Why Schaffer's solution to the problem of absence causation fails[1]

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> Never shall this thought prevail, that not-being is [causal]:
> Nay: keep your mind from this path of investigation.
> (Adapted from Parmenides)

1. Moore's ontological argument for *No Absences*

Michael Moore's view of causation in *Causation and Responsibility* (Oxford University Press 2009) is shaped by two assumptions:

Essential Relationality: Causation is a dyadic relation between a cause and an effect.

Causal Realism: Causation is something 'in' the world.

Essential Relationality and *Causal Realism* together imply that causal relata are part of the (mind-independent) world, and since the world is for Moore the totality of spatio-temporal particulars, it follows that causal relata must be spatio-temporal particulars. Moreover, Moore in effect endorses Parmenides' dunning words about non-being: "[T]here is the hard-to-dispute truth of general ontology: there are no negative properties, no negative events, and no negative states of affairs" (Moore 2009, 460). Moore concludes from this hard-to-dispute truth of general ontology that non-existent spatio-temporal particulars – "absences", including absent actions ("omissions") – are unfit for the role of causal relata: "Absences, thus, cannot stand in the singular causal relation … for the simple reason that they are not particulars" (ibid.). With other words, never shall this thought prevail, that not-being is *causal*. In Schaffer's words:

No Absences: Absences cannot serve as causes or effects.

Moore's ontological argument for *No Absences* comes down to this: Given *Essential Relationality* and *Causal Realism*, only spatio-temporal particulars can play the role of causal relata. But absences are not spatio-temporal particulars. It follows that absences cannot play the role of causal relata, and causal sentences[2] that say or imply otherwise cannot be true.

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[1] I am grateful to Jonathan Schaffer and Michael Moore for helpful discussions and comments.
[2] By a "causal sentence" I mean in this paper a sentence of the form "a causes b" which can be used to report an instance of causation.

2. A semantic argument for *No Absences*

The last remark suggests that Moore's ontological argument for *No Absences* can be supplemented with a semantic argument that exploits the intrinsic connection between truth and reference. If, as *Essential Relationality* has it, causation is a dyadic relation causal sentences have the logical form "a causes b", where "a" and "b" refer to causal relata. For a causal sentence "a causes b" to be true, both singular terms "a" and "b" have to refer. They cannot be empty since truth presupposes reference, and a singular term's lack a reference is a semantic defect that prevents any sentence containing it from being true. Conversely, if "a causes b" is true, then the two existential conclusions "There is something that causes b" and "There is something that is caused by a" are true, too. These inferences are licensed by the logical rule of existential instantiation. Following Moore's (not too happy) terminological suggestion that causal sentences that contain at least one empty singular term are about "absences", we can call causal sentences that suffer from this semantic defect "causal *absence* sentences".[3]

Causal absence sentences with this semantic defect are necessarily untrue since they fail to fulfill the existential presuppositions of truth (and falsity, for that matter). This gives us another argument for *No Absences*. For, the hard-to-dispute semantic truth that true causal sentences presuppose that their singular terms refer is the semantic counterpart of Moore's hard-to-dispute ontological truth that the being of causation presupposes the being of causal relata, from which Moore infers the truth of *No Absences*.

3. A logical argument for *No Absences*

Further support for *No Absences* comes from the philosophy of logic. What makes Moore's hard-to-dispute truth of general ontology so hard to dispute is not only that there are no negative particulars, but that there cannot be – at least not if we accept modern logic's standard account of negation as a truth-function. On the truth-functional account, what is negated – the object of negation – is always and exclusively something true or false, a proposition. At the linguistic level, the "not" of or-

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[3] "Not too happy" because "about" is a treacherous little word in this context. We have to keep firmly in mind that sentences with empty singular terms are not "about" anything in the way that sentences with referring singulars terms may be said to be about something.

dinary English is a truth-functional negation operator that applies only and exclusively to expressions of true or false propositions, i. e. (assertoric) *sentences*. It is best read as the sentential negator "it is not the case that … ". The gap "…" indicates a place-holder for a complete sentence "p". It follows that "it is not the case that *a is F*" is grammatical and meaningful, but any attempt to close the gap with a sub-sentential expression – be it a singular term (as in "it is not the case that *a*") or a predicate (as in "it is not the case that *F*") – produces ungrammatical nonsense. At the ontological level this means that only propositions can be said to be negative in the sense of having the form "non-p". Talk of negative particulars ("non-a's") or negative properties ("non-F's") is either reducible to talk about negative propositions or it is nonsensical. Only truths and falsities can be negative, but truths and falsities are not particulars, and *a fortiori* they are not spatio-temporal particulars. However, if only propositions can be negative, and only spatio-temporal particulars can be causal, nothing negative can be causal and nothing causal can be negative. Hence *No Absences*.

4. What is at issue between Schaffer and Moore?

It seems, then, that Moore's *No Absences* is a hard-to-dispute truth for many reasons, ontological, semantic and logical. It therefore comes as a surprise that Jonathan Schaffer's declared aim in "Disconnection and Responsibility: On Moore's *Causation and Responsibility*" (this journal) is to dispute it: "I will dispute Moore's claim that … causation does not allow absences as causes or effects".[4] Rather than a hard-to-dispute truth, Schaffer suggests that *No Absences* is an evident falsehood "since it is obvious that absences can be causal" (4.). He alleges that *No Absences* is proven wrong in a practical way by the time-honored work of executioners: "*No Absences* … mishandles paradigm cases of causation, such as cases of beheadings. Decapitation can cause death, if anything can. Yet death by decapitation belongs to a class of cases … which involve absences as causal intermediaries" (2.).

