too vague, or *flabby*. Our notion of causation, by contrast, is neither particularly heterogeneous nor particularly vague. Second, the notion of the normal is normative, and presumably causation is not: no more when it involves omissions than when it involves anything else.<sup>22</sup>

But even if this is right, we would have made progress nonetheless. First, we would have provided some useful additional support for DILEMMA by strongly motivating the claim that common sense draws causal distinctions based on an objectionable notion.

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<sup>22</sup>Even if it were granted that the notion applies to the natural world and might be made more precise, it could be objected that normality is ill-suited for analyzing causation, because the former, and not the latter, is highly extrinsic. Some people think that causal features of processes are *intrinsic* to them: roughly, that the causal facts about a region are determined just by what is happening in that region, not by anything external to it, and so might raise a third objection on these grounds. For if NORMAL PROPOSAL were correct, then causal features of processes can be determined *extrinsically*. Whether o causes e might depend on something that happened years ago and miles away: for example, an ancient distant promise. People who think that causation is not at all extrinsic or situation dependent are probably thinking of cases of causation by *comission* rather than causation by *omission*. Even so, this raises the question: to what extent is causation situation-dependent? I cannot answer that question here, but leave it for another occasion.

Second, recall our discussion in section II: views on which common sense is wrong lack a credible account of why we utter some o-sentences and reject others. Because NORMAL PROPOSAL articulates the assertibility-conditions of o-sentences, it provides more detail about what needs to be explained, and perhaps this can help us find such an explanation.

But I think that the idea that the notion of the normal figures in the correct analysis of causation by omission might be defended against the objections just raised. The first objection was that the notion of the normal is too heterogeneous, and too vague, to figure in an analysis of causation. Defending the idea that the notion of the normal can be put to use in analyzing causation will involve showing that while the notion is abstract, and covers a diverse range of cases, it also exhibits unity, and can be pinned down relatively precisely. I take it I have made some progress toward that end; enough, I hope, to indicate that this is a promising line to follow.

The second objection was to the idea that causation is normative. Here let us distinguish between two claims. Some people who deny that causation is normative simply have in mind the claim that some worlds without human purposes and interests nonetheless contain causes and effects. This claim is not in dispute; while sometimes the notion of the normal is connected to human purposes and interests (for example, when it applies to artifacts) other times it is not (for example, when it applies to the prompt arrival of the April rain).

But some people who deny that causation is normative have another claim in mind. Causation, they say, is an entirely natural phenomenon, like gravity or evolution. There is nothing at all normative about gravity or evolution, and so there is nothing at all normative about causation. The response to this objection is that the foregoing suggests, *inter alia*, that there *is* something normative about natural phenomena like gravity or evolution. For example, it was a Newtonian discovery that it is normal for two bodies to exert a certain force on each other; and it was a Darwinian discovery that it is normal for the peacock's tail to attract a mate. The suggestion, then, is that the natural and the normative are not as sharply opposed as we might have thought.



So, as far as I can see, it would be premature to convict common sense of error about causation by omission. Far from strengthening the basic argument for DILEMMA, NORMAL PROPOSAL shows us how we might reasonably resist it.

A concluding remark. It might seem in the end that whether NORMAL PROPOSAL is true, or merely gives the assertibility conditions of o-sentences, is rather a fine point of dispute. Intuitions about what o-sentences are false are not the firmest of data: recasting them as intuitions about what is not assertible might seem a small price to pay for keeping the notion of the normal out of our theory of causation. But the current analyses of causation, from which the normative is typically excised, are far from clean and settled. The issue of whether normativity is related to causation by omission in the way that I have suggested is linked to the success of the project of giving a non-normative analysis of other kinds of causation. It is not at all certain that this project can succeed. If I am right that causation by omission is normative, then we should not be surprised to see normativity implicated elsewhere in causation.

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## Causation and the Making/Allowing Distinction

I. Consider the following two pairs of cases. First pair:

- No Check:** Despite knowing that a sending a check for \$40 to Oxfam will result in a child's life being saved, Jim does not send one.
- Shoot:** Jim fatally shoots a child, thus preventing the child from stealing \$40 from Jim's wallet.

Second pair:

- No Catch:** A stone is hurtling towards Dick. Harry could catch the stone in mid-flight, but he doesn't, and it hits Dick.
- Throw:** Harry throws a stone at Dick, hitting him.

Intuitively, there is a moral difference between the first and the second case of each of these pairs.<sup>23</sup> In the second case, the agent's behavior is morally worse than his behavior in the first case. But in each pair, the agent's behavior has the same outcome: in No Check and Shoot, the outcome is that a child dies, and Jim saves \$40; in No Catch and Throw, the outcome is that Dick is hit by a stone.

Let us call these pairs of cases "the paradigm pairs." The paradigm pairs, and others like them, provide evidence that common sense morality is not *consequentialist*: common sense morality does not judge the moral worth of actions just in terms of their consequences. But it has proved extremely difficult to provide an account of a morally relevant difference between the members of pairs like the ones above.

One hypothesis about the difference that has received a lot of attention in the literature is that in the first kind of case the agent *allows* the outcome to occur, while in the second the agent *makes* the outcome occur. In Shoot Jim kills a child, but in No Check, Jim merely allows a child to die. In Throw, Harry hits Dick, but in No Catch Harry merely allows Dick to be hit. The hypothesis is:

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<sup>23</sup> For reasons of space, these and other cases have been left somewhat underdescribed, and the reader is invited to fill in the obvious details. So in Throw, for example, by throwing the stone Harry doesn't save Dick from stepping on a snake, etc., etc.

**MAKING MATTERS:** Ceteris paribus, it is worse to make something bad happen than merely to allow something bad to happen.

Many people think that MAKING MATTERS is the best explanation of the moral difference between cases like No Check and Shoot, and No Catch and Throw. Further, they think that common sense morality is deeply committed to MAKING MATTERS: that if MAKING MATTERS were false, then many of our common sense beliefs about morality would be false, too. For example, either Jim's not sending the check for \$40 is much worse than we think it is, or his shooting the child was not so bad. This is what Jonathan Bennett has in mind when he says that "the thesis that making/allowing is morally weightless even-handedly condemns many moral judgments that we are inclined to accept" (Bennett 1995, p. 142). So the thought is that if MAKING MATTERS were false, then the following would be true:

**DILEMMA:** Morality is either vastly more demanding, or vastly more permissive, than we thought it was.

In this paper I argue that MAKING MATTERS is not true, but that this does not force us to accept DILEMMA. I first survey some attempts to analyze the making/allowing distinction (section II), and then offer my own analysis (section III). My analysis has the result that there is an area of overlap: some cases are both makings and allowings. This raises an objection, which I discuss in section IV. I argue in section V that MAKING MATTERS is false, but that DILEMMA does not follow. I end with some brief remarks about the difficult question regarding the basis of the morally relevant difference (if indeed there is one) between cases like No Check and Shoot, and No Catch and Throw. While this paper leaves that question open, if I am right, progress has been made: one formerly attractive explanation must be rejected.

