

Cause by Omission and Norms

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Approved April 2013 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2013

ABSTRACT

Saying, "if Mary had watered Sam's plant, it wouldn't have died," is an ordinary way to identify Mary not watering Sam's plant as the cause of its death. But there are problems with this statement. If we identify Mary's omitted action as the cause, we seemingly admit an inordinate number of omissions as causes. For any counterfactual statement containing the omitted action is true (*e.g.* if Hillary Clinton had watered Sam's plant, it wouldn't have died). The statement, moreover, is mysterious because it is not clear why one protasis is more salient than any alternatives such as "if Sam hadn't gone to Bismarck." In the burgeoning field of experimental metaphysics, some theorists have tried to account for these intuitions about omissive causes. By synthesizing this data and providing a few experiments, I will suggest that judgments - and maybe metaphysics - about omissive causes necessarily have a normative feature. This understanding of omissive causes may be able to adequately resolve the problems above.

DEDICATION

For Cary Patrick O'Neil

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would most like to thank Bernard Kobes and Angel Pinillos, my co-chairs for this MA thesis. Bernard Kobes has met with me throughout the last year and a half to discuss causation, omissions, and nothing at all. He has been an excellent advisor and mentor, and this project would not be as interesting if it were not for his comments and challenges. Angel Pinillos has also been a supreme director of my thesis. While he has tainted – as many might say – my philosophical thinking with experimentation, I know that he has only done good for my project and my thinking about omissions and metaphilosophy. I am also thankful for Steven Reynolds, my third reader; he is a tough reader to please, and he has helped me improve this work.

I am also thankful Sara Bernstein's comments about my project; she is an intense and diligent philosopher, and I look forward to working with her at Duke University. David Gurney, Jaemin Jung, Joe Shin, and Kurt Blankschaen have also provided insight on early drafts. I also thank the ASU Philosophy Department for allowing me to write such a project.

And I could not forget the company of my cats, Tempe and Phoenix; without them, I would be very lonely.

I would also like to thank my family. Shari Richardson, my mother, and Bruce Holland, my father, have never been overbearing, which has allowed me to pursue whatever I wanted in my life. I thank Bill and Laura Henne for giving me the greatest opportunity in my life, being loving and supportive, and caring about my well-being. I thank Jack and Emily Henne for once helping me write out my applications for high school. They are also two of the most supportive people in my life. I also thank Linda and Allen Keeler for consistently caring for me, supporting my endeavors, and helping me achieve whichever insane goal I attempt.

I also thank three friends who have been very supportive of me and my project: Ryann Freeman, David Gurney, and Evan Piermont.

Lastly, I thank the person to whom this project is dedicated: Cary P. O'Neil. He was there when nothing was, and without him this would not have happened.

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Introduction

David Lewis thought that absences are spooky. In a way, he was right. That an omission of an event could cause another event does seem mysterious, for no positive event or force is present to cause the result. Yet, omissions do not usually spook us as non-philosophers. It is common to say things like, “the lack of space at the restaurant caused us to choose a different venue.” Of course, one might think that omissions as such can be rephrased as positive events: “the crowding at the restaurant caused us to choose a different venue.” But sometimes it seems as if it is truly an omission that caused some other event; for instance, we might say, “the lack of vitamin C causes scurvy.” Nonetheless, just as not all positive events are causes, not all omissions are causes. It is odd to say, “the rope not breaking caused Susan to make it to the top of the rope she climbed,” or “not throwing the rock at the window caused it not to break.” It seems, hence, that we need some account of when omissions are causes.

In this thesis, I will make a few suggestions about omissions and our intuitions about omissions *qua* causes. I will put forward an account of why I think some omissions are causally salient and why others are not so. To do this, I will rely on literature from the metaphysics of causation. I will also use experimental data and provide some experiments. In section two, I will give a defense of using experimental philosophy to discuss metaphysics.

Why Do Experimental Metaphysics?

Prima facie, it is false that the studying non-philosophers' intuitions about metaphysical thought experiments is philosophically important; while it may be interesting to psychologists or sociologists, the endeavor is insignificant to philosophers. Such methodologies where philosophers derive metaphysical theories from a description of the folk practice appear to be is-ought traps. Folk intuitions or judgments about philosophical cases, moreover, seem irrelevant to philosophers who can form their own – maybe more precise – judgments; philosophers are, some may say, trained in the art of intuiting. Despite these qualms, many contemporary philosophers find it significant to study non-philosophers' intuitions about metaphysical – and other philosophical - cases. They think that if they were to learn some fact about ordinary judgments, it may encourage them to revise their metaphysical theories that deviate from ordinary judgments. There are many concerns related to this project, but in order to make the inferential leap from describing the folk conceptions of metaphysics to revising theoretical ones, we must answer a further question: when – if it does at all – does experimental evidence merit a revision to metaphysical theory?

Because most of the work done on this question has been in ethics – particularly in theories of moral responsibility – I will describe what I think is a strong position on the project of experimental philosophy in relation to theories of moral responsibility. I will then suggest that the answer I support carries over to the metaphysical project.

Experimentation and Moral Responsibility

Philosophers assume theories of moral responsibility employ the same criteria for every responsibility judgment. Specifically, they assume the right criteria will have no

exceptions. Recent experimental evidence, however, suggests that folk responsibility judgments vary from case to case. That is, these folk judgments reveal pervasive exceptions to what are assumed to be invariant criteria. Because of these results, some philosophers like Knobe and Doris argue that we should revise our moral theories to accord with pervasively variantist folk responsibility judgments. But before we make inferences from describing folk conceptions of responsibility to revising theoretical ones, we must answer a further question: when does this experimental evidence merit a revision to theories of moral responsibility?

Assumption of Invariance

Knobe and Doris introduce the *assumption of invariance* for moral theories of responsibility.¹ By this assumption, philosophers suppose moral theories can employ the same basic criteria for all responsibility judgments. The criteria (and each individual criterion) for making responsibility judgments do not change because of consideration for the persons involved, relationships, circumstances, context, and other normative judgments.² The assumption is that theories ought to omit such considerations as germane aspects of moral responsibility judgments. Hence, the criteria, avoiding emotional or contextual interference, are rule-based or reason responsive.

In light of the assumption, there are two types of moral theories of responsibility: invariantism and variantism. Under *invariantism*, a theory employs the same criteria in all cases where people make a responsibility judgment. For *variantism*, there is at least one

¹ Knobe, Joshua and Doris, John. "Strawsonian Variations: Folk Morality in the Search for a Unified Theory." *The Handbook of Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2-3.

² These features seem very general. And they are. Nonetheless, the point is that the invariant criteria established by the theory are the only determining factors for responsibility judgments.

case in which a variant responsibility ascription principle applies as an exception to the standard criteria. In the literature, variantism has been defined broadly. Moral intuitions vary not just because of morally relevant (or not morally relevant) differences between cases but also because of differences in framing or in describing the question. If people have conflicting intuitions about a single case, then we would be wrong to call their folk theory variantist; they simply need to sort out their intuitions. If, however, people employ different criteria in different cases, this difference can be called variantist because there is at least one exception to the standard criteria employed. Notably, variantism has been construed in such a way that the different criteria do not have to vary because of morally relevant factors or because of differences between cases; as long as there is some exception to the criteria, we can consider a theory as variantist.³

Theories of moral responsibility traditionally assume invariance. A compatibilist view of determinism and moral responsibility, for instance, is invariantist. Under this view, a person is morally responsible for some action - even in a deterministic universe. These responsibility judgments are based on invariant criteria. For instance, Frankfurt's *real self view*, as many interpret it, suggests that people are morally responsible for behaviors that stem from second-order volitions.⁴ Under this invariantist theory, moral

³ I will address concerns about this view later in this chapter.

⁴ As an aside, this seems to be how Knobe and Doris (and many others) read Frankfurt, but it is not how Frankfurt reads himself; he does not think his notion of the free will has much bearing on moral responsibility because someone "may be morally responsible for having done [something] even though his will was not free at all." See Frankfurt, Harry. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." In *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23. Knobe and Doris look to a different, less precise passage: Frankfurt, Harry. "Three Concepts of Free Action" in *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 53-4. Interestingly, this emendation makes clear the

responsibility judgments do not vary in different contexts or in relation to a particular individual. The only determining factor for moral responsibility is the criterion proffered by the theory; no other considerations are taken into account, and the criterion applies equally in each case.

Experimental Data

Knobe and Doris observe an inconsistency: while moral theories hold the assumption of invariance, ordinary people seemingly do not make responsibility judgments based on invariant criteria.⁵ Because folk responsibility judgments lack these invariant criteria, it is easy to develop counterexamples to invariant moral theories: that is, it is easy to find cases where one's responsibility judgment deviates from the judgment expected by a theory's criteria. For Knobe and Doris, if a philosopher wants to obviate counterexamples to her theory and to develop a theory that accords with folk responsibility judgments, she must first identify the influences on these judgments.

A common way to discuss moral responsibility is to claim that an agent is responsible if she *caused* an event and brought it about *intentionally*. A theory of responsibility, under such an account, is invariant because causation and intentionality are invariant; specifically, the criteria used to make intentionality and causation judgments do not vary, and because these judgments do not vary, responsibility judgments employing these concepts – likewise – do not vary.

contention between invariantism and variantism; someone who holds that there is a strong connection between free will and moral responsibility holds a specific invariantist view, but she can still express counterexamples and variant cases where moral responsibility judgments do not correlate with her concept of free will.

⁵ Knobe, Joshua and Doris, John, "Strawsonian Variations," 6-7.

Knobe, Doris, and others, however, conducted experiments suggesting that the criteria for applying these core elements of responsibility judgments vary systematically. Specifically, the Knobe Effect, or the Side-Effect Effect, indicates that differences in the moral status of an event or a side-effect affect intentionality judgments. If, for instance, the moral status of a side-effect is bad, as opposed to good, people judge the agent performing the action as acting intentionally.⁶ In a between-subjects study,⁷ Knobe developed a vignette about a CEO who is asked to implement a new program. In one condition, the program has the side-effect of helping the environment, and in the other it has the side-effect of harming the environment. Researchers asked participants if the CEO intentionally harmed/helped the environment. 82% of participants claimed that the CEO *intentionally harmed* the environment, and 77% of participants said he *unintentionally helped* it. This highly replicated study suggests that there is an asymmetry in folk intentionality judgments. Specifically, when there is a bad side-effect of an agent's action, people judge the agent as acting intentionally.

Researchers have also found that causal judgments systematically vary based on normative judgments. In a between-subjects study, a vignette describes a receptionist in a

⁶ Knobe, Joshua. "Intentionally Action and Side-Effects in Ordinary Language." *Analysis* 63 (2003): 190-194.