In what sense do beheadings "involve" absences as causal intermediaries? Here is Schaffer's account of the causal mechanics of a beheading:

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[4] All references are to sections of Schaffer's "Disconnection and Responsibility: On Moore's Causation and Responsibility", forthcoming in Legal Theory, and available at http://www.jonathanschaffer.org/moore.pdf

"When Killer beheads Victim, consider the way in which this causes Victim to die. What happens is that the flow of oxygenated blood which was sustaining Victim's life has been disconnected. In other words, there is a step of prevention—the beheading causes the absence of blood flow to Victim's brain—followed by a step of omission—the absence of blood flow to Victim's brain causes death" (2.2).

This is how beheadings supposedly work: The swift severing of the head from the body causes an absence – a lack of blood in the brain – which in turn causes death. If this account were literally correct, beheadings would prove, *pace* Moore and *No Absences*, that absences can be effects as well as causes. The argument would go like this:

Beheadings can cause death – and usually do.
But beheadings involve absences as causal intermediaries, i. e. absences appear in them as causes and as effects.
Therefore, absences can serve as causes and as effects.
Therefore, *No Absences* is false.

However, despite Schaffer's repeated suggestions to the contrary, this is not his argument. It cannot be for the simple reason that Schaffer agrees with Moore about the truth of *No Absences*. It is important to note from the outset that, although Schaffer *says* that he wishes to dispute *No Absences*, and holds that beheadings and similar events are counterexamples to it, and that absences can be causal, he accepts that absences cannot stand in causal relations and that genuine causal absence claims are necessarily untrue. A clear indication of Schaffer's acceptance of these Moorean theses is his endorsement of what he calls Moore's "metaphysical premise … that only actual concrete entities (such as actual events) are eligible to serve as causal relata" (4.1). Schaffer says that this is "controversial, though still probably true".[5] However, if Moore's metaphysical premise is (probably) true, so is *No Absences*, since the former implies the latter. If only "actual concrete entities" – Moore's spatio-temporal particulars – can be causal relata, absences don't qualify. The truth of Moore's metaphysical premise guarantees the truth of *No Absences*, and Schaffer is committed to both.

But if *No Absences* is not controversial between Moore and Schaffer, what is? Far too late, towards the end of his paper, Schaffer admits that his disagreement

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[5] Ibid. – As his discussion in 4.3 makes clear, Schaffer's reason for thinking Moore's metaphysical premise to be controversial is not Moore's requirement that causation should relate existents, but that it relates "concrete", i. e. *spatio-temporal* existents. Schaffer thinks that the alternative view that causation is a relation between non-spatio-temporal or abstract entities, propositions in particular, to be more defensible than Moore seems to allow.

with Moore "over *No Absences* was partly verbal"; and that it "is best understood as a linguistic dispute" concerning *talk* about absences (4.2.4). More precisely, it is a semantic dispute about the meaning and reference of what Schaffer calls "omission claims". Schaffer's invocation of beheadings is not meant to cast doubt on *No Absences*. Rather, it is meant to highlight a fact about our ordinary way of thinking and speaking that needs to be reconciled with the truth of *No Absences*: That we often take what seem to be paradigmatic examples of causal absence sentences to be *true* – and sometimes rightly so. For example, a coroner asked to diagnose the cause of death of Charles I. of England, might say: "The beheading caused an absence of blood in Charles's brain, and the absence of blood caused him to die". This seems to be a causal sentence of the form "a caused b, and b caused c". The coroner's assertion aims at truth. It may be false, of course, since Charles may have in fact died, say, of a heart attack a second before the axe fell. But it is hard to believe that the coroner's diagnosis *could not be true* for the reason that absences cannot cause anything.

This, then, is the dilemma Schaffer thinks Moore's metaphysics of causation poses and fails to dispel. On the one hand, *No Absences* seems plausible. However, if so, no causal absence sentence can be true. On the other hand, it seems no less plausible, and is in any case taken for granted in everyday thought and discourse, that some causal absence sentences can be true and often are – in Schaffer's (literally false and therefore misleading) words, that "it is obvious that absences are causal" (4.). In short, Schaffer's puzzle is that these three theses seem plausible by themselves but cannot be true together:

No Absences: Absences cannot serve as causes or effects.

About Absences: All causal absence sentences say of some absence that it is causal.

Possible Truth: It is possible for a causal absence sentence to be true.

How is it possible for a causal absence sentence to be true if causal absence sentences are necessarily untrue for lack of reference of at least one of their singular terms?

