

# When an Action is an Intentional Omission

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**Abstract.** I use the normative theory of intentional omissions to argue that ordinary uses of ‘ $\alpha$   $\phi$ s intentionally’ are systematically ambiguous. There are occasions where they might be used to attribute intentional omissions rather than intentional actions. One can thus explain a number of puzzles that have been taken to be puzzles about the concept of intentional action: the Knobe effect, the connection between foresight and intentionality (in legal contexts), the Butler problem, the compatibility of moral luck with intentionality, the requirement of ability to do otherwise, the intentionality of akrasia.

**Keywords:** ability to do otherwise, akrasia, Butler problem, foresight, Frankfurt-type cases, intention, intentional action, intentional omission, knowledge, Knobe effect, luck

## 1 Introduction

We do some things intentionally. Sometimes we also intentionally fail to do things. It is natural to think that in the former case we are speaking of intentional actions, while in the latter of intentional omissions. Whether or not omissions are actions, it is natural to think that the concept of intentionality is the same.

In this paper, I will sketch how to use the normative theory of intentional omissions to explain a number of puzzles about the concept of intentional action. In §4.1, I show how to explain the so-called Knobe effect (according to which people’s attributions of intentional action depend on normative context). In §4.2, I sketch how this explanation can be extended to account for the connection between foresight and intentionality (in legal contexts). In §4.3, I explain the so-called Butler problem. In §4.4, I show how certain types of moral luck are compatible with intentionality. I also show how those types of cases are the flip-side of Frankfurt-type cases. The account can further explain the intentionality of akrasia (§4.5).

I should make clear that the paper does not pretend to offer a fully worked out argument for any of the claims I make. I believe that the main idea is worth advertising and worth defending, though a proper defense will need to be done on another occasion.

## 2 The Normative Account of Omission

On the normative account of intentional omission ([19], [23], [51, 52], [56], cf. also [55], [58]):

- (O)  $\alpha$  intentionally omits to  $\varphi$  if and only if (a)  $\alpha$  should  $\varphi$  (e.g.  $\alpha$  has a duty to  $\varphi$ , it is reasonable to expect of  $\alpha$  that  $\alpha$   $\varphi$ ), (b)  $\alpha$  is able to  $\varphi$ , (c) it is not the case that  $\alpha$   $\varphi$ s, and (d)  $\alpha$  is aware of (a), (b), (c).

Interestingly, the normative account of intentional omission has often been thought to require only the agent's awareness (true belief) or knowledge about the conditions of the omission (see [23], [50, 51, 52], [55], cf. [9], [47, 48]). I have argued elsewhere [44, 45] that there are good reasons for the normative theorist to require knowledge and not intention for the intentionality of the omission. This is of course not to say that some intentional omissions may not be accompanied by intentions not to do what one omits to do. The point is, however, that there are cases of intentional omissions where the agent does not have any relevant intention.

I will not argue for the normative account of intentional omissions. There are many problems that the account needs to sort out. The notion of ability, for example, is so unclear that one may reject any account that does not spell it out further ([4], [10], [14]). McGrath [33], for example, thinks that the notion of reasonableness is hopelessly confused (cf. [4], [19], [50, 51, 52]). She is right that it is confused, though not hopelessly so [40, 43]. In any case, much the same could be said about the concept of reasons prior to a theoretical treatment.

Let me mention and briefly respond to one problem.<sup>1</sup> Suppose that Chris tries to do something that he can and should do but fails to do it. In such a situation, clearly the addition of Chris' knowledge that he failed what he could and should have done does not amount to making the failure intentional. There are at least two ways to respond. One would be to simply exclude such cases by the addition of a further condition (O-e) that the agent did not try to  $\varphi$ . There are legal codes (for example, the Polish criminal code) where this is done almost explicitly. Aside from the requirement of knowledge (foreseeability) one requires acquiescence to the foreseen failure.<sup>2</sup> There is a legal debate what acquiescence means. On some interpretations, it is some sort of volitional state. On others, it simply means that the agent did not try (or did not try reasonably hard enough) to fulfill the duty.

On the other hand, there are surely cases of intentional omissions to fulfill the duty to  $\varphi$  where the agent tried to  $\varphi$ . I tried to file the taxes, I started filling out the forms. I just did not complete or send them out in the end. Perhaps I lied on the couch all day and could not put down a novel I was reading. I knew I would miss the deadline if I don't put it to a side. It seems to me that in such a case I intentionally omitted to file the taxes after all even though I may have tried to file them. However, suppose that the reason why I did not send out the tax forms in the end is that as I started to calcu-

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank one of the reviewers for pointing it out.