⁷ In a *between-subjects study*, researchers study participants' responses to *one condition* of the experiment; that is, one group of participants responds to one experimental condition, and other groups respond to other conditions. In a *within-subjects study*, researchers study participants' responses to *all of the experimental conditions*. Suppose we are studying people's attitudes towards marijuana before and after its legalization in Washington. If we conduct a between-subjects study, one group's attitudes will be measured before marijuana is legalized and an entirely different group's attitudes will be measured after the law is passed. If we conduct a within-subjects study, we will measure the attitudes of one group of participants before and after the passing of the law.

philosophy department who keeps her desk stocked with pens. Administrative assistants are allowed to take the pens, but faculty members are not allowed to take them. Despite the restriction, both the administrative assistants and the faculty members typically take pens. One morning, one of the administrative assistants and Professor Smith take pens. Later that day, the receptionist needs to take an important message, but there are no pens left on her desk. Researchers asked participants to indicate on a Likert scale whether they agreed or disagreed with two statements - one identifying Professor Smith as the cause of the secretary's problem and the other identifying the administrative assistant as the cause.⁸ The results show that people judge Professor Smith to be the cause of the problem and that they do not judge the administrative assistant to be the cause.⁹

The two behaviors, however, do not differ in typicality; it is routine for both Professor Smith and the administrative assistant to take pens.¹⁰ The rate of occurrence of both events, moreover, is statistically similar. There are also multiple ways to intervene; one, for instance, could prevent the administrative assistant from taking a pen. The original researchers, Knobe and Fraser, suggest that the principal difference between the actions is their moral statuses; Professor Smith is not supposed to take the pens, while the

⁸ Knobe, Joshua and Fraser, Ben. "Causal Judgment and Moral Judgment: two experiments." In *Moral Psychology*. Edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

⁹ Knobe, Joshua. "Person as Scientist, Person as Moralist." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2010): 315.

¹⁰ Interestingly, some researchers have recently found that typicality may play a larger role in causal judgments; specifically, they found that folk causal ascriptions are sensitive to agent-level typicality – not population-level statistical norms. This view goes against the consensus view – what I call the norm view – accepted by Knobe, Driver, and others. I have to omit a defense of this attack because of limits on scope and length, but I do think that the norm view can subsume the typicality attack. See Sytsma, J., J. Livengood, and D. Rose. "Two Types of Typicality: Rethinking the Role of Statistical Typicality in Ordinary Causal Attributions." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* (2011).

administrative assistant is permitted to do so. If the moral difference between the vignettes elicits a different causal ascription, then this study suggests that people do not make causal judgments as scientists do - considering only statistics. Furthermore, causal judgments - like judgments of intentionality – vary; that is, people are more likely to ascribe causation to an event where a norm is broken.

A large body of evidence suggests that intentionality and causal judgments vary. Intentionality judgments vary because of the normative status of a related event or a side-effect. Causal judgments vary because of normative considerations. Because these judgments are components of folk responsibility judgments, these variations suggest that ordinary responsibility judgments vary as well.

One might, however, suggest that philosophers fail to give a precise account of how the folk make responsibility judgments; that is, when making a responsibility judgment, ordinary people might not consider intentionality or causation at all. Hence, we might avoid examining causation and intentionality. Instead, we might simply examine the actual folk responsibility judgments.

Roskies and Nichols (among others) have found an asymmetry between abstract and concrete cases in people’s judgments of moral responsibility.¹¹ In their between-subjects experiment, they had two conditions. In the *actual condition*, the vignette described a deterministic universe like our own. In the *alternate condition*, it described deterministic Universe A, which was described exactly like our universe. The only difference between the vignettes was that one universe was our own and the other was

¹¹ Roskies, Adina and Nichols, Shaun. “Bringing Moral Responsibility Down to Earth.” *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (2008): 371-388.

Universe A. In each case, a character performed some action for which they could be found responsible. Roskies and Nichols found that in the universe like our own, people gave more compatibilist responses to questions of moral responsibility. This finding, often called the abstract/concrete paradox, suggests responsibility judgments vary based on abstract and concrete conditions.

Knobe and Doris see the abstract/concrete paradox¹² as one of the influences on the criteria that people use when making responsibility judgments – a feature encouraging people to apply different criteria under different conditions: that is, people apply compatibilist criteria in concrete cases and incompatibilist criteria in abstract cases.¹³ Hence, Knobe and Doris suggest that the only theory that can accord with folk responsibility judgments is one that generates different judgments under abstract and concrete conditions. This factor, I must note, is only one of many.

Variantism

Many experimental philosophers suggest the experimental results show that people do not use consistent criteria for all responsibility judgments. Instead, folk responsibility judgments depend on different criteria in each case, or they have numerous exceptions to criteria.¹⁴ The evidence, as many philosophers and psychologists take it, sufficiently shows that ordinary responsibility attribution is pervasively variantist.

¹² For an explanation of why this is a paradox, see: Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. “Abstract + Concrete = Paradox.” In *Experimental Philosophy*. Edited by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols. (New York: Oxford University Press 2008).

¹³ Knobe, Joshua and Doris, John, “Strawsonian Variations,” 7-10.

¹⁴ These are two distinct claims. One says that different criteria apply in different cases, and the other says that there are exceptions to criteria because of the influence of a feature outside of the

But it is a bit hasty to argue that the evidence is sufficient to make these claims about ordinary responsibility judgments. To justify this claim, we may look to further experimental results. In a study by Pinillos *et al*, the researchers hypothesized that subjects in a better epistemic condition are less likely to display the Knobe Effect.¹⁵ To corroborate their theory, they performed three experiments. In one of these experiments, the researchers gave subjects a cognitive reflection test (CRT) and hypothesized that those who score higher on it will be less likely to display the Knobe Effect. Their results showed a reduction in the Knobe Effect: people who scored higher on the CRT showed less of an asymmetry between the two cases. In another experiment, participants were given both vignettes (help and harm), and the researchers found a dramatic decrease in asymmetry of the Knobe Effect.

This study suggests that Knobe and Doris' inference from their amalgamation of studies might be hasty; that is, they cannot infer from this body of evidence that ordinary responsibility judgments are *always* variantist. For it seems that when people have improved epistemic conditions, we have reason to believe that their judgments will not vary as significantly. This result may suggest that the influences Knobe and others have identified are potentially less serious, for they stem from a mistake or an interference with good intuitions. While Pinillos' study encourages more experimentation, it ought to encourage experimental philosophers to be a bit more careful with the inferences made from their results.

criteria. The abstract/concrete condition is like the former, and the Knobe Effect is like the latter claim.

¹⁵ Pinillos, N. Á. *Et al*. "Philosophy's New Challenge: Experiments and Intentional Action." *Mind & Language* 26 (2011): 8.

Hence, there is at least one reservation about the recent experimental results: they may not sufficiently show that people's judgments of moral responsibility are variantist. There needs to be further evidence to sufficiently make this case. Experimental philosophers want to show how intuitions - as a result of people's underlying competence - vary in systematic ways.^{16 17} But this project, while growing clearer and finding interesting results, is still incomplete.¹⁸ Notably, not all psychological patterns are clear, for some may be a mistake or an inconsistency.¹⁹ Yet, most theorists corroborating these theses argue these intuitions vary in justifiable ways.²⁰

Data and Moral Theories

¹⁶ These researchers hope to discover the psychological mechanisms responsible for varying intuitions. See Knobe, Joshua. "Person as Scientist, Person as Moralist." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2010): 315-365. In this work (as in others), he propounds an overarching theory of the person as a moral scientist: that is, people's moral judgments are prior to all other judgments and systematically influence one's competence to make all other judgments. To see a systematic explanation of the abstract/concrete paradox, see Mandelbaum, Eric and Ripley, David. "Explaining the Abstract/Concrete Paradoxes in Moral Psychology: The NBAR Hypothesis." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 3 (2011): 351-368.

¹⁷ This goal of experimental philosophy may be phrased differently. It could be that experimental philosophy aims to reveal previously unrecognized variations in judgments or that it aims to show variation in conceptual competence.

¹⁸ At this point, one may raise a concern about interference with intuitions. Specifically, one may claim that while it may seem that the normative status of an event affects people's causal judgments, it is not the case that people's underlying competence to make (for instance) causal ascriptions depends on norms (to see a written form of this view, see Alicke, Mark. "Blaming Badly." *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 8 (2008): 179-186.). While I cannot do justice to this attack here, it is important to note that Knobe and some others do not think that the experiments show interference with intuitions; they think that normative judgments affect causal/responsibility judgments as a part of our underlying competence (Knobe, Joshua and Doris, John, "Strawsonian Variations," 30-1). For example, Knobe thinks that moral norms being broken help people identify the relevant counterfactual statement in causal judgments (see Knobe, Joshua. "Folk Judgments of Causation." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 40 (2009): 238-242.)

¹⁹ These mistakes may also be explained psychologically.

²⁰ Doris, John. "Variantism about Responsibility." *Philosophical Perspectives* 25 (2007): 183-214.

Putting aside these qualms and giving charity to these well-supported findings, there remains the question of how much theoretical weight we can give experimental results. We ought to ask: to what extent do these data merit a revision to theories of moral responsibility?

While Knobe and Doris think their project has psychological implications, they more controversially suggest that it has implications for moral philosophy. They foresee themselves finding some systematic patterns by which intuitions vary based on underlying psychological competencies. This thesis is a psychological one, one that (despite my hesitance to accept it) they have good evidence to bolster. This psychological account, however, is distinct from the normative one about who *ought* to be responsible. Despite this distinction, they argue that their data and the variantist psychological thesis motivate theories of moral responsibility to avoid invariant criteria. This radical view deserves some attention, for it is not clear why moral theories should be responsive to data about ordinary intuitions.

There are two views one could hold about this concern: *conservatism* and *revisionism*.²¹ *Conservatives* think that ordinary intuitions are for the most part right. Hence, these theories take first-order judgments seriously and accord with them as much as possible. Under this view, intuitions about causation, for instance, are correct, and when we use these to decipher moral responsibility, our judgment is also correct. A conservative takes variantist data seriously. *Revisionists*, on the other hand, think that intuitions 1) often deviate from what we have reason to believe is theoretically correct or 2) are wrong about the world. Either way, intuitions should be revised by a theory. By

²¹ Knobe, Joshua and Doris, John, "Strawsonian Variations," 32.

this account, a theory about responsibility is thought to have good and correct criteria for making such judgments, so it can correct people's deviant judgments. Many classroom philosophy professors might see themselves as revisionist, revising the faulty intuitions of their students. A revisionist does not take variantist data seriously.

While appealing, both views seem tenuous. Strict revisionism seems odd because the correction of folk intuitions seems to enable (without good reason) a theory to substantiate some intuitions and not others; such a view allows for the correction of intuitions that deviate from one theory and gives weight to those that corroborate it. The view does not need to answer to intuitions. It does, however, require a story explaining why some intuitions are incorrect. Strict conservatism, in contrast, seems odd because simply relying on our intuitions assumes that we are rarely wrong about morality. Our intuitions, however, often are wrong about the world, so it is strange for us to solely rely on them. Under this view, we need an account of why our ordinary intuitions are good ones. Rightly, Knobe and Doris suggest the correct moral theory is probably between these extremes. If one tends toward either extreme, one gets inaccurate theories.

To settle this tension, we may find principles that justify a preference for one view over the other or that tell us when we should be conservative or revisionist. Some have developed such principles. One, introduced by Vargas, is *normative adequacy*, or the idea that revision should be constrained where innovation does not accord with our network of mutually supporting norms and practices.²² If a theory introduces a norm or practice that creates discord within this nexus, then the theory's revision of ordinary

²² Vargas, M. "Responsibility and the Aims of Theory: Strawson and Revisionism." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 230.

judgments should be constrained. Under this principle, if folk morality turns out to be pervasively variantist, then strict invariantist revisionism ought to be constrained; for the invariant theory creates significant discord with the nexus of ordinary norms and practices. But the extent to which a moral theory might reasonably violate normative adequacy remains unclear, for there is almost always some degree of tension between theory and intuition.