**II.** There is a familiar two-part strategy for answering the question whether MAKING MATTERS is true. The first part of the strategy is to discover the underlying non-moral basis for the making/allowing

distinction. The second part is to determine whether that is a distinction on which a moral difference could depend. This section reviews some suggestions that have been made in the literature in connection with the first part.

A natural first pass at an analysis of the making/allowing distinction is this:

**CAUSATION THESIS:** An agent makes an outcome occur iff she causes it to occur. An agent allows an outcome to occur iff she does not cause it to occur.

Although it is of some initial appeal, CAUSATION THESIS will not do. Plausibly, and on most theories of causation, omissions—Jim’s not sending a check, Harry’s not catching the stone—can be causes. But according to CAUSATION THESIS, when an agent causes an outcome by omission, she makes it occur. That seems false: instead, it seems that when an agent causes an outcome by omission, she allows it to occur.

Let us pause over this point. What is it for an omission to cause an outcome? Suppose that in No Catch, Harry is a professional bodyguard whose job is to protect Dick from flying stones. If there is any causation by omission at all, this version of No Catch is an example. Harry fails to do something he is supposed to do—he does not prevent the stone from hitting Dick—and his not doing what he was supposed to do *causes* the bump on Dick’s head.<sup>24</sup> There are questions here: first, about what omissions are, and second, about how they can be causes.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately we need not take a stand on these difficult issues. For our purposes it is enough that we have a grip on the intuitive notion of causation by omission that No Catch illustrates, and that we agree that No Catch is an allowing. If that is right then CAUSATION THESIS is false, because it classifies No Catch as a case of making, not allowing.

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<sup>24</sup> Surely, not preventing an outcome is *not* sufficient for causing it. Vladimir Putin did not prevent the stone from hitting Dick, because he was thousands of miles away at the time, but his omission did not cause the stone to hit Dick. Even if this is correct, it seems that Harry’s omission was a cause, which is all we need.

<sup>25</sup> Some philosophers say that omissions are negative events; others say that omissions are negative states of affairs; still others hold that they are nothing at all. For examples of these three views, see, respectively, Peterson 1989, Thomson 2002, and Lewis 2000.

A natural second pass suggestion grants that makings and allowings can both be causes, and grants that when an agent causes an outcome by omission, she allows it to occur. It distinguishes between makings and allowings on the grounds that makings are commissions, and allowings are omissions:

**COMMISSION/OMISSION THESIS:** An agent makes an outcome occur iff she causes the outcome to occur by commission. An agent allows an outcome to occur iff she causes the outcome to occur by omission.<sup>26</sup>

COMMISSION/OMISSION THESIS gets Shoot and Throw right: in these cases, the agent causes the outcome by acting. Supposing that Harry is Dick's bodyguard, the suggestion gets No Catch right: Harry causes the outcome by omission, and so allows Dick to get hit.

Someone might object to COMMISSION/OMISSION THESIS as follows. While CAUSATION THESIS incorrectly has it that *no* allowings are causes, COMMISSION/OMISSION THESIS incorrectly has it that *all* allowings are causes. Suppose, this objection continues, that in No Catch Harry is a stranger who just happens to be passing by when the stone is hurtling towards Dick. Harry allows Dick to get hit, yet arguably Harry's not catching the stone does not *cause* Dick to get hit.

I am not convinced by these sorts of alleged examples of allowings without causation. At any rate, I shall assume for simplicity, if for nothing else, that all allowings of outcomes cause those outcomes. If that assumption proves incorrect, the positive proposal I shall present in the following section could be easily amended.

However, even given the assumption that all allowings are causes, COMMISSION/OMISSION THESIS is incorrect. Consider the following example:

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<sup>26</sup> For a defense of a version of this view see Quinn 1991, p. 367.

**DNR:** Bee suffers her tenth heart attack in the hospital. The doctor is on his way to restart her heart, but he will not restart it if Bee's husband signs the "DO NOT RESUSCITATE" form. Bee's husband signs the form, and Bee dies.

Bee's husband allows Bee to die; he does not make her die. But his signing the form is a commission—Bee's husband *did* something, as opposed to failing to do something—and this was a cause of her death. Hence COMMISSION/OMISSION THESIS wrongly classifies his signing the form as a making.

DNR is a case in which the agent's action prevents something that would have in turn prevented the death: Bee's husband signs the form, and thereby prevents the doctors from restarting her heart. A suggestion of Philippa Foot's classifies examples with this sort of causal structure—in which an agent's action prevents something that would have in turn prevented an outcome—as allowings. According to Foot, allowings come in two kinds:

There is firstly the allowing which is forbearing to prevent. For this we need a sequence thought of as somehow already in train, and something that the agent could do to intervene...So, for instance, he could warn someone, but *allows* him to walk into a trap...the [other] kind of allowing...is roughly equivalent to *enabling*; the root idea being the removal of some obstacle which is, as it were, holding back a train of events. So someone may remove a plug and *allow* water to flow, open a door and *allow* an animal to get out; or give someone money and *allow* him to get back on his feet. (1967, p. 273)

The first kind of allowing—which covers No Check and No Catch—is the kind in which the agent causes the outcome by omission. The second kind of allowing—which covers DNR—is the kind in which the agent's commission prevents something from preventing the effect. The agent removes the plug that was preventing the water from flowing, or opens the door that was preventing the animal from escaping, or remedies the pennilessness that was preventing the person from getting back on his feet.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> According to the passage just quoted, it is sufficient for an agent to allow an outcome to occur that she "forbears to prevent" it. But Foot goes on to imply that the passage requires amendment: she claims that "an actor who fails to turn up for a performance will generally spoil it rather than allow it to be spoiled" (1967, p. 273). It seems to me quite doubtful that any amendment is required: why doesn't the actor spoil the performance by allowing it to be spoiled? We can often describe cases of allowing by using causal verbs. For example, Bert could dash Alice's hopes by not replying to her email, and surely this is a case of allowing. Admittedly, perhaps it sounds a bit odd to say that he allows her hopes to be dashed. But that does not show that Bert's not replying is not an allowing. It only shows that linguistic markers

Foot's suggestion, then, is this:

**FOOT'S THESIS:** An agent allows an outcome to occur iff she either fails to prevent the outcome, or else removes an obstacle that would prevent the outcome from occurring. An agent makes an outcome occur iff she causes it in some other way.