<sup>2</sup> "A prohibited act is committed intentionally, if the agent has the intention of committing it, i.e. either wants to commit it or, having foreseen the possibility of committing it, acquiesces to such a possibility." (Kodeks Karny Art. 9. §1, my translation)

late the taxes I owe, I suffered a cardiac arrest and was taken to the hospital. I knew all along that I am missing the deadline, which only aggravated my state. In this case, however, it is arguable that I was unable to fulfill the duty (i.e. that condition (O-b) was not satisfied). One suspicion that a normative theorist may harbor about cases of failed tryings is that such failures indicate that the condition of ability may not have been satisfied after all. This would, however, demand a careful investigation of the concept of ability.

Let me stop here and bag all the problems for the normative account of intentional omissions. I acknowledge that the bag exists. The ideas I put forward depend on an appropriate way of sorting out the problems in the bag. I want to argue, however, that the normative theory of intentional omissions promises to offer results so interesting that they make it worthwhile taking another look at the problems in the bag in the hope of solving them.

Before proceeding it will be useful to emphasize that there is no agreement on the concept of intentional action [28]. For my purposes here, we can think that

- (I)  $\alpha$  performed an intentional action of  $\phi$ ing just case: (a)  $\alpha \phi$ ed, (b)  $\alpha$  was able to  $\phi$  (had requisite skills, cf. [24], [34]), (c)  $\alpha$  intended to  $\phi$  (or to do something closely related, see [12]), and (d)  $\alpha \phi$ ed because of the intention (cf. [18], [21, 22], [57]).

If we accept (O) and (I) then the intentionality of an omission is fundamentally different from the intentionality of an action. In intentional action, we execute our own commitments, the commitments we have undertaken in intending to do something [11, 12]. In intentional omission, we fail to act on commitments we acknowledge, paradigmatically commitments placed on us by others in their normative expectations of us [11], [40], [42, 43].

### 3 Can an Action Be an Intentional Omission?

There are many concepts of omissions. Some are ontological: e.g. Clarke [15, 16, 17] thinks of omissions as absences of actions. At least some omissions are plausibly thought of as absences of events. John's failure to water plants can be argued not to be identical to the plant's wilting.<sup>3</sup> If one accepts the general claim that omissions are not events then an action can never be an omission. The normative concept of omission is not an ontological concept, however. To say that an agent omitted to do something is to say that she failed to do what she should have done. Even if there is a legitimate ontological concept of omissions that cannot be applied to events, this is compatible with the fact that the normative concept of omission can be applied to events.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One may argue that the omission is actually John's action of doing something else. This is a line one can push in some cases but not so obviously in others. Is John's omission to come to a meeting identical to his (presumably nonaction) of oversleeping? In any event, I do not wish to defend any view here. My concern is with a non-ontological notion of omission.

<sup>4</sup> One may argue that all omissions are actions and that thus intentional omissions will not be different from intentional actions. (I thank another reviewer for pushing this.) The premise

In fact, I want to show that on the normative theory of intentional omissions, some actions ( $\phi$ ings) can be described as the agent's intentional omissions. Consider a negative duty, a duty not to  $\phi$ . It is possible to fail to do what is required by a negative duty. In general, we can apply the conditions of (O) to such a case in the following way.  $\alpha$  intentionally omits not to  $\phi$  just in case: (a)  $\alpha$  should not  $\phi$ , (b)  $\alpha$  is able not to  $\phi$ , (c)  $\alpha$   $\phi$ s (and so fails not to  $\phi$ ), and (d)  $\alpha$  is aware of (a), (b), (c).

One may have a number of reservations here. Is it at all possible to omit not to do something? If one accepts the normative theory of omissions, there is *prima facie* no reason why it should not be possible. The theory *can* be applied to such a case. This is not to say, however, that we go about attributing omissions not to  $\phi$  to one another (not explicitly at any rate).