Revisionary invariantism, in contrast, has a few justifying principles under what Doris calls *revisionary prestige*. Doris highlights three types of such prestige. One type is *instrumental success*: invariantism has instrumental success because it ameliorates more moral dilemmas. Some theories of medicine have instrumental success if they apply consistently and cure more illnesses. Likewise, a revisionary invariantist theory may have instrumental success if it applies the same criteria in every case and solves many moral dilemmas. The second type of prestige is *explanatory power*. Invariantist theories have explanatory power to justify judgments of moral responsibility – they have a theory to explain the correct moral judgments – which folk morality lacks. Such theories also can explain why ordinary intuitions vary: because, for instance, they are making performance errors. The last type of prestige is *expert consensus*. In medical fields, experts do not track folk remedies. Luckily, we do not depend on the cure for the flu that my mother used to give me (honey and whiskey in warm orange juice). We depend on expert consensus to develop flu vaccines. Likewise, we should depend on expert philosophical consensus about moral theories – not what our intuitions tell us.²³

²³ Doris, John. “Variantism about Responsibility,” 205-6.

From these principles, *conservatives* have *normative adequacy*, while *revisionists* have what has been called *prestige*. To be clear, conservatives have a principle that binds a moral theory to accordance with a nexus of norms and practices, and revisionists have one that gives precedence to theories that have instrumental success, explanatory power, and expert consensus. One may, nonetheless, wonder if these principles are distinct and at odds; specifically, could a theory lack normative adequacy yet have prestige (or *vice versa*)? If not, then these principles are fruitless and ineffective.

It seems likely that there is overlap between normative adequacy and prestige, yet it is not implausible that theories fulfill one principle and lack the other. Under a Frankfurtian theory of moral responsibility, for example, the theory may have instrumental success and lack normative adequacy.²⁴ The theory successfully gives good, consistent criteria for responsibility judgments: one is morally responsible if she acts because of her second-order volition; that is, the theory has instrumental success. Yet, the theory also conflicts with the nexus of our norms and practices; it is common for us to judge someone as responsible simply if the action stems from a first-order desire. This response may not satisfy those who think that if the theory does not account for folk judgments, then it lacks instrumental success. But someone arguing from the prestige principle can suggest that instrumental value does have to account for these judgments; it simply has to solve more dilemmas, which the Frankfurtian view does (*i.e.* free will and moral responsibility). While it seems that these principles are distinct, they only encourage the standstill. We still require a precise principle to determine when we ought to be conservative or revisionist.

²⁴ See footnote 4.

There is, however, a further principle that requires attention: what has been called *the moral-epistemological assumption* (MEA). This is the assumption that our first-order intuitions about concrete cases justify our moral theories.²⁵ Specifically, the best moral theory explains more of our intuitions. To move the debate between *revisionism* and *conservatism* forward, we must consider to what extent moral theories must accord with our intuitions. An explication of this principle will limit a radical stance on either position.²⁶

When a scientific theory is proposed, it must be empirically adequate. If a theory is not empirically adequate because it cannot be verified by results, then it fails to be a good theory. Even a good theory, nonetheless, has anomalies in the data that contradict it, but these anomalies will not necessarily make the theory null. As Kuhn noted in his work on the history of scientific revolutions, anomalies arise in normal science and sometimes penetrate the field pervasively enough to permeate the paradigm.²⁷ But even when results contradict a theory, there needs to be an empirically adequate alternative to take its place.

²⁵ Kumar and Campbell. “On the Normative Significance of Experimental Moral Psychology.” *Philosophical Psychology* 25 (2012): 313.

²⁶ There may be immediate reservations about this assumption. For instance, it may be difficult to figure out what exactly intuitions are. Further, once we have a clear idea about what exactly intuitions are, it may be difficult to make this assumption. These topics are discussed in Cappelen’s *Philosophy without Intuitions*. While I lack the space to argue it here, I disagree with Cappelen’s delineation of what an intuition is, and I disagree with his assessment of how intuitions are used in contemporary analytic philosophy. I cannot present my argument here due to limits on the scope. But, for these purposes, I will assume that intuitions – if we need to call them that – are pre-theoretical first-order judgments and that they are used in contemporary analytic philosophy. What I mean to capture by saying that intuitions are ‘pre-theoretical’ is that they are not a product of conscious reasoning (hence, they are not a product of conscious reasoning that relies on theoretical or folk-theoretical commitments).

²⁷ Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 65-7.

And if there are a set of empirically adequate theories to choose from, there may be other considerations to justify a choice. To a greater degree than Kuhn, van Fraassen saw empirical adequacy as a necessary tenet of scientific understanding.²⁸ His scientific constructivism said science provides empirically adequate theories and the acceptance of its theories involves a belief that they are empirically adequate.²⁹

There is an analogy between science and ethics in that an ethical theory needs to be empirically adequate; that is, an ethical theory necessarily adopts MEA. Someone may have immediate resistance to this analogy, for while science is descriptive, moral theories are prescriptive. While this concern seems apt, it is not precise. Even for prescriptive theories, we necessarily rely on empirical evidence - our intuitions (as in MEA) – to justify our theories.

We may, nonetheless, have some qualifications for MEA. The first is that there must be *a minimum degree of empirical adequacy*. If some other theory accords with no intuitions, then the theory seems obviously false. For instance, a theory of moral responsibility that claims X is responsible iff X loves Billy Joel accords with no intuitions. Any reasonable moral theory, thus, necessarily accords with some intuitions - although it is unclear to what extent it must do so.

MEA may be clearer if we examine its use in the development of moral theories. There are at least two ways to develop a moral theory. In one way, the moral theory accords with some other philosophical theory and has no initial bearing on our intuitions.

²⁸ van Fraassen, Bas. *The Scientific Image* (New York: The Clarendon Press, 1980), 12.

²⁹ Hacking, Ian. *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 51.

For instance, the way in which many interpret Frankfurt is that his concept of free will provides a theory of responsibility.³⁰

But if his theory greatly conflicted with our intuitions, this theory would be null; strong intuitions, in turn, sometimes encourage us to modify theories when a theory cannot account for a lot of them. There is an example of this in the metaphysics of causation. Ned Hall committed to a theory of generative causation, but he was led to develop two concepts of causation because his theoretical commitment conflicted with his causal intuitions about counterfactual dependence, omissions, and productive causation.³¹ Seemingly, intuitions justify changes to some theories. But it remains unclear when our intuitions serve this purpose.

The second way that we develop a moral theory is by making an inference to the best explanation based on a set of intuitions. Again, we cannot ignore the debt the theory pays to our intuitions. Based on how theories develop, there needs to be some adherence to MEA. To ignore novel data that conflicts with the original data used to develop a theory would be tendentious.

But beyond the basic requirement of MEA, it is unclear which intuitions count for or against a theory. Often in philosophy, we use ordinary intuitions to develop counterexamples. For instance, to challenge utilitarianism, one develops a case where we must murder a patient in a hospital to save five others. Few people, given this case, will express utilitarian intuitions. Hence, many suggest that this case fuels resistance towards

³⁰ See footnote 4.

³¹ Hall, Ned. "Two Concepts of Causation." In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by John Collins, Ned Hall, and L.A. Paul, 225-277 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

utilitarianism. Yet, others suggest that this counterexample has no bearing on the overall theory. Philosophers, hence, seem to lack a set standard for examining the extent to which intuitions must accord with moral theories.

I have suggested that we rely heavily on our intuitions to develop, modify, and justify moral theories. I have also noted that it is unclear which intuitions count as evidence under MEA. It is odd to claim that all intuitions count or that no intuitions count, but it is not clear which ones *do* count. The question is: to what extent can our intuitions be said to justify our moral theories? In other words, to what extent does MEA hold?

One conservative proposal is to suggest that intuitions that justify theories are those that go through rigorous empirical studies. Call this proposal the *search for good intuitions*. Seemingly, experimental data is a more representative way to determine general intuitions than armchair philosophy; rather than picking particular intuitions, philosophers now have an accurate measure of general intuitions. Under this proposal, if intuitions about moral responsibility vary, then invariant theories violate MEA. And Knobe and others have suggested that intuitions *do* vary in systematic ways. Thus, we should discard invariant moral theories because the *good intuitions* oppose them.

This proposal, however, is hasty and incomplete. Someone may object that the experimental studies are performed on non-philosophers, so these intuitions are not adequate for philosophical theories. The intuitions traditionally used in philosophy are those of well-practiced and introspective philosophers: trained expert intuiters. This

expert-intuiter objection, however, has come under fire.³² This concern is also empirical and requires a defense; that is, there needs to be evidence to show that philosophers actually are expert intuiters.³³ This evidence, however, is difficult to manifest. But if one shows that philosophers expertly intuit, the objection holds.

There is a second objection to *the search for the good intuitions*. Even if we find that folk have pervasively variant intuitions, we must also show that these intuitions are correct or good. Conservatives, hence, require a further argument for why folk variantism should be preserved in ethical theory; that is, they need to show that conserved variantist intuitions are correct. Notably, they do not require an argument for why variant intuitions are good in general, but they need to explain why intuitive exceptions to invariant criteria are good in each individual case.

In a recent article, Kumar and Campbell highlight this objection. They suggest that experimental work can help philosophers determine which features of cases engender divergent responses: what they call a *psychologically efficacious difference*.³⁴ For instance, in the abstract/concrete cases, experimenters found that subjects' intuitions diverge because of the way in which a case is framed. But Kumar and Campbell argue that philosophers require a further step for these experiments to elicit revision to moral

³² Weinberg, Jonathan *et al.* "Are philosophers expert intuiters?" *Philosophical Psychology* 23 (2010): 331-355.

³³ The idea behind the expert-intuiter objection is that philosophers – unlike non-philosophers – are not subject to most biases or interferences when they make a judgment about hypothetical cases. Because philosophers are trained as such, they make expert judgments about cases, so their judgments are better than the judgments of those who are untrained. The most destructive problems with this objection are that 1) philosophers do tend to exhibit biases as the folk do and 2) they do not have unanimous judgments about hypothetical cases. This objection seems unlikely to succeed.

³⁴ Kumar and Campbell. "On the Normative Significance," 322.

theories; philosophers need to show that the different features identified by experiments are of normative significance. That is, philosophers need to argue whether these differences are normative differences or non-normative ones.

Once these arguments are made, philosophers can use these normatively significant differences to identify the correct intuitions. Kumar and Campbell use *consistency reasoning* to resolve inconsistencies.³⁵ Essentially, this technique means that they treat all cases alike to expose or resolve inconsistencies in judgments about concrete cases.³⁶ When data expose a difference between intuitions about similar cases and philosophers have argued that the difference is normatively significant or not, they must resolve or expose this inconsistency. To resolve an inconsistency, a revisionist revises those intuitions elicited by non-normative features. To expose an inconsistency, a conservative identifies a previously unrecognized morally relevant feature.