FOOT'S THESIS classifies DNR as an allowing, for Bee's husband, in signing the form, removes an obstacle (the lack of a signature) to the process that results in her death. But FOOT'S THESIS fails with other examples, for some removals of obstacles are makings. To see this, consider:

**Flood:** Bert throws a bomb onto a dam. The bomb explodes; the dam crumbles, releasing the water. The ensuing flood drowns the villagers who live downstream.

In causal structure, this case is like Foot's plug-removal example in the quotation above. For in Flood, Bert removes an obstacle to a threat to the villagers by blowing up the dam. But intuitively, in this case, he makes something happen to the villagers. So it seems that while some cases of removing an obstacle are allowings, others are makings.

We shall return to FOOT'S THESIS below. But before doing that, let us consider one last account. Jonathan Bennett's analysis of the making/allowing distinction is motivated by the fact that when an agent makes something happen, she typically does so by moving in a very specific way; when she allows something to happen, that is typically not the case. To shoot someone, an agent must aim and pull the trigger. But an agent could allow someone to be shot by skipping, napping, writing a note or whistling a tune while the shooting takes place. This suggests to Bennett that if there is a relatively specific way that an agent must move in order to cause the outcome then she makes it happen, and if not, then she allows it to happen. Returning to our original four examples, on Bennett's account Jim makes the outcome occur in Shoot because most of the ways that he could have moved at the moment of the shooting are such that had he moved in those ways, the child's death would not have occurred. (He could have moved his fingers in so many ways that would not have resulted in the trigger being pulled.)

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imperfectly track the intuitive distinction between making and allowing. For a discussion of this point, see Bennett 1995, pp. 70-73.



Similarly Harry makes the outcome occur in Throw because most of the ways he could have moved at the moment of the throwing would not have resulted in Dick's being hit. In contrast, most of the ways that Jim could have moved in No Check, and most of the ways that Harry could have moved in No Catch, are such that the outcome would have occurred anyway. We can put Bennett's analysis as follows:

**BENNETT'S THESIS:** An agent makes an outcome occur iff most of the ways that the agent could have moved at the time would not have resulted in the outcome. An agent allows an outcome to occur iff most of the ways that the agent could have moved would have resulted in the outcome.<sup>28</sup>

BENNETT'S THESIS has the desirable consequence that Flood is a making, since most of the ways that Bert could have moved would not have resulted in the dam being destroyed. But it also incorrectly classifies DNR as a making: most of the ways that Bee's husband could have moved are such that they would not have resulted in Bee's death.

Bennett anticipates this difficulty in his discussion of an example similar to this:

**Torn Check:** Knowing that sending a check for \$40 to Oxfam will result in a child's life being saved, Mary writes one out, signs it, and puts it in her mailbox. Shortly afterwards, she has second thoughts, returns to the mailbox, and tears up the check.<sup>29</sup>

Torn Check has a structure similar to that of DNR and to Foot's second type of allowing: Mary does something to prevent a process that otherwise would have prevented an outcome. Specifically, Mary prevents her money from getting to Oxfam, and that would have prevented a child's death. And in Torn

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<sup>28</sup> In Bennett's terminology, an agent makes (allows) an outcome to occur iff her behavior is *positively (negatively) relevant* to the outcome. For simplicity, I am ignoring the tricky issue of how to count "the ways an agent could have moved" (see Bennett 1995, ch. 6).

<sup>29</sup> See Bennett's "Cancel" example (1995, p. 103). Another example of Bennett's has the same structure:

**Kick:** A vehicle is rolling down a slope towards a cliff edge. Agent kicks away a rock in the vehicle's path that can bring it to a halt, and the vehicle rolls over the cliff. (1995, p. 67)

For similar reasons, Bennett's analysis classifies this (wrongly, I think) as a making, not an allowing.

Check, intuitively Mary allows a child to die, just as Jim allows a child to die in No Check. Bennett suspects that our tendency to classify cases like Torn Check and No Check together (as allowings) “comes from seeing [these] different ways of not giving money...as morally on a par” (p. 104), and points out that this sort of reasoning would beg the question about the moral significance of the making/allowing distinction. I do not find this at all convincing. Irrespective of our moral intuitions about the case, Torn Check is clearly an allowing.

Let us take stock. COMMISSION/OMISSION THESIS and BENNETT’S THESIS are alike in that they will misclassify some cases in which the agent does something to cut off a process that would have prevented an outcome as makings. They classify DNR and Torn Check as makings whereas these are, intuitively, allowings. FOOT’S THESIS gets DNR and Torn Check right, but mistakenly denies that Flood is a making.

The problem cases have a certain structure in common: the agent does something to cut off a process that otherwise would have prevented the effect.<sup>30</sup> Apparently, what we want is a thesis that puts Flood on the making side of the line with Throw and Shoot; and DNR on the allowing side of the line with No Catch and No Check, as shown in the following table:

<u>Making</u>	<u>Allowing</u>
Throw	No Catch
Shoot	No Check
Flood	DNR

The next section proposes an account that gets this result, save that Flood is also an allowing. But, I shall argue, this consequence is entirely welcome.

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<sup>30</sup> It might be thought that not all cases of removing an obstacle or a barrier to an outcome are cases of cutting off a process. For example, it might be thought that in Flood, Bert does not cut off a process by blowing up the dam. However, on a (perhaps) slightly extended use of “process” he does: the process cut off by blowing up the dam is the “static process” consisting in the dam’s constantly exerting force against the water behind it.

III. We have so far been assuming—with Foot, Bennett, and others—that the making/allowing distinction is *exclusive*: nothing is both a making and an allowing. But perhaps this is a mistake. Perhaps the categories of making and allowing overlap.

In order to see that the overlap hypothesis is a genuine option, let us draw a distinction between distinctions. First, consider the “on/off” distinction for electrical switches. A switch is *on*, we may say, iff it closes an electrical circuit. It is *off* iff it is *not* on. Here the second side of the on/off distinction is characterized negatively, as the complement of the first, thus guaranteeing that the distinction is exhaustive. Let us call this kind of distinction a +/- *distinction*. A philosophical example of a +/- distinction is the analytic/synthetic distinction. One common way of explaining it is this: a sentence is *analytic* iff it is true in virtue of meaning; a sentence is *synthetic* iff it is not analytic.

