

**The Metaphysics and Ethics of Omissions**  
**Philosophy 285**  
**Winter 2014**

Dana Kay Nelkin/Samuel C. Rickless

Office: Dana (HSS 8004), Sam (HSS 8009)

Office Hours: Dana: Wednesday 10-11, Friday 11-12, and by appointment

Sam: Mondays and Fridays 11-12, and by appointment

Phone: Dana (858-822-0472), Sam (858-822-4910)

E-mail: [dnelkin@ucsd.edu](mailto:dnelkin@ucsd.edu) and [srickless@ucsd.edu](mailto:srickless@ucsd.edu).

***Course Description***

Omissions are metaphysically and morally puzzling. Metaphysically speaking, what kinds of things are omissions? Are they positive events or activities of a certain kind? (For example, is John's omission to call his mother at T identical to his calling his sister at T?) Are they negative facts, or just absences or non-entities? Given what omissions are, is it possible for omissions to be causes (or effects) of events (or other omissions)? For example, is Sarah's omission to water her plants a cause of their wilting? If it is, then is it also true that Barack Obama's omission to water Sarah's plants is a cause of their wilting? Morally speaking, we sometimes praise people for not doing things (e.g., "That was great how you didn't give up the state secrets despite the water torture") and we also blame them for not doing things ("You forgot your brother's birthday!"). And we think that there are things people really ought not to do, and that there are things that people are morally permitted not to do. In other words, we make a variety of moral judgments, not only about what people do (actions) but also about what they don't do (omissions). But omissions pose puzzles that actions do not. For example, when it comes to actions, we can typically point to a corresponding intention or at least some knowledge of the likely consequences on the part of the agent. More specifically, we might point to the fact that a murder is premeditated as reason for blaming more than for one that is done out of anger and an intention to harm but not kill. And while it is true for some omissions that they are associated with certain intentions and knowledge (such as not divulging state secrets), it is not true for all (for example, in cases like forgetting the birthday). If part of what grounds our blame and praise for actions is the associated intention or knowledge, but there is no such thing in the case of some omissions, are we really entitled to praise and blame in such cases? And if so why? Or take another puzzle: Charlotte omits to call the fire department when she sees lightning strike a tree and catch on fire. Over the next few hours, a huge swath of forest burns, along with hundreds of houses in a nearby town. Is Charlotte responsible for the damage? When it comes to actions, we often take it that people are responsible for, at most, what their actions cause. But it is not clear that Charlotte's omission *caused* the fire and damage; the lightning strike did that. So is Charlotte off the moral hook? If not, what makes her responsible for an outcome she did not cause? In the seminar, we aim to provide answers to all these questions.

## ***Readings***

All readings may be found on our TED website in the form of PDFs or links to articles. You may access library materials remotely free of charge by setting up a VPN through the library web site. Please note that the background and further reading listed below are optional.

### 1/8: Introduction: The Big Picture

#### 1/15: The Ontology of Omissions

*Background reading:* Myles Brand, “The Language of Not Doing”; Donald Davidson, “Reply to Bruce Vermazen” and “Actions, Reasons and Causes”; Achille Varzi, “The Talk I Was Supposed to Give...” (not including the section on Causation and Causal Explanations)

John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control* (pp. 124-25, 132-34)

Bruce Vermazen, “Negative Acts”

Randolph Clarke, *Omissions*, chapter 1 and sections 1-6 of chapter 2

*Further Reading:* Sara J. Bernstein, “Omissions as Possibilities”

#### 1/22: Omissions and Causation (Part I)

*Background reading:* Phil Dowe, *Physical Causation*, chapter 6

Phil Dowe, “A Counterfactual Theory of Prevention and Causation by Omission”

Jonathan Schaffer, “Causes Need not be Physically Connected to their Effects: The Case for Negative Causation”

*Further Reading:* David Lewis, “Void and Object”; Michael Moore, *Causation and Responsibility*, pp. 444-451

#### 1/29: Omissions and Causation (Part II)

Helen Beebe, “Causing and Nothingness”

Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Causation: Omission”

Sarah McGrath, “Causation by Omission: A Dilemma”

Randolph Clarke, *Omissions*, sections 7-9 of chapter 2

2/5: Responsibility for Omissions and the Question of Symmetry with Actions (Part I)