If we return to the experimental work described above, it seems that the variantist experiments identify some normative and some non-normative features. So, there are two ways to react to psychological variantism: 1) admit all facts about the cases into moral theories and be highly conservative or 2) admit only morally relevant facts and be conservative about some things yet not others. The second view seems like the best response to these data, for it is odd to allow non-normative features into moral theories. Nonetheless, the features eliciting the variantist response all require arguments – some that will be difficult to generate. For instance, the abstract/concrete cases seem to vary

³⁵ Kumar and Campbell. “On the Normative Significance,” 315.

³⁶ This method is not new. Kumar and Campbell formally introduce this concept to how experimental data is used.

because of facts about the way they are described, but cases like the Knobe Effect seem to differ because of normatively significant facts (*i.e.* the moral status of the side effect). There are also borderline cases that involve one's relationship to another agent, emotions, and sentiments. All of these features require arguments to admit them or reject them from moral theories, so it seems that we have created a lot of work for the future experimental philosopher.

Doris, Knobe, and others have convincingly made a psychological claim that folk judgments of moral responsibility are variantist. Controversially, they argue that their findings merit modifications to invariantist moral theories of responsibility. I have suggested that this elicitation is correct with some qualifications. The first is that a theory needs to minimally accord with first-order intuitions. The second qualification is that intuitions the data describe still require an argument (something like consistency reasoning) for them to be the correct or relevant intuitions. I have attempted to give a less hasty account of how experimental philosophy can influence moral theories, and I have suggested that experimental endeavors are not is-ought traps or wastes of time.

Experimentation and Metaphysics

The discussion in the previous section illuminates what experimental metaphysics – as I see it – is doing. That is, experiments on people's ordinary judgments reveal psychologically efficacious differences between different cases – differences that may reveal previously unnoticed features of cases that influence, bias, or distort metaphysical judgments. These features, once revealed by the studies, may be used by revisionists to eliminate distorted judgments or taken up by conservatives to revise the metaphysical theory. This dialectic may best be seen as a process:

1. Assume MEA₁ (*metaphysical-epistemological assumption*).³⁷
2. Experiment on people's judgments about metaphysical cases.
3. If one finds a psychologically efficacious difference between two cases, then one must determine whether or not that difference is metaphysically significant.
4. This determination can be done by using consistency reasoning. If two judgments are inconsistent because of a psychologically efficacious difference, the inconsistency can be resolved by revising the less tenable judgment. If a psychologically efficacious judgment is untenable, it ought to be revised. If, however, the psychologically efficacious difference is metaphysically significant, then the theory might need to be revised to accommodate the feature to which the judgment is sensitive.

It seems, by this process, that experimental metaphysics has some philosophical relevance.

What I hope to do with the remainder of this project is to conduct experiments that determine to which features of cases of cause by omission people's judgments are responsive. I have hypothesized that norms will be the psychologically efficacious difference between diverging judgments. If this is true, I will then argue that norms are metaphysically significant.

³⁷ This first step is that contemporary analytic philosophers assume that first-order intuitions about metaphysical cases accord with metaphysical theory. Some philosophers may want to reject this assumption, but I think it is unlikely that they will succeed in making this judgment. It seems, by any account, unlikely that a metaphysical theory can accord with none of our intuitions. Also, any metaphysical account, I think, at one point must appeal to intuition about metaphysical cases.

Cause by Omission and Its Problems

Saying, “if Mary had watered my plant, it wouldn’t have died,” is an ordinary way to identify Mary not watering my plant as the cause of its death. But there are problems with this statement. For one, if I identify Mary’s omitted action as the cause, I seemingly admit an inordinate number of omissions as causes. For any counterfactual statement containing the omitted action is true (e.g. if Hillary Clinton had watered my plant, it wouldn’t have died). The statement, moreover, is mysterious because it is not clear why one protasis is more salient than any alternatives such as “if I hadn’t gone to Bismarck.” There are many more problems with the admission of omissions as causes. In this section, I will outline a few of those problems and the solutions some philosophers have proposed.

Problems with Omissions

Although they have significant problems, counterfactual theories of causation are widely accepted in psychology and in philosophy.³⁸ Researchers often assume that people use counterfactual reasoning to identify causes. Their reasoning can be schematized as:

e counterfactually depends on c just in case if c had not occurred, e would not have occurred.³⁹

³⁸ See Lewis, David. “Causation.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 556-567.; Knobe, Joshua. “Folk Judgments of Causation.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 40 (2009): 6; and Livengood, Jonathan and Machery, Edouard. “The Folk Probably Don’t Think What You Think They Think.” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXXI (2007): 110.

³⁹ Lewis, “Causation,” 556.

The idea is that people use counterfactual reasoning to say c caused e. For instance, when I judge that my cat's meowing caused me to wake up, I reason that 'if my cat hadn't been excessively meowing, I wouldn't have woken up'.

There are a number of issues with counterfactual accounts of causation. One is that causes, under this account, seemingly lack *oomph* or physical force, a key component of many theories of causation.⁴⁰ That is, when we think that c causes e, some might assume that this means that c physically causes e by some physical relation between the events. But the counterfactual account does not require physical connection between a cause and its result. Another problem is that there are issues with cases of causal preemption and the inability for counterfactual theories to deal with them. Suppose Billy and Sue throw rocks at the same bottle, but Sue's rock hits and breaks the bottle a millisecond before Billy's rock passes through the same point in space, and Billy's rock would have broken the bottle had Sue's rock not broken it. The counterfactual in this case that identifies the cause – if Sue hadn't thrown the rock at the bottle, it wouldn't have broken – is false, for Billy's rock would have hit and broken the bottle.

While these problems deserve attention on their own, I am interested in one perennial problem that gives insight into the nature of causation and a possible solution to the problems above (and others). This problem is that counterfactual theories allow for cause by omission, or the judgment that the omission of an event is the cause of some other event. Examples of these sorts of cases are endless. Suppose, for instance, I go on

⁴⁰ See Kim, Jaegwon. "Causation and Mental Causation." In *Essays in the Metaphysics of the Mind*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

vacation to Bismarck, North Dakota, and I ask my friend, Mary, to water my Gollum Jade plant. And suppose that she fails to water it. I might then reason:

CF1: “If Mary had watered my plant, it wouldn’t have died.”

This reasoning identifies the omission of Mary watering my plant as the cause of death.

We might also consider some more common examples. The lack of vitamin D causes rickets. Professor Smith not showing up to class caused the class to get cancelled. Not brushing one’s teeth causes cavities. It is a very common experience for us to judge omitted events as causes.

A theory that allows for cause by omission, however, engenders some serious metaphysical problems. One is that if we accept omissions as causes, an infinite number of omissions count as legitimate causes. For if an omission of an event is a cause, any omitted event can qualify as a cause. By this reasoning, if we accept CF1, we should also accept:

CF2: “If George Bush had watered my plant, it wouldn’t have died.”

because both counterfactuals are true. Since these statements identify not watering my plant as the cause of its death, we can claim that anyone’s not watering my plant caused its death. Following Menzies, I will call this *the problem of profligate causes*.⁴¹⁴²

This problem is both a psychological concern and a metaphysical one. The psychological problem is that people can seemingly intuit an infinite number of omissive

⁴¹ Peter Menzies has called this the problem of profligate causes: Menzies, Peter. “Difference-making in Context.” In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by John Collins, Ned Hall, and L.A. Paul, 139-180. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

⁴² This is a problem also identified by Kim in many articles. For instance, see Kim, Jaegwon. “Causation and Mental Causation.” In *Essays in the Metaphysics of the Mind*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

causes, leaving it a mystery why human psychology ignores most of the omissions that could prevent the result from occurring. The metaphysical worry is that to count some omission as having a metaphysical causal status is to count any omission (all omissions being equal) as having that status. Accepting an omission as a cause results in the acceptance of too many omissions as causes. That is, if omissions count as causes, then there are countless causes. For instance, if omissions are causes, then I can say things like “John not writing his great novel caused you not to be as happy as you could have been.” But this result seems very unintuitive. In this paper, I deal with the metaphysical concern.

Blocking this concern about metaphysically real profligate causes, I believe, requires an explanation for how some omissions metaphysically differ from others with respect to their causal powers. Specifically, if all omissions are equal, then we must either 1) bite the bullet and accept profligate causes or 2) deny the causal status of omissions. Both consequences seem counterintuitive. And it seems as though there is some natural way to distinguish omissive causes from omissions that lack causal status. But this view requires an argument.

Denying Cause by Omission

While no one I have read will bite the bullet and accept profligate causes, many philosophers are willing to avoid the problem of profligate causes by rejecting the causal status of omissions. One way to do so is by arguing that causes are necessarily physically connected to their effects. In “Causes are Physically Connected to Their Effects,” Phil Dowe does just this, and he argues that causes by omission are simply quasi-causes. He maintains that - in general - causes and effects are physically connected. He accepts an abstract notion that:

CQ1. A causal process is a world-line of an object that possesses a conserved quantity.

CQ2. A causal interaction is an intersection of world-lines that involves exchange of a conserved quantity.⁴³

By this account, Dowe only accepts a causal status for events that are strictly physically connected. So, we can say that my throwing the rock caused the window to break because there is a physical connection (an exchange of a conserved quantity) between the event of my throwing the rock and the window breaking. Nonetheless, we cannot, by this theory, say that the lack of vitamin C causes scurvy because there is no physical connection between a non-event and the event of having scurvy.

Dowe, nonetheless, has a way to account for the often-used language about omissions as causes. He accepts a notion of quasi-causation, which is when an omission of an event has “the mere possibility of genuine causation.”⁴⁴ In the case of omissions, they are quasi-causes by omission; that is, not-A quasi-causes B where A and B are positive events or facts, not-A is an act of omission, and if A had occurred it would have caused B (or prevented not-B). So, he accepts that cause by omission is a quasi-cause because it is a possible cause that prevents the result. By this account, not brushing his teeth quasi-causes John to get cavities because if he had brushed his teeth, that event would have prevented his cavities.

⁴³ Dowe, Phil. “Causes are Physically Connected to Their Effects: why preventers and omissions are not causes.” In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Science*. Edited by Christopher Hitchcock. (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Dowe argues that his view better explains the range of intuitions that people have about omissions and causation.⁴⁵ Consider:

CS1: “Not treating the patient caused her to die”

And

CS2: “Not throwing the rock caused the window not to break.”

Specifically, his account can explain why people think CS1 is a case of causation and why CS2 is not one; each, his theory suggests, is a case of quasi-causation, and the difference between them is purely psychological. The theories that suggest omissions are causes, claims Dowe, rely too heavily on intuitions. These intuitions, he suggests, support quasi-causation more than actual causation.

The notion of quasi-causation, however, has issues. It does, in this case, seem that limitless events are quasi-causation that would, under his theory, be indistinguishable from what people want to call ‘causes by omission’. His view, moreover, seems too restrictive. The view would seem to limit a causal statement like:

CS3: “An increase in the company’s profits caused the stock’s price to go up”

because there is no physical connection between a company’s profits and its stock price.⁴⁶

Of course, there are a few plausible ways for him to account for this apparent restriction.

Nonetheless, there seems to be an emphasis on intuitions in the literature. That is, all accounts suggest that intuitions help determine the correct theory about cause by omission.

The Intuitive Acceptance of Cause by Omission

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ I will examine causal pluralism in the conclusion.