But not all distinctions are +/- distinctions. Consider, for example, the male/female distinction. Both sides of this distinction are characterized positively (say, in terms of the possession of certain sexual characteristics), so leaving it a substantial question whether there is any overlap. And indeed there is some (small) overlap. Let us call this kind of distinction—the kind both sides of which are characterized positively, so leaving room for overlap—an *M/F distinction*. Another (slightly artificial) example of an M/F distinction is the “ahead/behind” distinction. Something is *ahead* of you, we may say, iff you would reach it by walking in a straight line. Something is *behind* you iff you would reach it by turning 180° and walking in a straight line. It is a substantive question whether *ahead* and *behind* overlap. And, in fact, because we live on a sphere, there is maximum overlap. Rather surprisingly, everything ahead of you is also behind you, and vice versa.<sup>31</sup>

Is the making/allowing distinction a +/- distinction, or an M/F distinction? Arguably, it is an M/F distinction: we have a positive grip on *both* sides. In partial support of this, notice that some of the analyses discussed in section II characterize making positively, and some characterize allowing

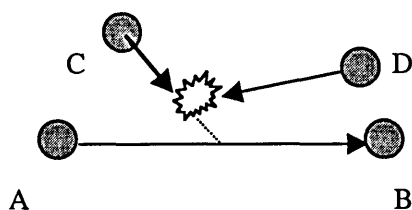
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<sup>31</sup> The distinction between distinctions is itself a +/- distinction.

positively. As a working hypothesis, let us assume that the making/allowing distinction is M/F, and try to find both a positive analysis of making, and a positive analysis of allowing.

I think that we can positively characterize making in terms of an idea that traces back to Hume: causation by *connection*. In the next four paragraphs, I will explain and illustrate this idea.

According to Hume, “nothing can operate in a time or place, which is ever so little remov’d from those of its existence” (*Treatise* Book I, Part III, Section II). That is, Hume’s view (perhaps charitably interpreted) is that if *c* causes *e* there must be a chain of *contiguous causation* linking *c* to *e*—or as I shall say, a *connection*—between *c* and *e*. But surely Hume’s view is too strong: it is not *necessary* for *c* to cause *e* that *c* be connected to *e*. To see this, consider the following case (taken from Lewis 2000) that contrasts causation by connection with causation without connection:



Here billiard ball A starts moving at  $t_1$  towards stationary ball B. Ball C is moving to intercept A, and knock it off course. Ball D deflects C before it can intercept A, which continues on its way and hits B at  $t_2$ . A’s moving at  $t_1$  causes B’s moving at  $t_2$  by a chain of contiguous causation—by connection. Does D’s moving at  $t_1$  also cause B’s moving at  $t_2$ ? Plausibly yes, but notice that this is *not* a case of causation that Hume would accept: D’s moving at  $t_1$  is not linked by a chain of contiguous causation to B’s moving at  $t_2$ —it is not connected to B’s moving at  $t_2$ . If D’s moving does cause B to move, it is not causation of the push-and-shove kind, as exhibited by A’s causing B to move by hitting it. A’s moving at  $t_1$  is *connected* to B’s moving at  $t_2$ , whereas D’s moving at  $t_1$  is not.

Given that it is not true that causation requires a connection, Hume’s insight may be expressed more cautiously like this: in *paradigmatic* cases of causation, the cause is connected to the effect. In *non-*

paradigmatic cases of causation—as when D’s moving causes B to move—the cause is not connected to the effect.

Here are some more examples that illustrate the contrast between causing by connection and causing in some other way. Alice’s stomping on Bert’s plant is connected to its death; her failing to water it is not. If Christopher pushes Dan and he falls, then the push is connected to Dan’s fall; if Ernie is poised to catch Fred, and Gert pushes Ernie out of the way, then Gert’s push is not connected to Fred’s fall. If Harold smothers Iris with a pillow, then his smothering is related to her death by connection; if Janet sits on the doctor who was rushing to the hospital to save Kate, and Kate dies as a result, then Janet’s sitting is not related to Kate’s death by connection. Notice that causation by omission is never causation by connection: Alice’s failing to water Bert’s plant is not connected to its death. Similarly, in No Catch, Harry’s not catching the stone is not connected to Dick’s accident.

One might take the crucial notion of a “connection” to be sufficiently well illustrated by examples like these, so that it is an open question whether connection amounts to a chain of spatio-temporal contiguity. Theorists who explain the notion in this way, by example, disagree about how to analyze it. Some might agree with Hume, that connection is simply a chain of spatio-temporal contiguity. On other views, connection is the ability to “transfer a mark”; on yet others, the persistence of some entity: for example, a trope.<sup>32</sup> For our purposes, we can bypass these issues.

We are now in a position to give a positive characterization of making. What *more* could be required for a making than simply paradigmatic causation—causation by connection? If your action causes an outcome in the paradigmatic push-and-shove way, then surely you *make* the outcome occur. Conversely, if you make the outcome occur, it occurs because you push-and-shove, not because you stand idly by or intercept a potential preventer of the outcome offstage (as when Janet sits on the doctor who was rushing to the hospital to save Kate). So the suggestion is:

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<sup>32</sup> For a sampling of these views, see Aronson 1971, Ehring 1997, Russell 1948.

**CONNECTION THESIS:** An agent makes an outcome occur iff she causes it to occur by connection.

CONNECTION THESIS correctly classifies Shoot, Throw, and Flood as makings, and correctly excludes DNR, No Check, and No Catch.

Now let us move on to a positive characterization of allowing. Here I think Foot's proposal is basically correct. First, if an agent causes an outcome by omission, then she allows the outcome to occur. Second, if she removes an obstacle or a barrier to an outcome's occurring—in our terminology, prevents something from preventing the effect—thereby causing it to occur, she allows the outcome to occur. In the absence of examples suggesting otherwise, these two ways of causing an outcome exhaust the ways in which an agent can allow something to occur.

Let us introduce some more terminology and say that in the second kind of allowing case, the agent causes the outcome to occur by *disconnection*.<sup>33</sup> Then the positive characterization of allowing can be put as follows:

**OMISSION/DISCONNECTION THESIS:** An agent allows an outcome to occur iff she causes it to occur by omission, or by disconnection.

OMISSION/DISCONNECTION THESIS correctly classifies No Catch, No Check, and DNR as allowings. Putting CONNECTION THESIS and OMISSION/DISCONNECTION THESIS together yields an analysis of the making/allowing distinction:

**MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS:** An agent makes an outcome occur iff she causes it to occur by connection. An agent allows an outcome to occur iff she causes it to occur by omission, or by disconnection.

As anticipated, this has the result that some cases are both makings and allowings. To see this, return to:

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<sup>33</sup> The terminology of “disconnection” and “connection” is taken from Schaffer 2001.

**Flood:** Bert throws a bomb onto a dam. The bomb explodes; the dam crumbles, releasing the water. The ensuing flood drowns the villagers who live downstream.