*Background Reading:* Harry Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”; John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, chapter 3

Alison McIntyre, “Compatibilists Could Have Done Otherwise: Responsibility and Negative Agency”

John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, chapter 5

2/12: Responsibility for Omissions and the Question of Symmetry with Actions (Part II)

Carolina Sartorio, “A New Asymmetry Between Actions and Omissions”

Randolph Clarke, *Omissions*, chapters 5 and 6

Matthew Talbert, “Praise and Prevention” (excerpt)

2/19: Responsibility for Omissions and Consequences and Actual Causal Sequence Views

Harry Frankfurt, “Some Thoughts Concerning PAP”

Ned Hall, “The Intrinsic Character of Causation”

Carolina Sartorio, *Causation and Free Will* (manuscript, chapters 1 and 2)

*Further Reading:* Sartorio, *Causation and Free Will*, chapter 4 or Sartorio, “Sensitivity to Reasons and Actual Sequences”

2/26: Responsibility for Unwitting Omissions and Negligence (Part I)

George Sher, *Who Knew?*, chapter 2

Lawrence Alexander and Kimberly Ferzan, *Crime and Culpability*, chapter 3

Michael Zimmerman, “Negligence and Moral Responsibility”

3/5: Responsibility for Unwitting Omissions and Negligence (Part II)

Gideon Rosen, “Skepticism about Moral Responsibility”

William Fitzpatrick, “Moral Responsibility and Normative Ignorance: Answering a New Skeptical Challenge”

George Sher, *Who Knew?* chapters 6, 7 and 9

*Further Reading:* Dana Nelkin, “Review of *Who Knew?*”; Holly Smith, “Culpable Ignorance”

and “Non-Tracing Cases of Culpable Ignorance”; Matthew Talbert, “Unwitting Wrongdoers and the Role of Moral Disagreement in Blame”

### 3/12: Responsibility for Unwitting Omissions and Negligence (Part III)

Heidi Hurd and Michael Moore, “Punishing the Awkward, the Stupid, the Selfish, and the Weak: The Culpability of Negligence”

Randolph Clarke, *Omissions*, chapter 7

### **Requirements**

- One short (2-3 page) paper per week, starting in the second week and ending in the eighth. Each paper must be sent as an e-mail attachment to Sam and Dana by 5pm on the day before the seminar in which the relevant issues will be discussed. Your paper should, if at all possible, do one of the following: (i) provide a logical reconstruction of a difficult argument to be found in a relevant text, (ii) criticize the validity or soundness of an argument in a relevant text, (iii) provide a counter-example to a central claim made in a relevant text, or (iv) articulate and defend an interpretation or philosophical position that competes with those found in the relevant texts. If you can’t find a way to do one of (i)-(iv), discuss your plans for the paper with one of us beforehand. We will calculate your grade based on the grades of your five best papers. (This means that you can turn in all seven and we will drop the lowest two grades, or you can simply turn in five).
- One long (15-20 page) term paper sent by email attachment to Sam and Dana, due Thursday, March 20 preceded by a prospectus (also emailed to Sam and Dana) due March 6.
  - The long paper must address positions and/or arguments to be found in the course readings or in readings previously approved by one of us on the basis of the prospectus.
  - The prospectus (2-3 pages) will include an articulation of your paper’s main thesis, the paper’s rough structure, along with a summary of some of the arguments you will be planning to use in support of the main thesis, and a bibliography.
  - Please note that we will not give out an incomplete grade unless you have a valid excuse for not being able to complete your paper by the deadline.
- One 15 minute in-class presentation. The purpose of the presentation is to introduce the main issues/problems/arguments to be discussed in seminar that day, raising some of your own questions/comments/criticisms along the way or at the end. The presentation may be related to the short paper, though the short paper (given its length) should be less introductory and more focused. You should not simply read your presentation, though you may speak your way through a handout. A handout is recommended, though not mandatory.

- Attendance is required at every meeting, unless a valid excuse is communicated to one of us in a timely manner (if possible, ahead of time).
- Your grade will be based on the quality of your papers (70% for the term paper, 15% for the short papers), your presentation (10%), and your participation in seminar (5%).