

Public Abstract

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It is common and quite intuitive to regard absences as causes. We often judge that someone's failure to act causes another event to happen, and we often judge that neglect is the cause of many harms. But our language belies a deep problem. Failures to act and instances of neglect are not actions. For example, a parent may neglect her child and cause the child harm, but it wasn't what the parent did that matters. It was what the parent didn't do that matters.

Extant philosophical accounts of causation struggle to make sense of our intuitive causal judgments concerning absences. Causation is standardly thought to be a relation between cause and effect. But in the previous example, the harm to the child is not causally related to the what the parent was doing --- she may have been reading a book --- the harm seems to be related to what the parent wasn't doing. But something cannot be related to nothing.

I argue that the philosophical problem of absences as causes issues from a misunderstanding of absences. If we understand sentences like, 'the absence of x caused y' to require 'the absence of x' to exist, then the case for absences as causes is a non-starter. (After all, absences, by hypothesis, don't exist.) On my account, causal claims involving absences are true and express genuine causal relations, without requiring the incoherent claim that such absences 'exist.'