5. Causal absence sentences about presences

The answer is that it is not possible. If absences are by nature causally impotent, a sentence saying otherwise cannot be true. As formulated in the last paragraph, Schaffer's puzzle has no solution. Since Schaffer accepts *No Absences* and takes *Possible Truth* as his basic *datum*, he has no choice but to reject *About Absences*. Schaffer's axiomatic starting point is *Possible Truth* as exemplified in causal absence sentences like "The absence of blood in Charles's brain caused his death" or "The gardener's omission to water my flowers caused them to wilt". If such sentences can be true, and possible truth presupposes reference, then the singular terms "the absence of blood in Charles's brain" and "the gardener's omission to water my flowers" must refer. But then *About Absences* must be false. It has to be replaced by:

*About Absences**   Some causal absence sentences are about presences.

Thus, the point of Schaffer's insistence on his basic *datum* is not to cast doubt on *No Absences*, but to argue for the replacement of *About Absences* with *About Absences**.

 *About Absences** seems paradoxical – how can a causal *absence* sentence be about a *presence*? The source of this misgiving is the presumption that causal absence sentences must be about absences. However, according to the explanation given in §2, a causal sentence of the form "a causes b" is a causal absence sentence if it contains at least one empty singular term. Being about an absence is sufficient for being a causal absence sentence, but it is not necessary. There may be causal absence sentences whose singular terms refer to presences. The reason it may still be appropriate to call them causal "absence" sentences is that by dint of their wording and choice of (singular) terms they *claim* or *purport* to be about absences. If sentences such as "The absence of blood in Charles's brain caused his death" and "The gardener's omission to water my flowers caused them to wilt" can be true, they must be about presences, but – oddly enough, to be sure – they refer to these presences as "the absence of blood in Charles's brain" and as "the gardener's omission". Thus, although such sentences refer in fact to presences, they may be called causal "absence" sentences in view of their use of *terms* like "absence" or "omission". It may help to mitigate the terminological hardship somewhat to follow Schaffer's practice of speaking of these sentences as expressing "claims".[6] Causal

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[6] However, in my use, "claim" refers primarily to propositions, and only in a derivative and second-

absence claims *purport* or *claim* to be about absences, but may not be. If about *About Absences** is correct, some of them are about presences.

6. The semantics of causal omission sentences

The question is: How is it possible for typical causal absence claims as expressed, for example, in "The absence of blood in Charles's brain caused his death" or in "The gardener's omission to water my flowers caused them to wilt" to be about presences? If absences in general and omissions in particular are non-existents, as Schaffer concedes they are, how can singular terms like "the absence of blood in Charles's brain" and "the gardener's omission" refer to existents in (possibly) true causal absence sentences? And to which existents do they refer? To answer these questions we need an account of the truth-conditions of causal absence sentences. Following Schaffer, I will concentrate on causal omission reports. My paradigm sentence will be "The gardener's omission to water my flowers caused them to wilt".

How are the truth-conditions of causal omission sentences determined? Let's take a look at their formational history. On way to look at causal omission sentences is to regard them as the final product of three consecutive semantic operations: negation, nominalization, and predication. Take, for example, "The gardener's omission to water my flowers caused them to wilt". At the linguistic level, the starting point of this semantic construction is the positive "commission" sentence

(1)   The gardener watered my flowers.

Moore suggests, and Schaffer accepts, that (1) expresses an existential claim:

(1')   There was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers.[7]

According to Schaffer, sentence (1') "serves to denote an event": a watering action with the gardener as agent and my flowers as patient (see 4.1). He also says that

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ary sense to the sentences that express them. Note that Schaffer applies the term "omission claim" to sentences and to a special type of singular terms, viz. nominalized sentences. For example, he says that, for Moore, "omission claims such as 'James's omission to kill Smith', 'James's failing to kill Smith', and 'the absence of James's killing Smith' come out as: NOT (e) (Killing(e) & Agent(e)=James & Patient(e)=Smith)" (4.2) Here the first three singular terms are said to have – *per imposibile* – the meaning of a sentence. This indiscriminate practice supports the current widespread and unfortunate tendency to blur the categorical distinction between sentences and singular terms, which in turn leads to confusion about the idea of reference denotation. See my second objection in §9.

[7] In the language of the predicate calculus: "$(\exists e)$ (Watering(e) & Agent(e)=the gardener & Patient(e)==my flowers)", where "e" ranges over events. Cp. Schaffer's analysis in 4.1 of "James killed Smith".

such sentences "denote existential quantifications over events". It is not clear what either of these formulations mean. True, (1') quantifies over events, but what does it mean to say that it *denotes* "existential quantifications over events"? A better formulation is perhaps that (1') says of a certain *type* of event that it has at least one instance (cp. Moore's paraphrase in the quote below). Or, alternatively, (1') may be said to claim that the property of being-a-watering-of-my-flowers-by-the-gardener is exemplified. Or, less contrived, that there was an event of watering of my flowers by the gardener. Thus, (1') may be said to assert of an event-type that it has instances (tokens), or of property that it is exemplified, or of a class that it has members.

If (1') merely makes explicit the logical form of (1), then (1) and (1') express the same proposition and have the same truth-conditions. We can therefore speak of *the* proposition or *the* claim expressed by both (1)-sentences. Since the claim expressed by (1)-sentences forms the basis and starting point of the semantic construction of causal omission claims, I refer to it as "the basic commission claim", and to the sentences with that content as "basic commission sentences".