Bert's throw causes the drowning by connection, so he makes the drowning happen. But he also causes the drowning by disconnection: his action removes an obstacle that was, in Foot's words, "holding back a train of events"—the torrent of water leading to the drowning of the villagers. (Note that the connection/disconnection distinction is an *M/F* distinction, and is not exclusive.) So Flood, according to the analysis just proposed, is both a making and an allowing.

But, far from being an undesirable result, this seems to be just what we want. Recall Foot's example of removing a plug, and consider:

**Unplug:** Bert removes a plug in his bath. The water released drowns some tiny people who live in the drain hole.

As Foot says, intuitively Bert *allows* the water to flow, and thereby (presumably) allows the tiny people to drown. But, also intuitively, in Flood Bert *makes* the water flow, and thereby makes the villagers drown. Yet, in all respects that could be relevant to the making/allowing distinction, Flood *is* Unplug. Hence, if Flood is a making, so is Unplug. And if Unplug is an allowing, so is Flood. Hence Flood is both a making and an allowing.

**IV.** As just noted, on the proposed analysis makings and allowings overlap. In the Appendix, I argue that the area of overlap is actually quite vast: almost every making of moral interest is also an allowing.

Although MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS does imply that there are many cases that are both makings and allowings, we have already in effect observed that there are many examples of *mere* allowings.

Examples include No Check and No Catch, the first cases of the two paradigm pairs introduced in section I. In these cases the outcome (the child's death, Dick's injury) is caused by omission, and since omissions are never connected to anything, these are allowings that are not makings. Another example is DNR. In that case, although Bee's husband causes Bee's death by commission, his action is not connected to the death, and so again this is an allowing that is not a making.

But the consequence that there is a large area of overlap raises the following objection. There are many pairs of cases in the literature with the following three features: (a) the cases appear to differ morally; (b) the making/allowing distinction is taken to be the best explanation of this difference; (c) on my analysis the cases do not differ with respect to the making/allowing distinction. In the next section I will argue that MAKING MATTERS is not true; this leaves me with the burden of accounting for the apparent moral difference between the members of the paradigm pairs and similar examples. The present objection comes before I have presented the argument against MAKING MATTERS: given that there are pairs with the features just mentioned, *even if* MAKING MATTERS is true, there is some explaining to do. If the apparent moral difference between pairs of cases in the overlap cannot be explained by appeal to the making/allowing distinction, how can it be explained?

In this section I will briefly respond to this worry by showing that the moral difference can be explained without appealing to the making/allowing distinction. Of course, I cannot discuss all the many examples individually: I will just choose two pairs that seem to be some of the most problematic. It may be, though, that there are harder examples.

Here are two cases that, according to Jeff McMahan, differ in the making/allowing way:

**Dutch Boy:** A little Dutch boy is preventing the flood that will kill the villagers by keeping his finger in a hole in the dike. Getting hungry and tired, he removes his finger. The dike breaks and the villagers die.

**Dutch Boy's Dad:** Same as Dutch Boy, except the Dutch boy's father, annoyed because his son is late for dinner, forcibly removes the Dutch boy's finger.<sup>34</sup>

According to McMahan, in Dutch Boy the boy allows the villagers to die (he does not make them die); whereas in Dutch Boy's Dad the boy's father makes the villagers die (he does not allow them to die). MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS implies that this is not so: Dutch Boy and Dutch Boy's Dad are both makings and allowings: the agent's action is related to the outcome by connection and also by disconnection. The Dutch boy and his father both remove barriers to a process that would result in the

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<sup>34</sup> McMahan 1993, p. 390, p. 392. I have slightly abbreviated McMahan's descriptions of these cases.



death of the villagers, and their actions are each also connected to the deaths: removing the finger, regardless of who does it, is connected to the dam's breaking, which is in turn connected to the flood and to the deaths. So, if MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS is true, the making/allowing distinction cannot explain any moral difference between these cases.

However, I think that *if* there is a moral difference between these cases, it can be explained by appealing to the difference in motive. The little Dutch Boy only pulled his finger out because he was tired and hungry. The father, on the other hand, has a callous attitude toward the fate of the villagers. This is plausibly relevant to the moral status of their acts.

But perhaps there is no moral difference between the agents' acts in these two cases. According to some, an agent's motive is only relevant to evaluating her moral character, not to evaluating her act.<sup>35</sup> We need not take a stand on this here: what matters for our purposes is that the difference in motive may well be driving our (mistaken) inclination to think that they differ with respect to the making/allowing distinction. To see this, suppose we preserve the structure of Dutch Boy while giving the agent a morally bad motive:

**Malevolent Dutch Boy:** A Dutch boy is preventing the flood that will kill the villagers by keeping his finger in a hole in the dike. He enjoys this task and is well supplied with food. The Dutch boy waits until nightfall before pulling out his finger, to maximize the number of casualties. The dike breaks and the villagers die.

Here there is some temptation to say that Dutch boy makes the villagers die. Yet, on McMahan's own account Dutch Boy and Malevolent Dutch Boy are alike with respect to the making/allowing distinction.<sup>36</sup> That seems right, but this supports the view that Dutch Boy is both a making and an allowing. Further, notice that Dutch Boy's Dad essentially is Unplug. Change the Dutch boy to a rubber plug, and change the dike to a bath with little people living in the drain hole. If you like, change the plug-pulling

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<sup>35</sup> See Bennett 1995, pp. 46-49.

<sup>36</sup> On McMahan's view, provided that the "aid or protection [from a threat]...requires more from the agent" (as opposed to being self-sustaining), whether withdrawing the aid or protection counts as a

Bert to an angry Dutchman who pulls the plug for no good reason. The resulting case is, in all respects that could matter to the making/allowing distinction, the same as Dutch Boy's Dad. Yet it is also the same as Unplug. I argued in the previous section that Unplug is both a making and an allowing. Hence Dutch Boy's Dad is, like Dutch Boy, a case of both making and allowing.

Let us turn now to a second pair of cases in which the apparent moral difference is supposedly explained by the making/allowing distinction, but which on my account are in the area of overlap. First case:

**Doctor:** At the patient's request, a doctor switches off a life support machine that is preventing the patient from dying of an incurable and painful disease.

Second case (due to Shelly Kagan<sup>37</sup>):

**Enemy:** As above, the life support machine is preventing the patient from dying. The patient's enemy creeps into the hospital and switches off the machine.

In Doctor, it seems that the doctor allows the patient to die. In Enemy, it seems that the enemy makes the patient die. What does MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS say about these cases? First, note that it classifies both as makings: the doctor and the enemy each cause the patient's death by connection. As mentioned, the Appendix argues that MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS implies that (nearly) all makings are allowings. Doctor and Enemy are makings of this kind. That is, on my analysis, Doctor and Enemy are both makings and allowings.