In fact, there are very good reasons why such descriptions will likely not be found in natural languages (not just English). For these descriptions contain a double negation. One of the negations is present in the content of the negative duty while the other is part and parcel of the concept of omission (to omit to  $\phi$  is not to  $\phi$  after all). Indeed, given the general linguistic pressures to cancel double negations,<sup>5</sup> it might be argued that when  $\alpha$  intentionally omits not to  $\phi$ ,  $\alpha$  in fact intentionally  $\phi$ s. Here is a simple argument (I have dubbed it  $\Gamma$ ) that shows how to do so.

- (1)  $\alpha$  intentionally omits not to  $\phi$ . So:
- (2) what  $\alpha$  intentionally does not do is not to  $\phi$ . So:
- (3)  $\alpha$  intentionally does not not  $\phi$ . So:
- (4)  $\alpha$  intentionally  $\phi$ s.

The argument relies on seemingly intuitive principles:

- ( $\Gamma$ 1) If  $\alpha$  intentionally omits (not) to  $\phi$  then  $\alpha$  intentionally does not (not-)  $\phi$ .
- ( $\Gamma$ 2) If  $\alpha$  intentionally does not not- $\phi$  then  $\alpha$  intentionally  $\phi$ s.

( $\Gamma$ 2) simply removes the awkward double negation. While ( $\Gamma$ 1) appears to be a special case of the claim that if  $\alpha$  omits to  $\phi$  then  $\alpha$  does not  $\phi$ , it is in fact problematic. If one takes the intention condition to be necessary for intentional action (I) while accepting the normative theory of intentional omissions (O), which requires only the satisfaction of the knowledge condition, then one has a reason to deny ( $\Gamma$ 1) [44].

If the account is accepted thus far, we reach the conclusion that ascriptions ' $\alpha$   $\phi$ s intentionally' *could* be systematically ambiguous. I will argue now that this theoretical possibility generated by the normative theory of intentional omission can actually cast light on a number of troubling phenomena. Philosophers of action have typically

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here is debatable but the conclusion does not follow. I believe that both actions and omissions are expressions of agency. It does not follow that the concept of intentional action and the concept of intentional omission are the same. A normativist could even restrict the concept of omission so that it applies only to actions (by making condition (O-c) agentive). Given such a restriction, all intentional omissions would be intentional actions, but it would still not be the case that all intention omissions to  $\phi$  were intentional actions of not  $\phi$ ing. This is because the intentional omissions to  $\phi$  could be intentional actions under a different description than that of 'not  $\phi$ ing' [6], [18], [44, 45]. See also footnote 6.

<sup>5</sup> Such pressures are present in most natural languages, even those that do tolerate and in fact demand double negatives in certain well-constrained grammatical contexts.

assumed those problems to be tied to intentional action. I will argue that they can be fruitfully thought of in terms of intentional omissions.

## 4 When $\alpha$ $\phi$ s intentionally: Intentional Action or Intentional Omission?

### 4.1 The Knobe Effect

In Knobe's classic study [30], people were presented with the harm vignette:

The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, "We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, **but** it will also **harm** the environment."

The chairman of the board answered, "I don't care at all about **harming** the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let's start the new program.

They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was **harmed**."

The subjects were supposed to say how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the claim that the chairman intentionally harmed the environment. Most subjects (82%) agreed with it:

(A) The chairman harms the environment intentionally.

Knobe presented an alternative version of the story to other subjects, which differed from the original only in that the word 'help' was put in place of 'harm' in the three marked places and in that 'and' was substituted for 'but'. Most people (77%) who read the help vignette were inclined to disagree with the claim that the chairman intentionally helped the environment:

(~B) It is not the case that the chairman helps the environment intentionally.

The asymmetry in intentional action attributions is surprising because the two cases seem to be fully symmetrical with regard to the conditions that have been taken to be relevant in orthodox theories of intentional action (I). The chairman seems to be in exactly the same state of mind in both cases, the way in which the state of mind relates to the ensuing events and the ultimate result (the harming/helping the environment) again does not seem to be different. The most striking difference between the cases concerns the normative context. Since such features of the normative context have been largely thought to be irrelevant to the orthodox notion of intentional action, the results are puzzling, cf. [31].

However, the orthodox theories of intentional action (I), which require an intention (or more generally a pro-attitude) toward the performed action can explain why people are inclined to assert (~B). The chairman neither intends nor wants to help the environment. Indeed, when people are asked to explain why they assert (~B), they do cite precisely the fact that the chairman did not intend or did not want to help the environment [38]. The orthodox theories of intentional action are thus capable of explaining one side of the puzzle. They fail in explaining why people are inclined to assert (A). In fact, when people are asked why they hold (A), they tend to cite the fact that the chairman knew the environment would be harmed [38], cf. [7, 8], [46].