While some views on cause by omission are too theoretically restrictive, other accounts claim the authority of intuition. Jonathan Schaffer argues that negative causation is genuine causation, thus causes need not be physically connected to their effects.⁴⁷ In his essay, Schaffer gives a number of cases and his intuitions about these cases. For instance, he considers that the lack of vitamin D causes rickets. Under any notion of causation - counterfactual, statistical, agential, evidential, explanatory, or otherwise - our judgment of a cause may include an omission as a cause. These intuitions about cases serve as the basis of his argument.⁴⁸ Schaffer accepts negative causation where the genuine cause seems to be an absence or omission. For instance, the absence of androgen in rats causes feminine behavior (rats that were castrated or given anti-androgen drugs display a female pattern of lordosis).

Schaffer argues against a number of philosophers – like Dowe - who think that causation involves a physical connection between events. That is, they think that if billiard ball A causes ball B to go into the corner pocket, then the causal relation involves a physical connection. Omissions, by this account, cannot be causes because non-occurrences cannot be physical connections. This generalization, says Schaffer, is hasty;

⁴⁷ Schaffer, Jonathan. “Causes Need Not Be Physically Connected to Their Effects: the case for negative causation.” In *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Science*. Edited by Christopher Hitchcock. (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

⁴⁸ Schaffer accepts that negative causation occurs when there is a causal intermediary that is an absence. So, when a terrorist pushes a button that prevents a shield from blocking the inhibitor of a source of energy that causes a bomb to explode, there is a case of negative causation. Precisely, the causal intermediary, the absence of the shield, caused the bomb to explode. This issue has some complexities that I cannot deal with in this thesis - *e.g.* transitivity - hence I will delay the discussion of negative causation in general to formulate my answer. I will, however, return to this issue in my conclusion.

for it seems that there must be a reason why we have all of the intuitions that he provides about negative causation.

While Schaffer spends the bulk of his time giving arguments against those who think causes must be physically related to their effects, he gives little in the way of a positive argument in favor of a causal view that allows negative causes as causes. Schaffer explains his intuitive judgments and takes a lesson about causation. It seems to him that causation itself has to do with making a difference.⁴⁹ So, for him, causation has a counterfactual feature - as many philosophers agree - but it also has a comparative feature of difference making. So, where scurvy counterfactually depends on the lack of Vitamin C, what picks it out as a cause is that the lack of the vitamin or the presence of it makes a difference to whether or not a person has scurvy.

Against Schaffer, one could argue that 1) any case of negative causation can be modeled as a case of positive causation and 2) our intuitions of negative causation can be flawed. First, consider an ordinary example: rickets. Rickets is caused by the absence of vitamin D. That is a folk judgment of actual causation that can be stated as token causation or as type causation. If, however, a model of rickets is created, we may change our minds about the cases showing cause by absence. Rickets is caused not by the lack of vitamin D but by the body taking calcium and other minerals from bones to use in bodily functions when there is not a sufficient amount of vitamin D. Specifically, when the body lacks vitamin D, a hormone is released that extracts calcium from bones to use in normal functioning. It seems then that it is not the absence of vitamin D that causes rickets - although it may be a causal intermediary; instead, it seems that the release of the hormone

⁴⁹ Ibid., 214.

causes rickets. Hence, we may in cases like these be conflating our intuition with a physicalist scientific notion of causation.

This argument above is an appealing route for some philosophers, but I think that it's ultimately flawed, and I will return to it later. In short, I have two responses. First, the difference maker in the rickets case is not the physical cause of the hormone – but the absence of vitamin D. So, it is difficult to say that the hormone is the actual cause. Second, the tendentious position of positive, physical causation is flawed. We may want to look at causal pluralism (as I will do later).

The Intuition of Salience

There is a related difficulty with counterfactuals. Even if we develop a precise account of causation and omission, it remains difficult to determine how people pick out the relevant counterfactual statements. Precisely, it is mysterious that people identify Mary's omission (in CF1) as the cause instead of my trip, as in:

CF3: “If I hadn't gone to Bismarck for a week, my plant wouldn't have died.”

Particularly in cases of cause by omission, it is difficult to determine how people identify these counterfactuals. CF1, CF2, CF3, and other positive events are a part of a causal structure, yet people identify only a particular omission as the token cause. Let us call this intuition to identify one omission as the cause *the intuition of salience*.⁵⁰

The problem of profligate causes and the conflicting intuition of salience have led philosophers to some diverse conclusions about omissions. This conflict leads Bernstein to see salience as a metaphysical concept, Beebe to distinguish cause from causal

⁵⁰ This is language borrowed from Sara Bernstein. Bernstein, Sara. “Omissions as Possibilities.” Paper presented at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, October, 2012.

explanation,⁵¹ and Hall to develop a kind of causal pluralism.⁵² All in all, there are many ways to solve these two problems related to omissive causes, but none seems entirely adequate.

Possible Explanations for the Salience of Omissions

These two problems have a few possible solutions that have been explored. Judith Thomson gives an account of the intuition of salience by appealing to fault; that is, she thinks that actual causes are those states of affair for which we ascribe fault.

Interestingly, Thomson does not think there are negative events.⁵³ As there are no negative persons (e.g. non-Obama), there are no spooky non-events. Specifically, there are no negative events that can count as omissions or absences. For instance, Carl brushing his teeth is an event, but Carl not brushing his teeth is not one.

There are, by her account, negative states of affairs. So, Carl not brushing his teeth is a negative state of affairs. Moreover, she thinks that states of affairs are causal. She gives an account of what it is for a state of affairs to cause something.⁵⁴ She claims, "If neither x nor y is an event [e.g. a state of affairs], then for x to cause y is for some event [p] appropriately related to x to cause some event [q] appropriately related to y."⁵⁵ So, the state of affairs where my cat meows in the morning can be said to cause the state

⁵¹ Beebe, Helen. "Causing and Nothingness." In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by John Collins, Ned Hall, and L.A. Paul, 291-309. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

⁵² Hall, Ned. "Two Concepts of Causation." In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by John Collins, Ned Hall, and L.A. Paul, 225-277. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

⁵³ Thomson, Judith. "Causation: Omissions." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXVI (2003), 82.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

of affairs where I wake up because some event - my cat's meowing - caused the event of me waking up.

She also accepts that an omission is a state of affairs.⁵⁶ So, some omission can be causal. For instance, John not studying for his test caused him to get a poor grade. John not studying and his receiving a poor grade are states of affairs. The event of John going out and partying, however, brought about the event where he performed poorly on the examination and the state of affairs where he received a poor grade.

Thomson, however, notices that something is missing in this account causation; if one accepts a counterfactual theory or an interventionist theory (even a Humean theory), it is difficult to determine the relevant counterfactual statement: that is, it is difficult to determine which counterfactual dependence claim is said to be the causal one (which state of affairs counterfactually depends on the caused state of affairs). This noted incompleteness is, I believe, Thomson trying to account for the intuition of salience.

To explain this intuition, Thomson argues that common sense can help us.⁵⁷ Specifically, common sense will show us that "something normative is at work" in cases of cause by omission (or any cause really).⁵⁸ For her, the normative feature of causation is fault or blaming; to be precise about this, she develops the following:

Principle P: If x is at fault for Y, x causes y.⁵⁹

By this principle, the state of affairs where Mary does not water my plant causes the state of affairs where my plant dies, for Mary's omission puts her at fault for the death.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 82 & 95.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 95

⁵⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Immediately, one might object that Thomson describes a psychological account of our intuitions or our causal cognitive process. Specifically, one might propose that Thomson's account describes why people pick out states of affairs as causes, but in a way that is not metaphysically important. If we discuss causation in terms of fault, it seems as though our intuitions are biased or distorted by a normative consideration.

But there is another more charitable way to take her thesis. This view is to suggest that blame is part of our conceptual competence at making causal judgments. Thomson, I believe, argues for this second interpretation.

This view, however, cannot be correct, for we make causal judgments without ascribing blame (i.e. blame is not a necessary condition for causation) and sometimes where we blame, we do not ascribe causation (where someone could have prevented an action that causes harm). We may then want to look for a broader account of the intuition of salience.

Norms

Sarah McGrath advances the idea that causation has a normative feature. First, she reiterates a dilemma:

- D: Either there is no causation by omission, or there is far more than common sense says there is.⁶⁰

This dilemma is that which arises out of the problem of profligate causes. For explication, we can imagine a common case of Mary who lives in Bismarck, North Dakota. When she takes a trip to Miramar, Florida, Mary asks her neighbor, Dirk, to water her plants. Chaz,

⁶⁰ McGrath, Sarah. "Causation by Omission: A Dilemma." *Philosophical Studies* 123 (2005), 125.

Mary's other neighbor, overhears Mary asking Dirk to water her plants and anticipates that Dirk will not water the plants. On the phone, Mary mentions to her cousin, Aubrey (who is in Nicaragua), that she is going away and needs her plants watered. When Mary goes away, Dirk does not water the plants, so it seems that Dirk not watering the plants caused them to die. But because this cause is an omission, any omission of this type can be the cause (the problem of profligate causes): Chaz not watering and Aubrey not watering the plants all count as causes. So, if there is cause by omission (against the first lemma of the dilemma), then there are far more omissions than make sense (as in the second lemma). To ignore omissions (first lemma), however, requires an explanation of why common sense is wrong.

McGrath's account assumes our intuitive judgments are correct about cause by omission. She then proposes the Normal Account. By normal, she means:

Normal: It is normal for X to P iff X is supposed to P.

Hearts pump blood. Hence, it is normal because hearts are supposed to pump blood. The normal account says:

Normal Account: Some 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 $C(O)$ to prevent E.

More clearly, an event type O - one that has been omitted - causes E iff O, and O is a normal would-be-preventer of E. The important part of her proposal is that it makes cause by omission normative, which is highly contested among people who suggest that causation is entirely physical.

McGrath thinks that this analysis helps us resist the dilemma and that we can rely on our intuitions about cause by omission. To me, her account seems plausible, and my intuitions accord with her own. But I think that this view must first be tested to ensure that the features of the cases that she finds salient are really the salient ones.

Cause by Omission and Experiments

Experiments have indirectly dealt with the intuition of salience. In this section, I will examine studies that elucidate the apparent salience of some omissions and suggest the *problem of profligate causes* is a less serious issue for ordinary causal judgments.

There are many cases where relevant omissions - while they may be considered causes under a nonrelationist view - are not judged to be causes. In one study, Livengood and Machery explore these cases. They perform experiments that suggest 1) the folk sometimes deny the causal status of omissions and 2) the folk do not conflate causal explanation and genuine causation.⁶¹

In one experiment, Livengood and Machery gave subjects the following vignette:

Susan had to climb a rope in gym class. Susan was a very good climber, and she climbed all the way to the rafters.

The authors set two conditions. In the *causation condition*, they asked:

On a scale of 1 to 7, 1 indicating that you totally disagree and 7 indicating that you totally agree, how much do you agree with the following claim? ‘The rope not breaking caused Susan to reach the rafters.’

In the *explanation condition*, the authors asked:

On a scale of 1 to 7, 1 indicating that you totally disagree and 7 indicating that you totally agree, how much do you agree with the following claim? ‘Susan reached the rafters because the rope did not break.’⁶²

⁶¹ Livengood, Jonathan and Machery, Edouard. “The Folk Probably Don’t Think,” 107-15.

