

Agency, Teleological Control and Robust Causation

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Extending the theory: responsibility for effects of omissions

Unlike outcomes that are the result of actions, outcomes that result from omissions do not usually involve teleological control. Nevertheless, agents are often held responsible for omissions, say, a guard who fails to stop a theft due to inattention or a friend who fails to pick you from the airport due to him playing video games. Moreover, in omissions, more than in actions, agents appear to have reduced responsibility as a result of internal (psychological) factors. To illustrate this, consider two persons, James and Maria, who both promised to pick you from the airport (on separate occasions) but failed to show up. While with James, this happened because he was absorbed in video games, with Maria this happens because she suffers from depression. It appears here that we will judge James more than Maria responsible for your being left stranded at the airport. Furthermore, Maria's degree of responsibility seems to gradually decrease with her level of depression¹. Giving a full account of responsibility assignments in such cases would require extensive discussion. Nevertheless, I will provide a sketch of how the teleological control theory can in principle be developed to account for assignments of degrees of responsibility in effects of omissions.

The first point is that need to consider the type of intervention (changes to background circumstances) that we are allowed to make when we probe robustness².

1 Fischer maintains that moral responsibility is a threshold phenomenon and that only assignments of praise and blame are subject to gradation. By contrast, I assume that the moral responsibility, in such scenarios, are graded (see also Coates & Svenson, 2013 and numerous experimental studies). Interestingly, variation of the degree of responsibility with psychological factors (say, depression) appears to characterize failures but not successful actions. For example, James and Maria would appear to be equally responsible for taking you from the airport, had they shown up, even though Maria had to struggle with her depression, though Maria would deserve more praise.

2 Following Woodward, I suggest that a central factor is the set of beliefs that the agent acts on (this makes the degree of robustness dependent in an important way on the mindset of the agent).

Consider the failing guard. Two complementary and equally valid frames can be considered. From a neutral (objective) perspective, the guard's omission is less robust in its outcome than that of the thief, contributing to the judgment that the thief has a higher degree of responsibility for the theft due to his intention, which is teleologically directed to the theft³. From the neutral perspective, in an omission caused by negligence, the agent is neither the only nor the major source of the effect. Thus, the guard's responsibility is at least shared with the thief who plays the more central (robust) role. However, from the perspective of the security company employing the guard, the situation differs. The judgment of the company (thus the contract offered to the guard) starts from the premise that an effective theft will be attempted. This, in turn, sets a strong constraint on the possible worlds we should examine to measure robustness – worlds in which a theft will be attempted. From this perspective, the omission becomes a robust cause for the theft's success.⁴

Finally, consider the reduced responsibility for Maria's failure as a result of her depression. A simple way to account for the difference between her and James is to focus on the teleological control of the actions that the agents did instead. While James played video games, Maria was passively shifting between various random activities (or just resting) due to her depression. Thus James, unlike Maria, displayed teleological control aimed towards a competing goal, which is associated with his deep-self (or character; Sripada, 2015). For Maria, the passive shifting between activities is not a manifestation of teleological control in the service of a competing goal. Rather the depression diminishes the stability of her attractor state mediating her intentional plan, allowing distracting thoughts to interfere. Furthermore, the stronger her depression, the more we have ground to believe that the priority she gave to the goal she failed to achieve was high, reducing the responsibility judgment for her failure.

³ In most worlds similar to the actual one (in which the guard failed to attend) no theft happens.

⁴ This is consistent with the legal context in which a person is responsible for an omission when she had a prior duty towards someone, which the omission violated.