

Intentional omissions are activities

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Intentional omissions are a special group of an agent's omissions. They happen out of the agent's will, instead of being merely things that happen *to* them. I can intentionally omit to vote in an election, omit to answer a question at a dinner, or omit to mow the lawn throughout the summer. What is intentional in an intentional omission is what the agent does *not* do. Although intentional omissions are something we deemed to responsible of, they are not intentional actions because no intentional bodily movement of the agent is necessarily involved (Clarke 2010; 2014).

A good ontological account of intentional omissions needs to account for *how* they reside in space and time. In the following, it is argued that when an agent is intentionally not performing an action, there is something going on, and this something is best described as a process of a kind in which the agent is instigating, controlling, and sustaining an omission of hers. This is because intentional omissions have several features of processes; they are homogenous, continuous, unbounded, indefinite, and directly uncountable. As processes instigated and sustained by *humans*, they should be seen as activities.

Originally, a distinction between performances and activities was based on Kenny's (1963) and Vendler's (1957) analysis. They argued that differences in verb aspect between performance and activity verbs mirror differences in the way these occurrences essentially reside in time. In the following, I apply this distinction and later findings on the necessary features of processes to the metaphysics of intentional omissions. It must be noted that the data we have of the metaphysics of agency includes linguistic evidence as well intuitions, thought experiments, and phenomenological data. I assume that agents are, to some extent, experts when it comes to distinctly *human-induced* occurrences.

(1) Kenny originally distinguished static verbs such as 'know' and 'be happy' from continuous verbs such as 'learn' or 'look for' (1963: 172). He further divided continuous verbs into performance verbs such as 'kill' and 'decide whether' and activity verbs such as 'keep a secret' or 'live at Rome' (1963: 173). According to Kenny, there is an essential difference in *how* these occurrences are in time: whereas states may last for a time, performances take time and activities go on for a time (Kenny 1963: 176). Verbs that are commonly used to describe intentional omissions behave like Kenny's activity verbs. It is not plausible to say, 'I took me all summer to not mow the lawn' but we can correctly say 'I have been refraining from smoking for a decade'. One can say that answering a question took two minutes, but we cannot say that not answering a question took the whole afternoon. Not answering a question does not itself *take* time, but it can go on for a certain time-frame. Intentionally refraining from working during a strike, for instance, can go on for two weeks.

(2) Another way to distinguish performances from activities, according to Kenny, is that whereas performance verbs can happen *quickly or slowly*, activity verbs cannot (1963: 176-177). Expressions of, as well as intuitions about intentional omissions, function like activities in this way as well. One cannot refrain from smoking quickly or slowly whereas one can smoke a cigarette slowly or rapidly. Intentionally omitting from working cannot happen quickly or slowly whereas performing an action that can be completed, such as bringing a pizza home, can happen slowly or rapidly.

(3) Compared to performances, activities, and processes, are *homogenous*. This means that what is going on in a process has the same nature throughout the time-frame in which it is going on (Mourelatos 1978: 416). Any part of the process has been deemed to be of the same nature as the whole (Vendler 1957: 146). Intentional omissions are process-like in this sense as well because they have the same nature throughout the time-frame in which they are going on: there is no difference in not answering a question at the beginning or the end stages of the omission. Compared to actions, there are different

parts in answering a question, for instance, and the action is not of the same nature at every moment of its course.

(4) Another feature of processes is that they are *continuous* compared to events. Whereas an event does not exist entirely at any time during its course (Stout 1997: 25), what is going on in a process is continuously present in its entirety at different times (Stout 1997: 26). What is going on in an intentional omission, as well, is something continuous rather than a specific, concrete change or a set of changes. An agent intentionally not mowing the lawn contributes to the same continuous omission that exists entirely throughout every small decision not to mow the lawn. What is unfolding exists entirely at any specific time during the course of the omission as there is no change that requires different *stages* of an event.

(5) Intentional omissions are also *unbounded*. Whereas events are deemed to be bounded – they have a definite duration – processes endure unbounded in time (Galton and Mizoguchi 2009: 4-5). Intentionally not answering a question, for instance, is unbounded in a sense that its temporal boundaries are fuzzy. In intentionally not answering a question, there are moments from which it cannot be determined whether intentionally not answering a question has started or is still going on although there are moments from which we can definitely say that the intentional omission is unfolding.

(6) Processes also involve no culmination of an anticipated result (Mourelatos 1978: 204). Michael Bennett says that activities are represented by *open intervals* whereas performances are represented by *closed intervals* (1977: 505.) This feature has been called the *indefiniteness* of the time stretch of activities (Mourelatos 1978: 204). According to Vendler, activities such as running or pushing a cart have no terminal set point or climax (1957: 145). Activities therefore have been seen as being essentially *atelic*, that is, processes such as pushing a cart qualify as activities regardless of whether the cart is pushed to a certain end point or not, or whether the activity is goal-directed or not (Mourelatos 1993: 386). Performances, however, are *telic*, that is, in them, the end point gives closure to what was going on (Mourelatos 1993: 386). How we perceive our intentional omissions suggests that they are activities in this aspect as well. Intentional omissions are anticlimactic. One can intentionally omit to smoke, but the intentional omission never reaches an end point after which ‘the deed was done.’ Not taking up a topic at a meeting ceases when the meeting is over, but the end point of the activity is determined by external reasons, the activity itself does not reach a culmination point. This is also in part revealed by how we speak of our intentional omissions. The question, ‘How long did you omit to pull the weeds?’ is appropriate whereas there is something wrong with the question, ‘How long did it take for you to not vote?’ The latter kinds of descriptions are used for performances, whereas the first kinds are used to talk about activities (Vendler 1957:145). This difference is based on the different way that activities and performances endure in time – performances take a definite time because activities go on for an indefinite timespan *without* a culmination point (Vendler 1957: 145).

(7) Intentional omissions are also *directly uncountable*. Whereas it is possible to count events, processes cannot be counted — at least in the same way as events can (Galton and Mizoguchi 2009: 4). John’s not smoking at a party is not directly countable, whereas George’s smoking happened three times. Instead, processes are *measured* – they are individuated by extrinsic containers (Mourelatos 1978: 210). One’s intentional omission to not take up a topic at a meeting can be measured extrinsically as lasting throughout the meeting. But it is difficult to perceive not taking up a topic happening three times because no specific change corresponding to this intention of the agent actually happened at the meeting.

References

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