The negation and contradictory of the basic commission claim expressed in (1)-sentences is that it is not the case that the gardener watered my flowers. Ordinary English allows a variety of ways and styles to express this omission claim. Moore mentions three:

"There are negative propositions about events, such as 'The gardener omitted to water my flowers' meaning 'It is not the case that the gardener watered my flowers'. Such negative statements are negative existentially quantified ones: if there is an omission to water my flowers, then what is true is that it is not the case that some instance of the type of event, watering my flowers, existed."[8]

Since all of these three formulations negate and contradict the content of (1)-sentences, I refer to them as "(Neg_1)-sentences". (Neg_1)-sentences deny what (1)-sentences affirm. (Neg_1)-sentences say that the gardener omitted to do – did not do – what (1)-sentences claim he did. Generalizing, we can say that omissions are non-commissions. The omission claim that a omitted to ø denies what the commission claim that a ø-ed affirms. They are each other's negations and contradictories. The negation of a commission claim is an omission claim, and vice versa. Talk of "omissions" derives its sense and point from the contrast with the corresponding

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[8] Moore 2009, 53; quoted by Schaffer in 4.1. – I have taken the liberty to replace Moore's (and Schaffer's) example sentence "James omitted to kill Smith" with mine, and I do so throughout this paper.

commissions. Since "omitted" means "did not", we can safely add "The gardener did not water my flowers" to Moore's trio of (Neg_1)-sentences. Moore's thesis is then that these four sentences express the same omission claim in different ways:

- The gardener <u>omitted</u> to water my flowers.
- The gardener <u>did not</u> water my flowers.
- <u>It is not the case that</u> the gardener watered my flowers.
- <u>It is not the case that</u> there was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers.[9]

For now, we can confine our attention to the first and the last entry on Moore's list:

(Neg_1)   The gardener omitted to water my flowers.

(Neg_1')   It is not the case that there was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers.

The second step in the semantic construction of the causal absence claim "The gardener's omission to water my flowers caused them to wilt" is nominalization. We can nominalize the two (Neg_1)-sentences by means of "that" to form the semantically equivalent singular terms:[10]

(NomNeg_1)   That the gardener omitted to water my flowers

(NomNeg_1')   That it is not the case that there was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers

In the third and last constructional step, we combine these (NomNeg_1)-singular terms with the predicate "… caused my flowers to wilt". This gives us two causal omission sentences that express the same causal omission claim:

(CauseNeg_1)   That the gardener omitted to water my flowers caused them to wilt.[11]

(CauseNeg_1')   That it is not the case that there was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers caused them to wilt.

If this example can be generalized, this account appears to be a plausible reconstruction of the formational history of causal admission claims. In any case, I think it

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[9] I assume here that this formulation – I call it "Neg_1'" – captures in a somewhat more natural way what Moore means by "It is not the case that some instance of the type of event, watering my flowers, existed" in the passage quoted above. For, to deny that the type identified by the indefinite description "event, which is a watering of my flowers (by the gardener)" is instantiated is to deny that something falls under the concept of being an event of watering of my flowers by the gardener.

[10] Again, ordinary English offers several semantically equivalent ways of nominalizing a sentence. A popular alternative to the use of "that" are gerundive constructions such as "the gardener's not watering my flowers". However, that-nominalizations are logically more transparent and therefore preferable for the purpose of semantic analysis.

[11] I assume here that "The gardener's omission to water my flowers caused them to wilt" is just another, more compressed way of expressing the same claim. It is another (CauseNeg_1) sentence.

is a plausible interpretation of what Moore has mind, so I will call it "Moore's account."

7. Schaffer's "pluralistic idea"

According to Schaffer, Moore's account is fine as far as it goes. But Schaffer believes that Moore overlooks a crucial ambiguity of meaning that affects all three constructional stages. We have seen that Schaffer accepts Moore's proposal that (1) is to be analyzed as (1'), and that both sentences are therefore synonymous. However, Schaffer argues that their respective negations (Neg_1) and (Neg_1') cannot have the same meaning and truth-conditions, since (Neg_1) is multiply ambiguous in a way that (Neg_1') is not. Since ambiguity is contagious, the same must be true of (NomNeg_1) and (NomNeg_1') as well as of (CauseNeg_1) and (CauseNeg_1').

According to Schaffer, this semantic ambiguity is introduced by the first step of negating a commission claim. We have seen that Moore offers his readers four allegedly equivalent ways of expressing omission claims in ordinary and not so ordinary English:

- The gardener <u>omitted</u> to water my flowers.   = (Neg_1)
- The gardener <u>did not</u> water my flowers.

- <u>It is not the case</u> that the gardener watered my flowers.
- <u>It is not the case</u> that there was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers   = (Neg_1')

Schaffer draws our attention to what at first sight appears to be a merely stylistic difference between the first and the second pair on Moore's list: The first pair negates by using the adverbial negator "not",[12] the second employs the sentential[13] negator "it is not the case that …". According to Schaffer, Moore is wrong to suggest that this difference is merely stylistic and has no semantic import. He argues that the adverbial negator "not" infuses the first pair of sentences with a scope ambiguity that makes them multiply ambiguous in a way the second pair, which uses the

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[12] I assume here that "omitted" just means "did not" so that the sense of "not" is part of the sense of the first sentence even though the word is not.