I agree that there is a moral difference between Doctor and Enemy, but I do not think that we need the making/allowing distinction to explain it. In Doctor, the patient gives the agent permission to switch off the machine; in Enemy the agent switches off the machine without having any permission. This is an obvious explanation of the moral difference.<sup>38</sup>

In short, I have suggested that many moral differences that are often taken to require explanation in terms of the making/allowing distinction can be explained in some other way. This claim is particularly important if, as I shall now go on to argue, MAKING MATTERS is false.

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making or an allowing depends on "whether the person who terminates the aid or protection is the person who has provided it" (1993, p. 396).

<sup>37</sup> 1989, pp. 101-102. I have slightly abbreviated Kagan's description.

<sup>38</sup> According to Thomson 1999, the difference between these two cases is that the doctor has a liberty right to switch off the machine, whereas the enemy does not. That may be true, but it is not the *non*-moral ground of the moral difference between the two cases.

V. Let us summarize the discussion so far. The first part of the strategy for discovering whether MAKING MATTERS is true is to find the non-moral basis for the making/allowing distinction. After surveying some analyses from the literature, I argued for MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS, which says that an agent makes an outcome occur iff she causes it by connection, and that an agent allows an outcome iff she causes by omission, or by disconnection. According to this analysis, makings and allowings overlap. In the previous section we responded to the worry that if there is overlap, we will not be able to explain the moral difference between many pairs of cases.

This section turns to the second part of the strategy. Given our analysis of the making/allowing distinction, is this a distinction that—*ceteris paribus*—makes a moral difference? I will argue that the answer is no: MAKING MATTERS is not true. I will then go on to argue—all too briefly—that the falsity of MAKING MATTERS does not force us to accept:

**DILEMMA:** Morality is either vastly more demanding, or vastly more permissive, than we thought it was.

First, here is the argument that MAKING MATTERS is not true. Given that all makings are allowings (or near enough), we should interpret MAKING MATTERS as concerning the contrast between making something happen and *merely* allowing it to happen. Thus interpreted, MAKING MATTERS is equivalent to this:

**CONNECTION MATTERS:** *Ceteris paribus*, it is worse to cause an outcome by connection than to cause it in some other way.

So, MAKING MATTERS is true just in case CONNECTION MATTERS is true. As a first attempt at showing that CONNECTION MATTERS is false, consider the following variant of Flood:

**Tackle:** Alec has planted a bomb on the dam, and Curt is running to defuse it. Bert tackles Curt, preventing him from defusing the bomb. The bomb explodes, drowning the villagers.

In Flood Bert causes the outcome by connection; in Tackle, he causes the outcome in some other way. Hence, if CONNECTION MATTERS is true, Bert's behavior in Flood is worse than his behavior in Tackle. But, on the contrary, it seems Bert's behavior in tackle is just as bad as his behavior in Flood. This way of arguing against CONNECTION MATTERS is suspect for a couple of reasons. First, because Bert did was very bad in both Tackle and Flood, it might be that, as Bennett puts it, "a real moral difference escapes our moral sensors because it is swamped by all that wickedness" (1995, p. 78). Second, if we fill out the details of Flood and Tackle in a natural way, it may be that some other morally relevant factor is present in one of the cases and absent from the other. For example, perhaps the bad outcome in Flood is certain to occur, given that Bert throws the bomb on the dam, whereas in Tackle the bad outcome is just very likely to occur, given that Bert tackles Curt (there's a chance Curt will wriggle free). Of course, we could stipulate that there is no difference here, but there might be others, and enough stipulations will turn Flood and Tackle into strange science fiction cases.

To get around these difficulties, let us look at a rather contrived pair of cases in which the agent's behavior is not so bad, and it is clear from the start that everything possibly relevant to morality is equalized apart from the making/allowing distinction.<sup>39</sup> Consider this pair of examples:

**Make Button:** Jim is seated before a red button and a green button. He can press either one; if he presses neither he will be electrocuted. If Jim presses the red button, this will make a stone fall on Harry, and Jim will receive \$10. The green button is a dummy, not wired up to anything. If Jim presses the green button Harry will be unscathed, but Jim will not receive anything. Jim presses the red button, and the stone falls on Harry, giving him a nasty bruise.

**Allow Button:** Same initial setup as above. If Jim presses the green button, this causes a protective screen to rise, preventing a falling stone from hitting Harry, and Jim will not receive anything. The red button is a dummy, not wired up to anything. If Jim presses the red button, he will receive \$10. Jim pushes the red button, and the stone falls on Harry, giving him a nasty bruise.

The threat of electrocution gives Jim just two options; either push red or push green. Suppose that in each case, Jim knows what will happen to Harry if he pushes red, or if he pushes green. Suppose further that in

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<sup>39</sup> For a similar attempt see, e.g., Tooley 1994.

each case, Jim has no grudge against Harry: Jim just wants the money. Is Jim's red-button-pushing behavior in MAKE BUTTON any worse than his red-button-pushing behavior in ALLOW BUTTON? It seems to me clear that it is not.

Supposing that it is no worse, it follows that CONNECTION MATTERS is false. For in this pair, we have corrected for every other difference that could make a moral difference. *Ceteris* is therefore *paribus*, and yet what the agent does is no worse in the first case than it is in the second.

Admittedly, if CONNECTION MATTERS is false, it doesn't follow that the presence or absence of a connection *never* makes a moral difference. For all we have said so far, it might be that the presence of a connection only matters in some situation, where other features are present.<sup>40</sup> That is, it might be that the presence of a connection matters sometimes, but not always. But it is not immediately clear how this could happen: to borrow an apt phrase from Bennett, we should want to know "what rouses the distinction from its moral lethargy" in some contexts, but not in others (1995, p. 82).

Because CONNECTION MATTERS is false, and it is not clear why a connection would matter in some cases and not others, we may cautiously conclude that the presence or absence of a connection never matters. That is, given that MAKING MATTERS is false, it is hard to resist the stronger conclusion that the making/allowing distinction never makes a moral difference. The question now is: are we forced to accept DILEMMA?

As illustrated in section IV, alleged moral differences that seemed to require a morally significant making/allowing distinction can often be treated in other ways. Sometimes the genuine difference can be explained by other features of the cases. Although the cases discussed in section IV do not in fact differ with respect to the making/allowing distinction, I think the point can be generalized. Sometimes alleged differences between pairs of cases that *do* differ with respect to the making/allowing distinction are no differences at all, and sometimes genuine differences can be explained in other ways. Such factors include difference in motive, difference in cost to the agent, and difference in the effort that would be required to

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<sup>40</sup> For this point, see Kagan 1989. See also Bennett 1995, p. 80.

see that the outcome did not happen. So even if the making/allowing distinction is morally neutral, there is certainly room to resist the conclusion that morality is vastly more or less demanding than we thought it was. In general, I think that people who have thought that the neutrality of making/allowing leads to DILEMMA have not attended carefully enough to the fact that in the paradigm pairs and other cases like them, *ceteris is seldom paribus*.