I have argued [44, 45, 46] that one can accept what I have called the omissions account, which conjoins the orthodox theory of intentional action and the normative theory of intentional omission. The normative theory of omission provides a natural explanation of the harm case in the Knobe effect. If we look for intentional omissions in Knobe's cases, we will find one in the harm case: the chairman commits an intentional omission not to harm the environment. Presumably, he has a duty not to harm the environment (Oa). It is within his power not to harm the environment (Ob), for it is within his power not to start the program. He does harm the environment (Oc), i.e. fails to do the duty.<sup>6</sup> His omission is intentional because he *knows* all of this (Od).<sup>7</sup> Thus:

- (C) The chairman intentionally omits (to do his duty) not to harm the environment.

As argued (§3), there are reasons to think that the problematic intentional action attribution (A) is a disguised form of the intentional omission attribution (C). We can use argument form  $\Gamma$  to derive (A) from (C). Since the chairman intentionally omits (to do his duty) not to harm the environment (C), what he intentionally does not do is not to harm the environment. In other words, he intentionally does not not-harm the environment. When we cancel the awkward double negation, we obtain the claim that he intentionally harms the environment (A).

However, it would be erroneous to think that in assenting to the claim that the chairman intentionally harmed the environment, people attribute an intentional action to the chairman. The concept of intentionality is different. The intentionality of action requires an intention or pro-attitude (I), while the intentionality of omissions requires knowledge (O)<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, as already mentioned, when people are asked why they claim that the chairman intentionally harmed the environment they appeal to the fact that the chairman knew that the environment would be harmed [38]. This is just what we would expect if the attribution of intentional harming were an intentional omission rather than an intentional action.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that one can consistently think that he harms the environment without thinking that he performs an intentional action of harming the environment. He does something else intentionally, i.e. he intentionally starts the program, which causes the environment to be harmed.

<sup>7</sup> One might worry that the story does not tell us that the chairman knows that he should not harm the environment (I thank one reviewer for noting this). This point can be granted, though it is natural to think of such knowledge as part of common knowledge. At any rate, I claim that those people who hold that the chairman intentionally harmed the environment (and not all do [38], cf. [28]), believe that he had the requisite knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> One may object that knowledge suffices only for the claim that the agent knowingly  $\phi$ ed, but not for the claim that he  $\phi$ ed intentionally. I have argued that there are reasons to think that in the case of omissions, their intentionality is tantamount to their being done knowingly [44, 45]. I have also shown [44] how to explain interesting empirical results regarding the attributions of 'knowingly' and 'intentionally' in these contexts (cf. [1, 2, 3], [29, 30], [38]).

## 4.2 Intentionality, Intention, and Foresight: Oblique Intention

The results reached above can be extended to explain quite generally why foresight (without intention) is sufficient for intentionality in some cases [9], [24], [26]. In cases where the agent should not  $\phi$ , is able not to  $\phi$ , does  $\phi$  having foreseen it, the agent commits an intentional omission not to  $\phi$ . The resultant  $\phi$ ing is intentional but it need not be intentional under the description “ $\alpha$  performed an intentional action of  $\phi$ ing” but rather under the description “ $\alpha$  committed an intentional omission not to  $\phi$ .”

Note too that the connection between intentionality and foresight is likely to be very common in law. This is because lawyers are mostly concerned with negative duties designed to prevent harm. Failure to abide by those duties will be intentional as long as the knowledge condition is satisfied.<sup>9</sup> Legal theorists sometimes use the construct “oblique intention” to cover such cases. If intentional omissions are understood properly, the motivation for introducing oblique intentions will be removed, cf. [12].

## 4.3 The Butler Problem

Butler [13] imagines Brown hoping to throw a six and doing so. We would not say that she did so intentionally (not if she uses regular dice). However, suppose that Brown uses a revolver with a six-bullet chamber, in which she put only one bullet and then randomly spun it. If she aims the gun at Smith hoping to kill him and does succeed, we *would* say that she killed Smith intentionally. We are inclined to say:

- (D) Brown kills Smith intentionally.
- ( $\sim$ E) It is not the case that Brown throws a six intentionally.