[13] "It is not the case that …" is a sentential operator because it generates sentences as values for sentences as arguments. What the sentential negator negates – the object of negation – is always and exclusively the complete sentence that follows it, or more precisely, the complete proposition expressed by that sentence.

sentential negator "it is not the case that …", is not. Adverbial negations with "not" are said to be indeterminate and ambiguous in scope since they allow for "widest" *as well as* for "narrower" scope interpretations. In contrast, sentential negations with "it is not the case that …" are unambiguous and determinate since they are *exclusively* of widest scope. Thus, in its widest scope meaning, the adverbial negator "not" is semantically equivalent to the sentential negator "it is not the case that …". In the widest scope reading of "not", the omission sentence "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" says that it is not the case that the gardener watered my flowers. Thus, when "not" is read as having widest scope, the first two sentences on Moore's list express the same omission claim as the members of the second pair. However, unlike its sentential counterpart, the adverbial "not" can also have a narrower scope. On any narrower scope reading what is being negated is not what the basic commission sentence "The gardener watered my flowers" affirms but something else. Due to their scope ambiguity, omission sentences such as "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" express additional, very different omission claims – or so Schaffer wants us to believe: "So I am advocating that omission claims can only have wide scope negation, the *pluralistic* idea that omission claims can have multiple interpretations with negations of various scopes, including both wide and narrower scope readings (4.2).

Some clarifications of Schaffer's pluralistic idea are in order. That "omission claims can have multiple interpretations with negations of various scopes, including both wide and narrower scope readings" can only mean that certain *sentences* that purport to be about omissions of the form "a omitted to (did not) φ" allow for multiple interpretations relative to the scope assigned to "not". It cannot mean that there are multiple negations of the same omission claim, or that there is more than one way to negate the same commission claim. There is no such thing as widest and narrower scope negations of the same *proposition*. As mentioned in §3, modern logic conceives of negation as truth-functional and thus always and exclusively of widest, i. e. sentential, or more precisely, propositional scope. It follows that, in the last analysis, all negations can be expressed with the widest scope sentential negator "it is not the case that …". Talk of different types of negation – "widest vs. narrower scope" – of the same sentence is a just a (potentially misleading) way of speaking about *the* – one and only, always widest scope – negation of different propositions

expressed by that sentence. Applied to our example, Schaffer agrees with Moore that all four sentences on Moore's list express *the* – one and only! – negation and *the* – one and only! – contradictory of the basic commission claim (1). However, against Moore's monistic idea that all four sentences are merely stylistic variations of one and the same omission claim, Schaffer advocates the "pluralistic idea" that the first pair on Moore's list is multiply ambiguous and expresses other negations and con- tradictories of commission claims different from (1) as well. Thus, "The gardener omitted to water my flowers" and "The gardener did not water my flowers" are both (Neg_1)-sentence like the other sentences on Moore's list.[14] But, unlike the sentences that comprise the second pair, they are *not only* (Neg_1)-sentences.

What are these additional, very different omission claims that Schaffer alleg- es are expressed by "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" apart and beyond the negation and contradictory of (1)? One of those so-called narrow scope negations explicitly mentioned by Schaffer is

(Truism)   There was an event, which was not a watering by the gardener of my flowers.[15]

This expresses the boring truth (Schaffer rightly calls it a "truism") that there was an event in the history of the universe that fits the negative description of not being a watering by the gardener of my flowers. According to Schaffer, (Truism) express- es an omission claim, and omission claims are non-commission claims.[16] What is the corresponding commission claim, i. e. the negation and contradictory of (Truism)? Clearly not the content of (1), since (Truism) and (1) may both be true. It may be that the gardener watered my flowers *and* that this was not all that ever happened in the history of the universe. (Truism) is not the negation and logical contradictory of (1), but of

(Hopeless)   It is not the case that there was an event that was not a watering by the gardener of my flowers.

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[14] In the rest of this paper, I will for reasons of convenience condense both of this pair of sentences into one: "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers."

[15] Cp. Schaffer's analogous narrower scope negation of "James killed Smith" as "($\exists$e) NOT (Killing(e) & Agent(e)=James & Patient(e)=Smith)" which he paraphrases as "There is an event (a positive presence) which is not a killing of Smith by James" in 4.2.

[16] It is Schaffer, not me, who calls these alleged alternative meanings of omission sentences "omis- sion claims" and is therefore committed to view their respective negations and contradictories as commission claims in my sense. I found it difficult to see in what sense this terminology is applicable, for example, to (Truism) and (Hopeless) and to (OtherDoings) and (OnlyWaterings). Is this merely a terminological oddity?

This expresses the (hopeless) claim that all that ever happened were waterings of my flowers by the gardener. A second so-called narrow scope negation mentioned by Schaffer and also allegedly expressed by "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" is

(OtherDoings)   There was something done by the gardener to my flowers which was not a watering.[17]

(OtherDoings) would be true, for example, if the gardener had done other things to my flowers, for example, if he had smelled, pruned or talked to them. Again, (OtherDoings) does not deny what (1) affirms, since they are compatible: The gardener may have watered my flowers, but that may not be all he ever did to them. Rather, (OtherDoings) denies the claim that all the gardener ever did to my flowers was watering them:

(OnlyWaterings)   There was nothing done by the gardener to my flowers which was not a watering.

