

On the Causal Power of Absences

By Achille C. Varzi, Columbia University

I find it incredible that philosophers may think absences have causal powers. Surely Sartre didn't *see* the absence of Pierre, when he arrived late for his appointment. Surely it wasn't the absence of oxygen that *killed* the trapped miners. And surely it's not the absence of content that made everyone blink at Tyron Goldschmidt's paper in *Dialectica*. Those are just opaque ways of reporting what truly happened, which only involved the on-site participants. At least, that is what they are unless we take absences, too, to be things that can be genuinely present—a bad move. Whether or not we agree that having powers is a necessary condition for being, it surely is sufficient. That being said, sometimes the challenge to posit absences is serious. So-called causation by omission is a good case in point, as when we say that A's failure to turn off the gas caused the explosion, or that A's omitting the cutlery from the wedding list was the cause of B's complaint. Are we to deny that sometimes we are causally responsible for our "positive acts" as well as for our "negative acts" (Bentham)? Isn't it true that we may cause harm or offense not only by our "doings" but also by our "inaction" (Mill)? More generally, how can we uphold to the traditional view that the "omission of good" is as reprehensible as the "commission of evil" (Plutarch), if omissions are a mere *façon de parler*? The answer, I argue, trades on two distinct but related ideas. First, there is the idea that in some cases a negative event (omitting the cutlery) just *is* an ordinary, positive event (drawing up such and such a list, with no cutlery); it is a positive event under a negative description. Second, I elaborate on Helen Beebe's idea that not all causal explanations are reports of causation. Perhaps there is no positive event corresponding to the description 'A's failure to turn off the gas'. If so, then the relevant causal statement is just false. But the corresponding causal explanation—that there was an explosion because A didn't turn off the gas—may nonetheless be true. And if that explanation is true, and adequate, it may well be all we need to blame A for what happened.