But merely pointing this out leaves the really hard questions untouched. Recall the first of our two paradigm pairs:

- No Check:** Despite knowing that a sending a check for \$40 to Oxfam will result in a child's life being saved, Jim does not send one.
- Shoot:** Jim fatally shoots a child, thus preventing the child from stealing \$40 from Jim's wallet.

Common sense morality—however one explains this rather vague notion—is committed to the claim that No Check and Shoot differ morally. If a making/allowing difference does not explain this alleged moral difference, what does? Is there some principle that can systematically explain the apparent moral difference between cases like these two? Or must the explanations be on a case-by-case basis? Or is common sense morality mistaken in holding that there is a genuine moral difference here?

I do not have answers to these questions, but here are some observations that might be useful. Some philosophers have argued that cases like No Check and Shoot are morally equivalent: faced with a choice of not sending a check or shooting a child, morality does not tell Jim which to choose. They conclude from this that, in cases like No Check, the agent's behavior is not permissible: Jim is morally required to send \$40. They further conclude that morality is vastly more demanding than we thought.<sup>41</sup>

All these steps in this argument seem to me to be too hasty. Take the first step, and recall the familiar case of the surgeon who cuts up an innocent man who has wandered into the hospital. The surgeon cuts up the innocent man in order to save five patients who will die without his organs.<sup>42</sup> A

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<sup>41</sup> See, in particular, Kagan 1988, Unger 1996.

<sup>42</sup> See Foot 1967, and also Thomson 1976.

natural thought is that the surgeon's act is wrong because he *makes* the one die; the right thing for him to do is to *allow* the five to die. However, as Thomson points out, this case is exactly parallel, with respect to the making/allowing distinction, to the equally familiar trolley example.<sup>43</sup> The trolley is barreling down the track, headed for the five, with one innocent man off on a fork in the line. Diverting the trolley makes the one die, and not diverting it allows the five to die. Yet, most people agree, diverting the trolley is morally permissible. It would be too quick to conclude from the fact that cutting up the one and switching the trolley are alike with respect to the making/allowing distinction, that they are morally equivalent. At the very least, we would have to see a lot of failed attempts to explain the moral difference before this conclusion becomes at all plausible. Similarly, if we become convinced that the making/allowing distinction is not morally relevant, it is a big jump from that to the conclusion that No Check and Shoot are morally equivalent.

Now take the second step of the argument, from the claim that cases like Shoot and No Check are morally equivalent to the conclusion that, in cases like No Check, the agent's behavior is not permissible. Here there is a missing premise. Absent further argument, it would be just as reasonable to take common sense opinion about No Check, not Shoot, to be correct, and so conclude that morality is far *less* demanding than we thought.

Finally, the third step. This is also questionable. It is not clear that common sense morality really is committed to the claim that Jim's behavior in No Check is *not* permissible. Many people are troubled by this sort of case, and think that there probably is something deeply wrong with someone like Jim not saving a distant stranger's life. It does seem to be true that common sense morality judges No Check and Shoot differently, but it does not follow from this that Jim's behavior in No Check is permissible.

In sum: common sense morality can survive the moral irrelevance of the making/allowing distinction, although it is not clear exactly how.

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<sup>43</sup> Thomson 1976; the trolley example is due to Foot (1967).

## Appendix

This appendix goes into more detail about the extent of the overlap between making and allowing.

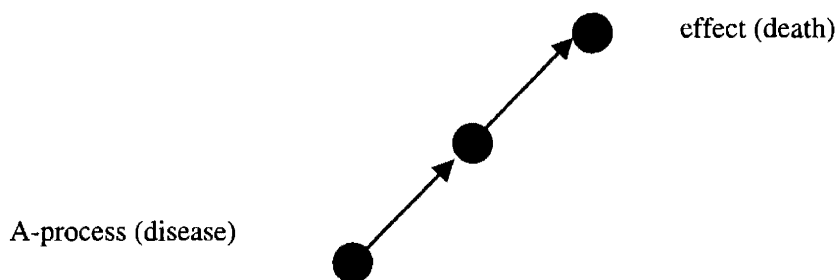
First, return to the following familiar example:

**Doctor:** At the patient's request, a doctor switches off a life support machine that is preventing the patient from dying of an incurable and painful disease.

Many people have wanted very much to secure the result that the doctor allows the patient to die by switching off the machine. But this has been difficult, because on almost any account of what it is for an agent to make an outcome occur, the doctor makes the patient die. This is true of every analysis we considered in section II except FOOT'S THESIS. But FOOT'S THESIS characterizes this case as an allowing at the expense of incorrectly characterizing other cases with the same causal structure—for example, Flood—as allowings.

According to MAKING/ALLOWING THESIS, Doctor is an allowing. But it is also true that the doctor's action is connected, via a chain of connected events, to the death. So in addition to allowing the death to occur, the doctor makes it occur.

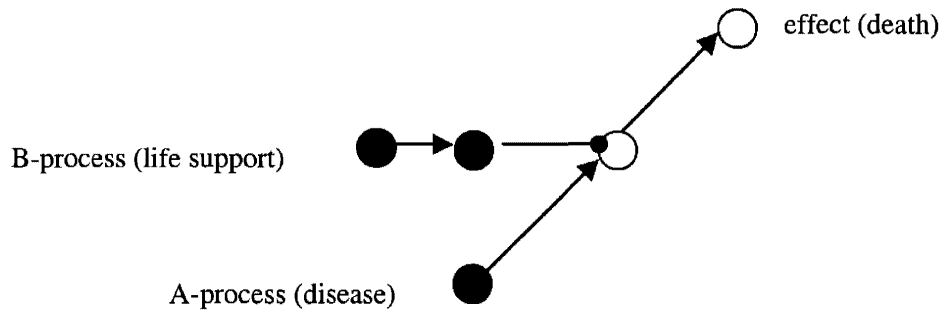
It will be useful to illustrate this point diagrammatically. The following diagram represents the disease as a process that leads to the death:



In this diagram, filled-in circles represent events, and arrows represent causation by connection. The process that is aimed at bringing about the effect—in this case, the disease—is the “A-process.”