We can summarize Schaffer's positions as follows. Omission sentences with "not" suffer from a "familiar scope ambiguity of ordinary language" (4.2). They express as many different propositions as there are grammatically possible scope variations of "not". If "not" is understood as having widest scope, an omission sentence such as "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" says the same as (Neg_1). We can state its truth-conditions on its (Neg_1)-meaning as follows: "The gardener omitted to (did not) water may flowers" is true *iff* it is not the case that the gardener watered my flowers. However, "not" may also have a narrower scope. If it express-es, for example, (Truism) its truth-conditions are: "The gardener omitted to (did not) water may flowers" is true *iff* it is not the case that all that ever happened were waterings of my flowers by the gardener. Another possible narrower scope mean-ing of our omission sentence is (OtherDoings): "The gardener omitted to (did not) water may flowers" is true *iff* it is not the case that all the gardener ever did to my flowers was watering them.

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[17] Again, cp. Schaffer's analogous narrower scope analysis of "James killed Smith" as "($\exists$e) (NOT Kill-ing(e) & Agent(e)=James & Patient(e)=Smith)" which he paraphrases as "There is something done by James to Smith which is not a killing" in 4.2.

8. The significance of narrower scope meanings: reference

For Schaffer, the salient and all-important difference between the widest scope meaning (Neg_1') and narrower scope meanings such as (Truism) and (OtherDoings) is that (Neg_1') denies the existence of something, whereas (Truism) and (OtherDoings) affirm the existence of something merely negatively described. Widest scope meanings are of the form "Nothing is F", whereas narrower scope meanings are of the form "Something is not F". Narrower scope meanings such as (Truism) and (OtherDoings), Schaffer says, "denote" or describe a different "positive presence", or a different "positive event" in negative terms:

"On all of the options other than the one where the negation takes widest scope, the absence claim is denoting a positive presence, but *describing it negatively*. For instance, the last example above [= (OtherDoings)] describes a positive event of the gardener doing something other than a watering of my flowers [...]. Absence talk can be a way to describe something" (4.2).

Hence, there is absence talk of the logical form "Nothing is F" about nothing (i. e. an "absence"), and there is absence talk of the form "Something is not F" about something merely negatively described. Moore's widest scope meaning (Neg_1') is of the first type, Schaffer's narrower scope meanings (Truism) and (OtherDoings) of the second, and can therefore be said to denote, describe or refer to something existent.

Let's assume that (Truism) and (OtherDoings) are about something and refer to or denote a "positive presence", a "positive event". What is the significance of all this for the problem of absence causation? It is this: If narrower scope meanings such as (Truism) and (OtherDoings) refer to a positive presence instead of an absence, to something instead of nothing, they can be used as building blocks in the semantic construction of possibly true causal omission claims. In effect, Schaffer argues that, if (Truism) and (OtherDoings) refer, so do the singular terms formed by "that"-nominalization:

(NomTruism)   That there was an event, which was not a watering by the gardener of my flowers

(NomOtherDoings) That there was something done by the gardener to my flowers which was not a watering

If this is correct, each of the two singular terms (NomTruism) and (NomOtherDoings) refers to a positive event, which may play the role of a cause. Since (NomTruism) and (NomOtherDoings) form the respective subject terms of the causal omission claims

(CauseTruism)	That there was an event, which was not a watering by the gardener of my flowers caused them to wilt.
(CauseOtherDoings)	That there was something done by the gardener to my flowers which was not a watering caused them to wilt.

formed by applying the predicate "… caused my flowers to wilt" in the third constructional step, they too may be said to be about this event and possible cause. If so, (CauseTruism) and (CauseOtherDoings) are causal omission claims that meet all existential presuppositions for having a truth-value.

Generalizing, Schaffer concludes that there may be true causal omission sentences despite the fact that omissions (and absences in general) are causally impotent. What makes this possible is the fact that omission claims (and absence claims generally) can be understood as being about something: "Absence talk can be a way to describe something" (4.2). Thus, in order to reconcile *No Absences* with *Possible Truth*, we merely have to assume that the subject terms of (possibly) true causal absence claims have been formed from omission claims with a narrower than widest scope negation: "When I truly claim that the gardener's failing to water my flowers caused them to wilt, I need only be read as describing the cause with the negation taking some narrower scope, to be speaking of something" (4.2).

9. Three objections

There are at least three objections to Schaffer's solution. The first concerns his thesis that omission sentences that use the adverbial "not" such as "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" are scope ambiguous, and express a variety of different omission claims. Against this, I will argue that there is no such scope ambiguity, that Schaffer gives us no convincing argument to think otherwise, and that his semantics for omission sentences has unacceptable consequences.

We have seen that Schaffer's account is crucially premised on the existence of an alleged scope ambiguity of "not". What grounds are there for believing in this scope ambiguity? This is Schaffer's argument:

"There are many places [in "($\exists$e) (Watering(e) & Agent(e)=the gardener & Patient(e)=my flowers)"] where one could insert a negation. There is the option of giving the negation widest scope …. But there are a range of alternatives in which the negation has narrower scope […] So I am advocating, as against the idea … that omission claims can only have wide scope negation, the *pluralistic* idea that omission

claims can have multiple interpretations with negations of various scopes, including both wide and narrower scope readings" (4.2; Schaffer's italics).