⁶² “Ninety-five individuals taking classes at the University of Pittsburgh took part in the experiment (mean age: 21; 2 years; range: 18–60 years; 41.1% male). In classroom settings, subjects were randomly assigned to the causation condition (N = 49) or to the explanation condition (N = 46). Subjects had to answer the relevant question by circling a numeral on a seven-point scale, anchored at 1 with “totally disagree” and at 7 with “totally agree.”” Livengood, “The Folk Probably Don’t Think,” 116.

For the causation condition, the mean answer was 2.73. For the explanation condition, the mean answer was 3.50. As predicted, the mean answer in the causation condition was significantly lower than the neutral answer, 4. Against their prediction, they also found a statistically significant difference between mean answers in the two conditions.

To reiterate their results, they found that the folk sometimes deny omissions as genuine causes. Where some nonrelationists about causation would identify an omission as a cause, the folk did not. Against their prediction, participants were also less likely to say the omission of the rope breaking was a cause as opposed to an explanation.⁶³ This result suggests that people generally distinguish actual cause from causal explanation.⁶⁴

The folk, however, do sometimes identify omissions as causes. It is common for someone to claim, “Mary not watering your plants caused them to die.” We, moreover, think that the folk identify not watering the plant as a genuine cause – not simply an explanation. The problem is to figure out when the folk do so, or to determine when *the intuition of salience* identifies an omission as a cause.

⁶³ The reason why this finding is important for experimental metaphysics is that some metaphysicians argue that cause by omission is simply an accessible way to explain a causal scenario. Much of Helen Beebe’s work is dedicated to this theory. By this account, saying, “the lack of vitamin C caused scurvy” is an explanation of a causal scenario that may be more complex. Omissions, under this theory, are not causal – but only explanatory. Livengood and Machery’s results go against this theory.

⁶⁴ Livengood and Machery replicated the results in a slightly different case where Susan climbs a frail, dangerous rope. Their prediction was that in this case the rope not breaking would have a high explanatory relevance and less causal relevance. Their results again corroborated P1 and went against P2. “In the causation condition, the mean answer was 3.06 (SD = 1.84), while in the explanation condition, the mean answer was 4.00 (SD = 2.14). As in Experiment 1, the mean answer in the causation condition was significantly different from a neutral answer, 4 ($t(35) = -3.09$, $p < 0.005$). Subjects were also significantly more likely to agree with the target sentence in the explanation condition (“Susan reached the rafters because the rope did not break”) than with the target sentence in the causation condition (“The rope not breaking caused Susan to reach the rafters”) ($t(69) = 1.99$, $p = 0.05$, two-tailed).” Livengood, “The Folk Probably Don’t Think,” 120.

Exploring the Intuition of Salience

While this intuition is particularly useful for discussing omissive causes, it is important for causal judgments in general. One of the leading researchers on this intuition is Knobe, agreeing with small coterie of philosophers, who thinks that this type of causal selection is extra-structural.⁶⁵ In much of his work, Knobe argues that people's moral judgments are an integral part of the process by which people make folk causal judgments; for him, there is single underlying mechanism to explain morality's influence on causation.⁶⁶

Knobe's view, however, has not been the dominant position about causal ascription. For a long time, most psychologists and philosophers interested in how ordinary people make judgments about causation held – what Knobe refers to as – a person-as-a-scientist view.⁶⁷ Under this view, people make causal judgments in a way that is analogous to the way in which scientists make causal judgments; as a scientist uses rigorous statistical methods to determine the cause of some event, the ordinary person uses folk statistical methods. While the ordinary person does not use the rigorous mathematical methods and models that a scientist would use to identify a cause, she discerns cause by using informal statistical methods. That is, proponents of the view aver that the people use the same basic methodology as systematic scientists - only their mathematical techniques are less stringent.

⁶⁵ What I mean by 'extra-structural' is that one can develop a node diagram to represent the causal scenario but still lack a clear notion of the cause in that scenario.

⁶⁶ See Knobe, Joshua. "Folk Judgments of Causation" and Knobe, Joshua. "Person as Scientist, Person as Moralist."

⁶⁷ Knobe, "Folk Judgments," 1.

Researchers corroborated the person-as-a-scientist theory in many experiments. In one study, researchers gave participants a vignette about George, who writes a profound paper and sends it to some journals for publication. A reviewer rejects his article, so George wants to know the cause of his rejection. Researchers asked participants about two cases; in one case, almost all of the journals reject George's paper, and in the other, only the one reviewer rejects it. Subjects claimed that George's paper caused his rejection in case 1, and they said that the reviewer caused George's rejection in case 2. The results, argue the proponents of the person-as-a-scientist view, suggest that people use folk statistics to make causal judgments.⁶⁸ Specifically, in case 1, participants recognize the invariance in George's rejection rate, so they deem his paper as the cause. In case 2, participants recognize the statistical abnormality of the reviewer's rejections, so they deem the reviewer to be the cause.

There are two important clarifications. One is that the exactness of folk statistics is irrelevant; this experiment shows one way in which people's causal cognition is analogous to scientific inquiry. That is, the important part of the person-as-a-scientist view is that the folk make causal judgments using a cognitive process analogous to the methods used in systematic science; folk statistics and actual statistics are not identical. The second point of clarification is that this view does not aim to delineate all factors that influence, interfere with, or distort intuitions. A person's emotions, moral qualms, and other influences can interfere with causal judgment. If subjects, for instance, were told that the reviewer secretly hated George, then subjects' responses would be distorted (they might ascribe cause to the reviewer in both cases). Rather than confronting these

⁶⁸ Knobe, "Folk Judgments," 2-3.

influences, the view simply describes the fundamental nature of folk causal competencies: that they are, at base, like systematic science.⁶⁹

Knobe, however, is suspicious of what many psychologists have called distortions and biases. As noted above, many researchers suggest that moral judgment biases causal intuitions. Knobe, in turn, argues that people's moral judgments are an integral part of the process by which people make folk causal judgments; for him, there is single underlying mechanism to explain morality's influence on causation. Specifically, he thinks that people's moral judgments determine their selection of the relevant counterfactual in the causal scenario. This view is the person-as-a-moralist view.

To bolster the theory, Knobe cites the pen experiment mentioned in chapter one.^{70,71} To recall, the results show that people overwhelmingly judge Professor Smith to be the cause of the problem and that they do not judge the administrative assistant to be the cause. The events are statistically the same. The researchers, Knobe and Fraser, suggest that the principal difference of the actions is their moral statuses; Professor Smith is not supposed to take the pens, while the administrative assistant is permitted to do so. If the moral difference between the two subjects' actions elicits a different causal ascription, then the study suggests that people do not make causal judgments as scientists make them (*i.e.* considering only statistics).

⁶⁹ Knobe, "Person as Scientist," 316.

⁷⁰ Knobe and Fraser. "Causal Judgment and Moral Judgment: two experiments."

⁷¹ Knobe, "Person as Scientist," 315.

Knobe posits his own hypothesis about causal ascription in response to the data on the moral influence on causal judgment.⁷² The results from the above experiment show that moral judgments are part of the process by which causal judgments are made. He rejects the view that moral judgments distort the informal scientific methods that folk use to make causal judgments.⁷³ Rather, Knobe argues that there may, in fact, be a single underlying mechanism to explain how the folk use statistical methods and moral consideration when they make causal judgments. By this theory, the folk have as a part of their competency in making causal judgments a hybrid scientific and moral mechanism.⁷⁴ We can call this the person-as-moral-scientist view.

Under this view, Knobe thinks that moral judgments are the integral part of people's underlying competence that helps them identify the relevant counterfactual alternatives in causal judgments.⁷⁵ In his work, Knobe highlights three principles for counterfactual reasoning.

1. People are inclined to consider counterfactuals in which statistically usual events replace statistically unusual ones.
2. People are inclined to consider counterfactuals in which good events replace bad events.

⁷² Knobe's hypothesis, as he thinks of it, is an extension of his work on the side-effect effect (the Knobe Effect). The asymmetry between judgments of intentional action between morally good and morally bad cases, he posits, results from an underlying competence that includes moral considerations; precisely, he does not think that the Knobe Effect results from moral, emotional, or normative interference but from an underlying mechanism (a conceptual competence) that includes moral considerations. See Knobe, "Person as Scientist," 316-9 and Knobe, "Intentional Actions and Side-Effects."

⁷³ I will return to this view later in this section and explain its failings.

⁷⁴ Knobe, "Folk Judgments," 1-2.

⁷⁵ Knobe, "Person as Scientist," 326.

3. Unless there is some specific reason to think about a given counterfactual, people are inclined to classify it as irrelevant and not give it any further thought.⁷⁶

Knobe's critical principle is two. This principle allows him to suggest that moral judgments are a part of the mechanism that people use to make causal judgments.

Returning to the pen case, we can clarify Knobe's person-as-a-moral-scientist view. When judging the cause of receptionist's problem, the subjects use:

CF4: "If Professor Smith hadn't taken a pen, the receptionist would've had one."

Using principle two, subjects replace a bad event - Professor Smith taking the pen when he should not have - with a good one - Professor Smith not taking a pen. They do not, however, use:

CF5: "If the administrative assistant hadn't taken a pen, then the receptionist would've had one."

Participants, Knobe suggests, do not use CF5 because there is no reason to consider it (principle three) and because it is not a morally bad action (principle two). Precisely, CF5 satisfies none of the three principles.

Under this theory, if the causal judgment is about a morally relevant event, then the subjects' moral judgment is a part of their underlying competency. Morality then is not interfering with causal judgment - but helping to determine it.

But Knobe's initial focus on moral norms may be a bit too restrictive. In "Cause and Norm," Hitchcock and Knobe propose an alternate theory for how people identify the

⁷⁶ Knobe, "Folk Judgments," 5. Knobe explains these principles throughout this article. This is my adaptation of them.

relevant counterfactual statements in causal judgments.⁷⁷ They posit an underlying mechanism that incorporates norms instead of moral judgments. Specifically, they suggest that people make causal judgments by discerning the best way to intervene and prevent the result. The best way to intervene, they argue, is to replace abnormal events with normal ones. I call this the *norm view*, which states that people rely on extra-structural norms to identify relevant counterfactuals in causal ascriptions.⁷⁸

While they have a different aim in their paper, they ask: how do people choose the relevant counterfactual? To present this inquiry, they discuss a case of causal preemption:

Assassin and Backup go on a mission to poison Victim. Assassin puts poison in Victim's drink. Backup stands at the ready; if Assassin hadn't poisoned the drink, Backup would have. Both poisons are lethal. Victim drinks the poison and dies.

The obvious, relevant, and intuitive counterfactual is:

CF6: "If Assassin hadn't poisoned Victim, Victim wouldn't have died."

But this counterfactual is false because if Assassin had not poisoned the drink, Backup would have. Backup's action, however, is not a cause of Victim's death, while Assassin's action is a cause; hence, it would be wrong to say that Backup in any way caused

⁷⁷ I must note that the primary thesis of this article is not to develop this alternative theory for how people choose the relevant counterfactuals in causal reasoning. Rather, the aim is to discover what is helpful about determining factors that violate norms and calling them causes. They suggest that the purpose is to identify which event of all the possible events is the one that would most likely prevent the result from reoccurring. People identify the best possible way to intervene, the authors suggest, by replacing the abnormal event with a normal one. Hitchcock, Christopher and Knobe, Joshua. "Cause and Norm." *Journal of Philosophy* CVI (2009), 607.