Once again this is surprising. Luck has been thought to exclude intentionality ([24], [34]). The chanciness of a dice roll or of a bullet chamber spinning *prima facie* speaks against attributing an intentional action to Brown whether in the morally loaded or neutral case.

When we look at the cases in search for intentional omissions, we will find that we can ascribe an intentional omission to Brown in the killing case:

- (F) Brown intentionally omits not to kill Smith.

All of the conditions in (O) are satisfied: (a) Brown has the duty not to kill Smith, (b) it is within her power not to kill Smith (it suffices that she not fire or touch the gun), (c) she does kill Smith (again one need not think that she kills Smith intentionally; she presses the trigger intentionally, which causes the death of Smith), (d) she is aware of all of this.

Once again we can use  $\Gamma$  to transform (F) into (D). Since Brown intentionally omits not to kill Smith (F), she intentionally does not not-kill Smith. When we cancel the awkward double negation, we obtain the result that she intentionally kills Smith. We thus arrive at the claim we are intuitively inclined to give (D). Because there are

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there are a number of alternative philosophical theories of intentional action that embody the idea that foreseen but unintended consequences of intentional action are brought about intentionally (cf. [12], [21], [57]). Those theories typically have problems with accounting for Knobe’s help scenario.

reasons to doubt the legitimacy of deriving (D) from (F), we have a solution to the Butler problem ( $\sim D$ ,  $\sim E$ , F), but at the same time an explanation of the folk inclination to hold (D).

As Lowe [32] was the first to predict [35], if the throwing of a six were to have the consequence of Smith's dying (e.g. when a bomb will explode when Brown throws a six, of which she is aware), then people will tend to say that Brown intentionally killed Smith (in fact 87.5% of people claim so [36, 37]). On the above account, it is also rational (pace (O)) to claim that Brown intentionally omitted not to throw a six, though it is not rational (pace (I)) to claim that she performed an intentional action of throwing a six. If ' $\alpha$   $\phi$ s intentionally' is ambiguous in the way I suggest that it is, then one would expect people to be torn between assenting to the claim "Brown intentionally threw a six" (as a claim about the intentional omission not to throw a six) and denying<sup>10</sup> it (as a claim about the intentional action of throwing a six). Indeed, 55% people do claim that Brown intentionally threw a six in a Lowe-type case [36, 37].

#### 4.4 Dual Powers, Moral Luck, Frankfurt-Type Cases

Philosophers have sometimes thought that intentional action requires dual powers: we need to be able to do what we do and we need to be able to do otherwise [5, 20]. The notion of power or ability is extremely problematic. For the purposes of argument (as a first approximation), let me understand ability to  $\phi$  in terms of reliability to  $\phi$ . I am able (not) to  $\phi$  if I am reliable in fulfilling the task (not) to  $\phi$ .

For most ordinary action-types we have dual powers. I am able to raise an arm (I'm reliable in fulfilling the task to raise the arm) as well as I am able not to raise the arm (I'm reliable in fulfilling the task not to raise the arm). But other combinations are possible. Consider someone at early stages of Parkinson's disease, who cannot control the tremor of his hands. Such a person is no longer reliable in performing many manual tasks, such as pressing a certain button. The person will occasionally hit it but not reliably. In the wanted sense, he is unable to hit the button. However, he may very well be able not to hit the button. (We would think that he is unsuited for the job of a traffic controller, which requires precise button pressing, but that he is perfectly suited for the job of a night guard in an aquarium, which involves the duty *not to* press buttons that initiate the removal of water from the tanks, for example.)

Intentional action has been thought to require the agent's ability, skill, reliability to  $\phi$  [24], [34]. It is fruitful to think that the ability to do otherwise is a necessary condition of intentional omission, not of intentional action. We should observe that, on the normative theory, intentional omission requires the ability to do otherwise. An intentional omission to  $\phi$  (which is a not  $\phi$ ing after all) requires the ability to  $\phi$  (i.e. to do other than what one does). An intentional omission not to  $\phi$  (which is a  $\phi$ ing) requires the ability not to  $\phi$  (i.e. to do other than what one does). John intentionally omits to feed a cat only if John does not feed it but was able to feed it (i.e. was able to do otherwise). The chairman intentionally omits not to harm the environment only if he does

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<sup>10</sup> In a regular game of dice with no grave consequences attached, 90% of people deny the claim that an agent intentionally throws a six [36, 37].



harm the environment and he was able not to harm the environment (i.e. was able to do otherwise).