In this passage, Schaffer draws the semantic conclusion that omission claims have multiple interpretations from the grammatical premise that certain formulations of commission claims allow for more than one place to "insert a negation" that. Applied to our example about the gardener, his argument is:

P1: The commission sentence (1) "The gardener watered my flowers" means (1') "There was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers".

P2: Grammar permits the generation of many meaningful sentences by inserting "not" in different places in (1'), among them (Neg_1'), (Truism), and (OtherDoings).

Therefore, C: The omission sentence "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" is multiply ambiguous and expresses the meanings of all the meaningful sentences thus generable from (1'), among them (Neg_1'), (Truism), and (OtherDoings).

If this is Schaffer's argument, it is a *non sequitur*. P1 and P2 do not imply C. It is true that the rules of grammar allow for more than one meaningful place to "insert a negation" into "($\exists$e) (Watering(e) & Agent(e)=the gardener & Patient(e)=my flowers)", *vulgo*

(1')   There was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers.

It is also true that, if we allow a bit of reshuffling, the results of these grammatically correct, and thus meaningful "insertions" include not only the widest scope negations

(Neg_1')   It is not the case that there was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers.

but also so-called narrow scope negations such as

(Truism)   There was at least one event, which was not a watering by the gardener of my flowers.

(OtherDoings)   There was something done by the gardener to my flowers, which was not a watering.

And yes, all of these sentences may be said to be "perfectly legitimate semantic values" in the sense that they are *grammatically* legitimate. That is, (Neg_1'), (Truism), and (OtherDoings) have been formed in accordance with the rules of grammar.

However, this grammatical fact goes no distance in establishing the semantic conclusion that the omission claim "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my

flowers" expresses the meanings of all grammatically correct sentences thus grammatically generable, and that the resulting multiple ambiguity is "is just a familiar scope ambiguity in ordinary language." Moreover, Schaffer's claim that the "wide scope and the various narrower scope readings are all *perfectly legitimate semantic values*, which a speaker might intend to express", for example, by uttering "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" taxes credulity. The consequences are simply too bizarre.

First of all, it is hard to swallow that "The gardener did not water my flowers" is multiply ambiguous and therefore different in meaning from "It is not the case that the gardener watered my flowers". But according to Schaffer, the last formulation captures only the (Neg_1)-meaning of that sentence, and a speaker might also intend (Truism) or (OtherDoings). Even then we should keep in mind that there is a striking asymmetry between the widest scope meanings on the one hand and multiple narrower scope meanings on the other. Only the widest scope (Neg_1)-meaning expresses the negation and the contradictory of the content of (1). On any of its narrower scope meanings, someone could utter "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers", and consistently add: "… and he diligently waters my flowers all the time". As if this were not odd enough, a speaker who intends (Truism), could meaningfully and truthfully back his claim by adding, "… after all, there is the sinking of the Titanic"; and if he intended (OtherDoings), he would be able to support what he says by "… because he talks to them every day for hours". The speaker may also consistently and perhaps truly express the complex thought that there are events other than waterings of my flowers, but that the gardener never did anything else to them, by uttering, with a quick switch of intentions in the right place: "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers, and it is not the case that the gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers." All this seems strange, if not bizarre, and amounts in my view to a *reductio* of Schaffer's omission semantics. "The gardener omitted to (did not) water my flowers" simply does not have these narrower scope meanings, and a speaker therefore cannot express them, even if he intends to do so.[18]

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[18] I assume here that it is impossible for an individual speaker to *make* a phrase mean something it doesn't mean. That is, I side with Alice against Humpty-Dumpty:
Humpty-Dumpty: "… There's glory for you!"
"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

However, let's assume *arguendo* that omission sentences formed with "not" are multiply ambiguous in the way Schaffer says they are. Would this solve the problem of absence causation along the lines Schaffer envisages? My second objection is that it would not. As we saw in §8, the salient difference Schaffer tries to exploit between widest and the narrower scope meanings is one of reference or denotation. It is that the former are allegedly event-quantifications of the non-referential type "Nothing is F" whereas the latter are of the referential type "Something is not F". This difference in terms of denotation or reference is what Schaffer's is really after and what gives his distinction between wide scope and narrower scope meaning its philosophical point.

However, is there such difference of reference or denotation between widest and narrower scope meanings? We should be wary of the general idea of sentences as having reference, or as "denoting" something. The main point of (assertoric) sentences in normal use is to assert, not to denote or to refer.[19] The notion of reference is clearest with respect to singular terms. It is harmless to say that a sentence "a is F" is about (denotes, refers to) whatever its subject term "a" is about (denotes, refers to). The subject term is naturally understood as giving us the subject of assertoric discourse, i. e. what we talk about. Here, talk of sentence reference is derivative from, and parasitic on, singular term reference. But it is not always possible to reduce talk of sentence reference to talk of singular term reference, and any analogical extension from the reference of singular terms to other logical categories, be it predicates or sentences, has to make the point and rationale of the analogy clear. In particular, it is a mistake to think that, since it is harmless and true to say that sentences of the form "a is F" are about the individual a, it must also be harmless and true to say that sentences of the form "Something is F" are about something. "Something" is not a singular term, but a (second-order) predicate, a quantifier. If it can be said to refer at all, its mode of reference is not that of a singular term.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"
"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."
[19] In many current discussions the idea of sentence reference is taken for granted, which in turn supports a questionable tendency to assimilate sentences to singular terms. This tendency is also evident in Schaffer's text; see footnote 5 above.