⁷⁸ See Knobe, Joshua, "Folk Judgments of Causation," Knobe, Joshua, "Person as Scientist, Person as Moralist," Knobe and Fraser, "Causal Judgment and Moral Judgment," and Hitchcock and Knobe, "Cause and Norm," 592-3.

Victim's death. So, the authors ask: *how do people decide which counterfactual statements are relevant?*⁷⁹

Hitchcock and Knobe amend Knobe's earlier understanding of how people choose counterfactuals by adopting an interventionist theory of causation. Under this theory, they hold that while people can identify causal structures, what makes them pick out a specific counterfactual is a purpose: making a difference. Strictly, people identify the counterfactual statements that would prevent the result by intervention. For instance, to prevent Victim's death, we need to preclude Assassin's actions. So, we judge Assassin's action as the cause (CF6).

But people do not pick out any intervention. It is true that if Counter Assassin had murdered both Assassin and Backup, Victim would not have died. Nonetheless, this counterfactual is highly unusual, abnormal, and irrelevant. Hitchcock and Knobe argue that people pick out the intervention that would prevent the action in *normalized versions* of the scenario. They write, "In general, while causal structure identifies all of the factors that *could* be manipulated...to effect a change in the outcome, the actual causes are the factors that *should* be manipulated" (italics are theirs).⁸⁰ By this, they mean that people assume a situation that is more normal than the actual situation they are making a causal judgment about. People then identify what *should* be done to prevent the action. This intuitive interventionism engenders people's causal judgment.

⁷⁹ Hitchcock, Christopher and Knobe, Joshua, "Cause and Norm," 595.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 590.

To be exact, we can see this process in three steps. First, people classify events from normal to abnormal.⁸¹ For example, Assassin poisoning Victim is a normal situation, while Assassin with Backup is an abnormal one. Second, when confronted with an abnormal event, people then identify the counterfactuals that best normalize the situation. People, for example, will use CF6 instead of considering a counterfactual that incorporates Backup. Third, people identify the best way to prevent the result (*e.g.* prevent Victim's death). These three steps summarize the norm view.⁸²

We may then return to the pen case for contrast with Knobe's earlier person-as-a-moral-scientist view.⁸³ The two behaviors do not differ in typicality; it is routine for both Professor Smith and the administrative assistant to take pens. Statistically, the events are the same. There are also multiple ways to intervene; one, for instance, could prevent the administrative assistant from taking a pen. The administrative assistant, however, violates no norms, while Professor Smith does. Since Professor Smith's actions are abnormal, the counterfactual about him is relevant, while the counterfactual about the administrative

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 597.

⁸² There is an important question about norms that I will return to later. It is important to note that Hitchcock & Knobe use 'norm' generally to include statistical and prescriptive norms (Hitchcock and Knobe, "Cause and Norm," 597-8). Statistical norms identify the general frequency of events. One hundred degrees, for example, is a statistically normal temperature for Arizona in May. Prescriptive norms - which include moral norms, legal norms, and etiquette - identify what people generally ought to do. A prescriptive norm, for instance, is that one should not interrupt another person when she is speaking. Norms, for them, simply mean situations with a high degree of normality, a view that has been repeatedly corroborated in psychological research. In this paper, we should think of norms not as normative as in ethics but as normal.

⁸³ The original researchers, Knobe and Fraser, suggest that the principal difference between the actions is their moral statuses; Professor Smith is not supposed to take the pens, while the administrative assistant is permitted to do so. If the moral difference between the subjects elicits a different causal ascription, then this study suggests that people do not make causal judgments as scientists do - considering only statistics.

assistant is not. Thus, stopping Professor Smith from taking a pen is the best way to prevent the secretary's problem.

The norm view, hence, explains *the intuition of salience*: in a phrase, a cause is salient if a norm is broken.⁸⁴ That is, when people use counterfactual reasoning to decipher causal scenarios, they identify the most abnormal counterfactual statement. Then they normalize that statement, which identifies it as the cause. Suppose that subject S has a range X_0 - X_n (in the form ' $\sim a \rightarrow \sim b$ ') of counterfactual statements (relevant or not) to describe a causal scenario. The most abnormal X_n that will normalize the scenario will be used to identify the actual cause of the scenario.

There is, however, a serious objection to Knobe's view. Some researchers posit the person-as-a-bumbling-scientist view (in some articles, Knobe also calls this the alternative explanation).⁸⁵ Under this view, the folk make causal judgments using folk scientific methods and statistics, but they mess up. Proponents of this explanation suggest that motivational bias distort or bias the true causal judgment from the folk scientific method.⁸⁶ The folk moral judgments - possibly even their emotions - distort their correct (i.e. statistical or scientific) judgments about causation. In sum, the moral judgment - or otherwise - interferes with the causal judgment. People's competencies for making causal judgments are nonmoral, but moral biases impede people's ability to correctly make causal ascriptions. While there are many forms of this view, one called the blaming objection is an important one. This objection claims that people are conflating their

⁸⁴ This is the normative feature I have mentioned.

⁸⁵ Knobe, "Person as Scientist," 320

⁸⁶ Ibid., 321

assignment of blame with their causal judgment. Because subjects, for instance, want to blame Professor Smith in the pen scenario, they deem him the cause. Subjects' moral judgment, in other words, distorts their causal judgment.⁸⁷

Knobe and other researchers have found a plethora of ways to combat this alternative explanation. Two significant ways of doing so are to develop experiments where 1) the subject is not blameworthy for the result yet remains the cause or 2) the cause is not an agent. In an experiment of the latter type, Knobe used the following vignette:

A machine is set up in such a way that it will short circuit if both the black wire and the red wire touch the battery at the same time. The machine will not short circuit if just one of these wires touches the battery. The black wire is designated as the one that is supposed to touch the battery, while the red wire is supposed to remain in some other part of the machine.

One day, the black wire and the red wire both end up touching the battery at the same time. There is a short circuit.

Subjects were asked to agree or disagree with one of two statements: one stating that the fact that the red wire touching the battery caused the machine to short circuit and another stating that the fact that the black wire touched the battery caused the machine to short circuit. Subjects judged the fact that the red wire touched the battery to be the cause of the short circuit.⁸⁸ In other words, the theory explains that the subjects made this causal

⁸⁷ See Alicke, Mark, "Blaming Badly," and Alicke *et al* "Causation, Norm Violation and Culpable Control." To see Knobe's response, see Knobe, "Person as Scientist," 322-3.

⁸⁸ "Subjects rated each statement on a scale from 1 ('disagree') to 7 ('agree'). Overall, the statement about the red wire received a mean rating of 4.9; the statement about the black wire received a mean rating of 2.7. This difference was statistically significant, $t(3410) = 30.2$, $p < .001$. When one looks only at subjects who are philosophy professors or have Ph.D.s in philosophy, one finds the same basic pattern (mean for the red wire = 5.3, mean for the black wire = 3.5, $t(325) = 8.4$, $p < .001$)" Hitchcock and Knobe, "Cause and Norm," 599.

judgment because of normative features of the case and not because of a blaming distortion.

Experiments, Salience, and Omissions

The norm view interestingly implies that people will sometimes pick out the counterfactual that contains an omission as a cause. From the above research, we can expect that the folk will ascribe abnormal events causal status. Therefore, while Livengood and Machery's study suggests the folk sometimes deny the causal status of omissions, we now have a good predictor for when omissions count as causes; specifically, the folk will identify omissions as causes when an event that can prevent the result breaks a norm.

To test this view, I designed a study with the following vignette:

Bash Ball is a game played on a large outdoor course with a lot of hiding places. In the game, there are Runners and there are Bashers. Runners are allowed to run wherever they want to on the course, but if they get hit by a Bash Ball, they are out of the game. Runners are also allowed to talk to one another and strategize. Bashers must remain in one spot for the entire game, and they must try to hit the other team's Runner's with one of their Bash Balls. *Bashers are allowed to talk to their team's Runners and tell them where the other team's Bashers are.* The goal of Bash Ball is to get as many of the team's Runners to the opposing team's Zone as possible.

Zach, Harmon, and a few other friends are on a team playing Bash Ball against another team. Zach is a Basher, and Harmon is a Runner. At one point in the game, Zach spots one of the other team's Bashers behind a tree on the other side of the field. Later on, Harmon sees Zach and runs past him. *Knowing that he is allowed to talk to Runners,* Zach does not tell Harmon where the other team's Basher is. Soon after, the Basher that Zach spotted hits Harmon with a Bash Ball. Harmon is out for the remainder of the game.

Do you agree with the following statement?

Zach not telling Harmon where the other team's Basher is caused Harmon to get out of the game.

Yes/No

How confident are you in your answer?

(Not at all Confident) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (Very Confident)

There are two conditions. In the *abnormal condition* (above), Bashers are allowed to talk to Runners on their team, and in the *normal condition* they are not allowed to do so.⁸⁹

The *abnormal condition* is more abnormal than the *normal condition* because participants expect Zach to tell Harmon about the Basher – specifically, when there is not a rule prohibiting him from doing so, he is *supposed to* tell Harmon about the Basher (so their team can win) – yet he does not do so: he breaks a norm. Hence, in the *abnormal condition*, 72.4% of participants claimed that Zach’s omission caused Harmon to get out of the game, while only 24.1% claimed this in the *normal condition*.⁹⁰

This result is revealing. The causal structure is the same in each case; the event of Harmon getting hit or other conditions seem to be positive causes, and the omission may

⁸⁹ The only difference between the vignettes is that in the *normal condition* the word ‘not’ was inserted twice to specify that Bashers were *not allowed* to talk to Runners.

⁹⁰ In the *abnormal condition*, 35 (N = 29) participants on Amazon Turk (62.1% Male, 34.5% Female, 3.4% Decline to Answer, and 3.4% Other) responded to a survey for \$0.20 compensation. Of the participants, 21 (72.4%) answered ‘Yes’, and 8 (26.6%) answered ‘No’. These results are statistically significant ($\chi^2=5.828$, $df=1$, $p=0.0158$). In the *normal condition*, 35 participants (N = 29) on Amazon Turk (48.3% Male, 51.7% Female) responded to a survey for \$0.20 compensation. Of the participants, 7 (24.1%) answered ‘Yes’, and 22 (75.9%) answered ‘No’. These results are statistically significant, ($\chi^2=7.759$, $df=1$, $p=0.0053$). On a weighted scale (1 being ‘Very Confident’ for the ‘No’ answer 14 being ‘Very Confident’ for the ‘Yes’ answer (7.5 is the neutral answer)), the mean answer in the *abnormal condition* was 9.79 (SD = 3.947) and 4.55 (SD = 4.672) in the *normal condition*. The differences are statistically significant ($t(58) = 4.561$, $p<.001$, two-tailed). In each condition, the surveys were the same except for the word ‘no’ inserted twice in the normal condition. Participants were also given basic comprehension questions to ensure that they read the vignette and answered appropriately; those who failed the comprehension questions were discarded (6 in the abnormal condition and 6 in the normal condition). All participants were from United States.

be causally relevant or causal (if one accepts omissions as causes). Despite the causal structure, something extra-structural (a broken norm) affects whether or not the participants judge an omission to be a cause. To be clear, the omission in the *abnormal condition* was the salient cause because of a normative feature - not a structural feature – of the case.⁹¹

Discussion of Experiments

These results carry a lot of weight for *the problem of profligate causes* and *the intuition of salience*. But I will resolve neither mystery. Instead, I will make a suggestion for what these experimental results imply about the metaphysics of omissive causes.