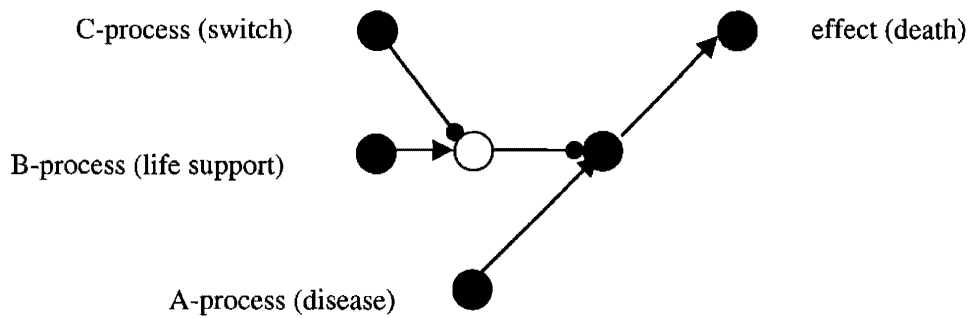


When the patient is on life-support, a process (the action of the life-support machine) is preventing the A-process (the disease) from running its course. We can diagram this like so:



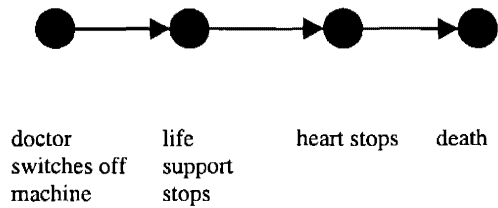
Circles that are not filled in represent what would have happened, had the process not been cut off. Lines ending in a dot represent prevention.

Now consider the case when the doctor switches off the machine:



This diagram shows that a third process—call that the C-process—disconnects the B-process, before it is able to do its work cutting off the A-process. An event that is part of the C-process that cuts off the B-process is a “disconnecter.” Thanks to the fact that the C-process cuts off the B-process, the A-process runs to completion, resulting in the effect.

Doctor can also be described as a connection case:

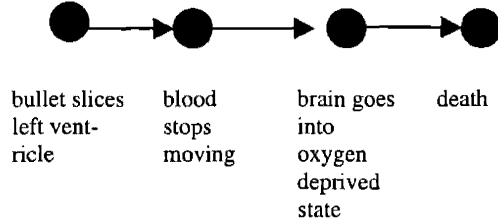


Given that nearly everyone assumes that the making/allowing distinction is exclusive, the fact that Doctor falls in the overlap explains why there is so much disagreement about whether it is a making or an allowing. Seen one way, it can seem like a making; seen another way, it can seem like an allowing.

Now consider the following example of an obvious making:

**Ordinary Murder:** Al's bullet pierces Joe's heart, and so Joe stops breathing, suffers brain death, and dies.

Ordinary Murder is a paradigm case of connection. Here is a straightforward way to represent it:

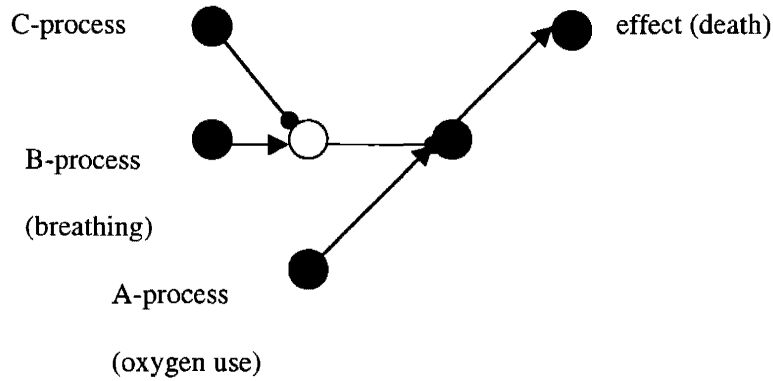


This diagram represents the case as one in which the bullet firing is connected to the death. But bullet firings are also related to deaths by disconnection: they cut off breathing, which is a process that prevents oxygen starvation. So bullet firings cut off a process that otherwise would have prevented death, and so are disconnectors<sup>44</sup>:

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<sup>44</sup> For this point, see Schaffer 2000.

disconnecter (bullet pierces heart)

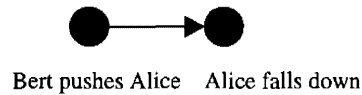


By redescribing the case, we see that shootings are related to subsequent deaths by connection and also by disconnection. So, according to our analysis, Al both makes Joe die and allows him to.

The fact that we can do this for cases like Ordinary Murder suggests the hypothesis that *all* makings are allowings. This can be further supported by the following connection case that at first glance does not seem to be also a case of disconnection:

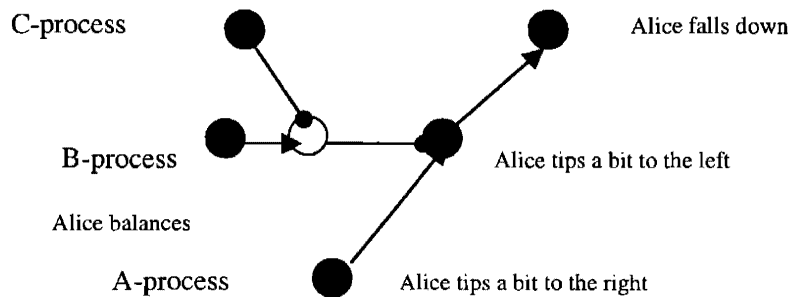
**Shove:** Alice is balancing on a balance beam. Bert pushes Alice, and Alice falls down.

This is most naturally represented like so:



But, somewhat less naturally, we can also represent it as a disconnection case:

disconnecter (shove)



In this diagram, Alice's balancing is represented as preventing her falling down. When Bert shoves her, she loses her balance—that was what was preventing her from falling. But if we can represent this case as a disconnection case, then it seems we can also represent a case in which Alice is just standing on the sidewalk as a disconnection case. After all, whenever Alice is standing, her balancing is preventing her from falling down.

Admittedly, describing Shove as a disconnection case is somewhat unnatural, insofar as it is unnatural to describe Alice as constantly being prevented from tipping, but it is nonetheless correct.

However, it is not clear that we can show that every connection case is a disconnection case, and so perhaps it isn't true that *all* makings are allowings. Here is a case that seems hard. Imagine that a cue ball is rolling toward an eight ball. The cue hits the eight and the eight rolls into the corner pocket. This looks like a paradigm connection case: the cue's movement causes, by connection, the eight ball to roll into the pocket. Is there a process that we can plausibly say was poised to prevent the eight ball from rolling into the pocket, only to be cut off by the impact of the cue ball?

In any event, this much seems secure: almost any making that is of moral interest is also a case of causation by disconnection, and so is also an allowing.

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