The basic commission sentence (1) "The gardener watered my flowers" is reasonable taken to be about the gardener and / or about my flowers. And this remains true even if (1) is analyzed as meaning (1') "There was an event, which was a watering by the gardener of my flowers." It follows that, if (1) and (1') are synonymous, and (1) is about the gardener and / or my flowers, so is (1'). However, does the fact that (1') quantifies over events show that it (and hence (1) as well) "serves to denote an event", a watering action of the gardener, as Schaffer claims? Not in the same sense of "about" that makes it natural to say that "a is F" is about a. We have to tread carefully here. If quantified sentences are "about" the entities they quantify over, then (1') is not about "an event", but about *all* events, and it says that at least one of them, possibly all satisfy the indefinite property of being a watering by the gardener of my flowers.[20] This formulation makes clear that (1') neither identifies a single event nor asserts the existence of a single event. This is true even if, as a matter of contingent historical fact, there happened to be one and only one act of watering of my flowers by the gardener.[21] Even if the gardener had watered my flowers only once, (1') would not denote, describe or be about this action. "Something" is no more or no less referential than "nothing". It is therefore false to say that (1') "serves to denote an event", a positive and possibly causal presence, whereas (1')'s negation and contradictory (Neg_1') does not "serve to denote an event", and is at best "about" a causally impotent absence. Generally speaking, sentences of the form "Something is (not) F" are in the same boat as those of the form "Nothing is F" in terms of reference and denotation. Either both "denote" something, or neither does. If so, Schaffer's distinction between widest and narrower scope meanings looses its point.

However, let's assume that Schaffer's semantics for omission sentences is correct and does undergird his distinction between non-referential and referential omission sentences. If so, absence talk is not necessarily about absences, but "can be a way to describe something" (4.2). Is this enough to solve our problems about

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[20] Cp. also the alternative formulations mentioned in §6 above.

[21] Schaffer's example "James killed Smith" may mislead in this respect, since we tend to assume tacitly that Smith is a human person, and we know that human persons can only be killed once. Given this assumption and the medical fact, the singularity of the "something" asserted to exist happens to be guaranteed by the sense of the predicate. But what if Smith is a cat with nine lives, which may be killed repeatedly? That is one reason I prefer the example "The gardener watered my flowers". It is free of such temptations.

absence causation, as Schaffer claims? Schaffer says that the "metaphysical problem disappears. When I truly claim that the gardener's failing to water my flowers caused them to wilt, I need only be read as describing the cause with the negation taking some narrower scope, to be speaking of something" (4.2). My third and last objection is that Schaffer's solution let's us down in an area where omission claims play a vital role, viz. in normative contexts. When omission claims are used to support a normative judgment of praise or blame, Schaffer's semantic recommendation to simply read the speaker as describing the cause, for example, along the lines of (Truism) or (OtherDoings), is counterproductive.

Let's assume that I sue the gardener for negligently killing my flowers by not watering them in a court of law, and he has the nerve to deny my charge, claiming that he diligently watered my flowers without fail. To support my charge, I call to the witness stand an expert – a floral coroner, as it were – who testifies: "That the gardener omitted to (did not) water your flowers caused them to wilt." According to Schaffer, what he says can only be true if he speaks of something, so the jury has to interpret the embedded omission sentence as expressing a narrower scope meaning. So they take him to mean, say

(CauseTruism)   That there was an event, which was not a watering by the gardener of my flowers caused them to wilt.

On this interpretation, the jury understands the expert as testifying that at least one, perhaps all events in the history of the universe which are not waterings by the gardener of my flowers are the cause of death of my flowers. The problem is that, even if what he says were true, this truth is compatible with the gardener's diligently watering my flowers all the time, as his lawyer will be quick to point out. Another possible narrow scope meaning of the expert's testimony is

(CauseOtherDoings)   That there was something done by the gardener to my flowers which was not a watering caused them to wilt.

On this reading, the jury takes the expert as identifying as the cause of death of my flowers as at least one, perhaps all of the events in the history of the universe that satisfy the condition of being things the gardener did to my flowers which were not waterings. Again, one of the problems with that is that it does nothing to negate and contradict the gardener's counterclaim that he *did* water my flowers – and similar for all narrower scope meanings.

The dilemma that Schaffer's solution creates is clear: If the jury takes the subject term of the expert's causal omission sentence as having its widest scope (Neg_1) meaning, it cannot be true. But if they take it as having any of the narrower scope meanings, such as (Truism), (OtherDoings) or any other, it cannot bolster my charge of negligence since it fails to contradict the basic commission sentence. Shouldn't an adequate solution of the problem of absence causation avoid this dilemma and allow for omission claims to support normative judgment of blame and responsibility? I think it should. For this and the other reasons mentioned, I conclude that Schaffer's solution fails.