These results suggest that *the intuition of salience* has an explanation: the causal salience of some omissions is brought about by normative features of the causal scenario. This explanation illuminates Livengood and Machery's results. In their results, the folk deny the causal status of an omission because the omission of the broken rope does not break a norm. Specifically, the folk do not consider:

CF7: "If the rope had broken, Susan wouldn't have made it to the top."

because it is an irrelevant counterfactual. Under the norm view, to consider CF7 is to consider a scenario that is more abnormal than the one at hand, for the scenario in which the rope does not break is already normal. Hence, where one does not need to identify a

⁹¹ A few other experiments support the same conclusion. One experiment using semantic integration techniques and the same conditions results in the same finding. Also, when people are asked about cause by omission, they tend to always say that omissions are causes. Furthermore, the folk seem to accept cause by omission so widely, that there does not seem to be an abstract/concrete paradox or any general reticence to accept omissions as causes. It seems that people judge omissions or absences to be the same (in terms of causation) as positive events. I hope to present much of this data elsewhere. Funding limitation hinders the presentation here.

way to prevent the result from occurring, there is no purpose for identifying a broken norm in an abnormal scenario as the cause.

Livengood and Machery foresee this attack on their project. They argue that while “people might argue that the rope not breaking is not the most relevant...cause[,]...This reply should be restricted...It is...*ad hoc*: there is no evidence that people take the rope not breaking to be a cause...at all.”⁹² In an experiment, it would be difficult to show that the rope not breaking is not a relevant cause. My study, however, is not *ad hoc* because I bolster my assertion with theory. The approach predicts that in any case where the norm view identifies an omission as a cause, the folk agree. If there is one case where the norm view should identify an omission as a relevant cause and the folk deny its causal status, then one presents a bigger problem. Nevertheless, it seems that the norm view and my study account for the *intuition of salience* and Livengood and Machery’s results.

More troubling is the *problem of profligate causes*. It is important to note that if one has an account of *the intuition of salience*, one can deal with this problem; if we know why specific causes are salient and others are not, we have an account of why profligate causes are not causes. Thus, we can explain why some omissions are causes.

I have suggested that this intuition has a normative feature, but stating this does not show how an explanation of *the intuition of salience* deals with *the problem of profligate causes*. To do this, I must flesh out this normative feature.⁹³ I can do so in two ways. The first is to say our underlying competence at making causal ascriptions relies on

⁹² Livengood and Machery, “The Folk Probably Don’t Think,” 123.

⁹³ In this project, I, as other theorists have, have used ‘norms’ and ‘normativity’ broadly and vaguely. A further and related project for this view is to more precisely define what kind of norms are at work. I will discuss this project in my conclusion.

norms and normative judgments; this is to say there is a single underlying mechanism for making causal ascriptions that relies on our normative judgments.⁹⁴ So, when we judge an omission as a cause, the omission is not necessarily a metaphysical cause; rather, it is an event that serves the purpose of being the best way for us to prevent the result. By this account of the normativity, we cannot fully deal with *the problem of profligate causes*; at best, we can give a psychological account of why the problem does not seem to matter.⁹⁵ The metaphysical problem, however, persists, for a psychological explanation – without further discussion – has little impact on the metaphysical structure.

The second way to parse the normativity is to suggest that norms are an essential feature of cause by omission (and maybe causation in general); salience, under this account, is a metaphysical property that has a normative feature. What the experiments are then showing is that the folk make accurate causal judgments and that the metaphysical causal structure that informs these judgments has itself a normative feature. As I noted earlier, Sarah McGrath holds such a view; in one article, she proposes the following:

o causes *e* iff *o* occurs, *e* occurs, and either C_o is 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**⁹⁶

By her account, omission *o* causes event *e* iff *o* normally prevents *e* or *o* normally prevents *e**, which causes *e*. While this account needs further explanation, it is one that deems causation itself – not simply causal judgments – as normative. Hence, *the intuition*

⁹⁴ This is essentially the norm view.

⁹⁵ This explanation would, however, deal with the psychological problem.

⁹⁶ McGrath, Sarah. “Causation by Omission,” 142.

of salience is explained by the metaphysical causal relations that have normative features. Unlike the first view, if a view like this one holds, *the problem of profligate causes* ceases to be a problem. For we have an account of salience that shows why specific omissions count as causes and why profligate causes are not metaphysically causes. Either way we parse this normative feature, omissions *qua* causes seem to be normative.

There are, however, some serious objections. Someone may argue that normativity has nothing to do with *genuine* causation. This objection comes in two parts. The first part is to say the studies show that our intuitions may be interfered with or tainted by norms. For these critics, normativity has nothing to do with the metaphysical causal relation. The second part is to develop a metaphysical notion of salience (some have done so) that lacks normative consideration.⁹⁷ This metaphysical view suggests that our judgments – although they are not always precise – are informed by the metaphysical relation. An objector of this type might, for instance, claim that “drought caused the famine” is a case where no normative considerations are involved (*i.e.* there is a non-normative metaphysical relation).

This objection, while serious, is fruitless. To deal with the first part, a champion of the norm view can challenge opponents to find a causal judgment that lacks a normative feature. The opponent may point to the drought case. Knobe, Hitchcock, and McGrath, however, have a much wider conception of norms. Under their view, the drought case has a normative feature. McGrath, for instance, might claim that it is *supposed to* (normal to) rain; for her, the salience of the omission depends on norms. In

⁹⁷ Someone may also propose a view that denies a notion of salience and the causal status of omissions.

response to the first part of the objection, one can claim that it is impossible to find a judgment of causation that lacks a normative feature. Hence, if all ordinary causal judgments have a normative feature, it is difficult to claim that norms interfere with true causal judgments. The objector then needs to explain how this distortion occurs.

Dealing with the second part of the objection is more challenging, and it deserves more consideration than I can give here. But suppose that someone developed a metaphysical and non-normative notion of salience. The problem for this view is that a metaphysical account relies on intuitive causal judgments that – I have suggested – have a normative feature. We could not imagine a metaphysical account that did not appeal to – at some point – our intuitive causal judgments. Even if one were to accept causal pluralism, acknowledging that one concept of causation has a normative feature, she would still rely on this concept to develop a metaphysical concept of omissive causation. Hence, without an explanation for the claim that norms distort causal judgments, there is no reason to think that genuine causation lacks a normative feature.

While more work is required, the experimental evidence seems to suggest that omissive causes necessarily have a normative feature. Under some normative accounts of *the intuition of salience*, *the problem of profligate causes* ceases. Hence, we may, after accepting a norm-based metaphysical theory of causation, accept omissive causes.

Conclusion

I have done three things in this project. First, I have given an account of why experimental metaphysics is an appropriate methodology for a philosophical project. Second, I have bolstered the norm view of causal judgments in experimental philosophy (which has a growing consensus) by suggesting that the view holds for omissions. Third, I have supported the views of some metaphysicians who think that the salience of the actual cause has a normative component. Lastly, I have suggested that the view that I hold can – if correct – resolve some problems in the metaphysics of omissions and cause by omission.

This thesis will produce a lot of future projects. First, this project requires further experimentation of how the folk treat omissive causes and further discussion about which account of normativity is apt. There are two projects that deserve immediate attention. The first is to determine what concept(s) of causation ordinary people have and when they exhibit it(them). Exploring this project will help determine if there is any non-normative concept of causation at all.⁹⁸ The second project is to determine more precisely what kind of norms (statistical, prescriptive, *et cetera*) affect or influence the causal status of omissions. Understanding these norms will inform the metaphysical consequences of this view. Some people are already working on this endeavor (*e.g.* Livengood). The future disagreement seems to be that certain types of norms, typicality (by agent or population), and normality are the important feature for causal judgments. While some experimental philosophers will argue that Thomson's fault argument (see

⁹⁸ It will also help determine exactly when the folk accept omissions as causes.

above) is correct, I suspect that McGrath's view is more precise, but these views must be tested.⁹⁹

I also think that more work must be done to determine the relationship between the abstract/concrete paradox and the normative component of causal judgments. A future project will be to look at the semantic memory accounts of the paradox and determine the relationship to causal ascriptions.

Another related project is to examine the results that this project has on a perennial question in the metaphysics of causation: is causation ideal or real?¹⁰⁰ It may seem that this project ultimately suggests that causation is ideal – or at least that causation depends on people being around to observe it. For if the existence of norms depends on people and causation depends on normative features of the world, then causation must also depend on people being around. Many philosophers – even recent ones – have suggested that this may be the case.¹⁰¹ It does, however, seem obvious that causes happen without human presence. In a world without life on it, rock A seemingly still causes rock B to break into bits when the two rocks collide.

To explicate, I can use an example. Suppose there are three people: Chris, Jordan, and Quinn. All three live in a world like ours but with entirely different norms. In this world, there are two classes of people – upper class and lower class – and upper-class

⁹⁹ See Sytsma, Justin; Livengood, Jonathan; and Rose, David (forthcoming). "Two Types of Typicality: Rethinking the Role of Statistical Typicality in Ordinary Causal Attributions." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*.

¹⁰⁰ I thank Bernard Kobes for pushing me on this problem and for the examples I use below.

¹⁰¹ Menzies, Peter and Price, Huw. "Causation as a Secondary Quality." *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 44 (1993): 187-203.

people are not expected to help people in need while the lower-class people are expected to do so. Chris and Jordan are upper class, while Quinn is lower class. One day, Jordan falls into a toxic waste pit. Because of the norms in this world, Chris is not expected to help Jordan, and Quinn is. Chris, nonetheless, has access to a device that rescues people from toxic waste pits, and this device is only accessible to upper-class people and can be used for a small monetary cost. Quinn can also jump into the pit to save Jordan, but it would cost him his life. Neither Chris nor Quinn saves Jordan, and he dies. The question is whether Chris or Quinn's omission caused Jordan's death.

It is difficult to make this judgment across worlds, but I think that the point of the example is fair. The norm view would predict that Quinn not sacrificing his life for Jordan caused Jordan's death. By our standards, however, we might assert that Chris's omission caused Jordan's death. What this example suggests is that the norm view treats causation as contextual, anthropocentric, and not necessarily real.

My view, however – which accords with the views of many philosophers – does not necessarily suggest that causation is ideal; there are ways around this consequence. One way is to say that I have been talking about actual cause – not necessarily causation in general. When we discuss actual cause, we are discussing the event that can best be modified to prevent the result, while causation involves a much more intricate and baroque linkage of events. That is to say that the only idealized aspect of causation is the actual cause.

Another way to obviate this result is to be a causal pluralist – a view that many philosophers support (*e.g.* Ned Hall and Christopher Hitchcock). One could say that at least one concept of causation – for instance, dependence causation – accords with the

norm view. Hence, at least one concept idealizes causation. Other concepts of causation, however, are not necessarily ideal. There seems to be a number of ways around this consequence.

While these future projects require time and discussion, this project at least makes a suggestion for the foundation of our intuitions about cause by omission.

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