We have seen reasons to think that when we use the form of words ‘ $\alpha$   $\phi$ s intentionally’ we may have in mind that  $\alpha$  performed the intentional action of  $\phi$ ing or that  $\alpha$  committed the intentional omission not to  $\phi$ . In cases where the agent has dual powers, depending on whether other conditions of (I) and (O) are fulfilled, the agent may have performed an intentional action or committed an intentional omission or both. If the agent is not able to  $\phi$  but does as a matter of luck  $\phi$  (Butler-type cases), then as long as he is able not to  $\phi$  (and the other conditions of (O) are satisfied), the ascription of intentional  $\phi$ ing is an ascription of an intentional omission not to  $\phi$ . This shows in a general way how luck is compatible with intentionality.

	(Dual powers cases)	(Butler cases)	(Frankfurt cases)
“ $\alpha$ $\phi$ s intentionally”	intentional action intentional omission	intentional omission	intentional action
$\alpha$ is able to $\phi$	✓	✗	✓
$\alpha$ is able not to $\phi$	✓	✓	✗

The third possibility of ascribing intentional  $\phi$ ing involves cases where the agent is able to  $\phi$  but is not able to do otherwise. Such cases have been made famous by Frankfurt [20] who envisaged a counterfactual intervener taking over control over the course of events had the agent decided to do other than he does. The fact that the agent is unable to do otherwise shows at most that she cannot commit an intentional omission. However, if the other conditions of (I) are satisfied, she may well perform an intentional action.

If one understands the dual nature of intentionality, one will see that the connection between responsibility and intentionality is doubly secured, so to speak. It is relatively immune to luck (Butler cases) and to the lack of ability to do otherwise (Frankfurt cases).

#### 4.5 Akrasia

The normative account of intentional omission can also answer the question why akratic behavior is intentional. Akrasia can be conceptualized in various ways, but one way to capture its core is to think that it involves a failure to do carry out the commitment that one has undertaken whether in intending to do something or in judging that doing something would be the rational thing for one to do. The paradigmatic cases of omissions are cases of failures to do what is required by an external commitment typically placed by another agent. But clearly it is also possible to omit to do what is required by one’s own commitment (the commitment engendered in one’s intending to do something). This is what happens in akrasia.

The normative theory of intentional omission does not aim to answer all questions about akrasia but it can answer why akratic action is intentional without the agent’s having an intention to do what she does. If akratic behavior is covered by the intentionality of omission then all that is required is the agent’s *knowledge* of what she is

required to do (she knows what she intends), of the fact that she is able to do what she is required to do (arguably she could not intend to do it unless she believed that she is able to do it). What is further required is her knowledge that she does not do what she resolved to do.

## 5 The Social Nature of Intentionality

I have argued that the normative theory of intentional omission shows a great deal of promise in explaining puzzling phenomena usually taken to lie within the purview of theories of intentional action.

It might be thought that there is something disconcerting about accepting such different accounts of intentional action (I) and of intentional omission (O). But this duality is not as disconcerting as one might initially think [27], [45]. Rather it reveals the fact that agentic concepts are at roots social concepts [25], [42, 43], [53, 54]. The normative concept of omission is a social concept *par excellence*. It embodies sensitivity to others and their legitimate normative claims and expectations of the agent. In intentional omission, we fail to act on commitments we acknowledge, paradigmatically commitments placed on us by others in their normative expectations of us. By contrast, intentional action involves the execution of the agent's own commitment (the intention). Agentic concepts thus involve both types of commitments: external commitments (normative expectations) as well as internal commitments (intentions) [11, 12], [44, 45, 42, 44]. What appears to be an unwelcome duality is rather a reflection of the fact that agency is not just individual (whether in the singular "I" or the plural "we" sense) but also interpersonal – it exhibits what Brandom [11] calls the I-Thou structure [39, 41]. As agents, we are thrown into the social world, which lays a variety of claims on us. We need to build ourselves as agents against such background.

I have claimed that what appears to be the bastion of individualism [39, 41, 49] in philosophy of action, viz. the concept of intentional action, should be buttressed by the nonindividualist concept of intentional omission. To fully account for our uses of 'α φs intentionally', we need to invoke not just the concept of intentional action but also the normative – and, at roots, social and interpersonal – concept of intentional omission.

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