An absent demonstration of absence causation

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Goldschmidt (forthcoming) purports to provide a demonstration of the causal powers of absences. Here, we contend that not only is the case presented not in fact an instance of absence causation, but, even if we grant that it is, it represents an uninteresting contribution to the literature on absence causation.

To let everyone in on the joke: Goldschmidt has published a paper without any words. And we take his point to be that the paper’s lack of words – that is, its absence of body text – has caused some effect – for example, us to write this response – thereby demonstrating the causal efficacy of absences. However, this doesn’t feature an instance of absence causation. We’ve a paper with a certain feature – namely, having no body text – that has been published, and which has caused the relevant effect. But the property picked out by the negative predicate isn’t an absence; it’s just a property! After all, we don’t think that my radiator’s being white involves an absence of colourfulness, nor ‘I’s lacking a cross-bar involves an absence of ink.

Of course, this ‘positive re-description strategy’ is likely to be the first port of call when one is confronted with absence causation: given an apparent instance, one simply says that the absence terminology picks out a (positive) property ascription, thereby neutering the case of any would-be absence threat. This strategy likely won’t work for all absence cases, due at least in part to location issues (more on this below). But whether it succeeds in neutralizing every case is irrelevant to whether it works in some. And it certainly does works here: the above description of the cause accurately details the relevant instance of causation, and it fails to feature any causally efficacious absence. So, it is highly questionable whether Goldschmidt has succeeded in his primary aim.

Further, for those who do endorse genuine absence causation, (at least!) two interrelated metaphysical worries emerge. The first concerns locating the absence. When you can easily locate the absence – as in the present case – then there is room for a positive description of the relevant region, resulting in a standard case of causation between events where one happens to be picked out via a negative description. But not all cases are so easily located. In the classic example of the gardener who failed to water the plants and thereby caused them to die, we can ask, where was the absence located? The two most plausible candidates are the gardener’s location (on the couch, several miles away), or the location of the would-be watering (in the garden, where the plants are). However, neither looks entirely satisfying, for if we assume the former, then we commit ourselves to spooky action at a distance, as the gardener manages to kill the plants from miles off; meanwhile, the latter does the same for prevention cases. Now, when you can not so easily locate the absence – as in the gardener case – this puts pressure on the advocate of absence causation to give us a rubric by which we identify the location of the event in question. Hall (2002) demonstrates the difficulty in resolving this issue, but Goldschmidt (forthcoming) makes no contribution to this debate at all.

The second problem concerns the number of causally efficacious absences. Suppose that we simply accept that the gardener’s failure caused the plants to die. Must we also accept that the Queen’s failure to water them was a cause too? What about the failure of aliens to do so, or an extraordinarily dextrous T-Rex? One should hope not, but if any of those alternates had performed the watering, the plants would, in all likelihood, have survived, and so they each pass a difference-making test for causation. This creates the problem of profligate causes, as raised by Menzies (2004): if one absence is genuinely causal, then the dam bursts...
and a potential infinity of absences are also both causes and caused by every action (or inaction!) in the world. Absent some good metric by which to distinguish between the genuine causes (the gardener’s failure) and the non-causes (T-Rex’s failure), this sort of problem threatens to undermine the idea that absences can be causal at all.

Applying this point to the present case, we get that the paper’s lack of Sanskrit text, numerals, doodles, puns, clever bits of wordplay, etc., all cause the relevant effect. So, as it turns out, it is a powerful paper – far too powerful, in our book.

But, more pressingly, while nuanced and thoughtful discussion of these issues can be found in, for example, Beebee (2004), Menzies (2004), McGrath (2005), Dowe (2009), Sartorio (2010), and Bernstein (2014), the point isn’t raised in Goldschmidt (forthcoming). In fact, none of the important and sophisticated work on the topic of absence causation is shown the respect it deserves by Goldschmidt’s ‘demonstration’. This seems a major hole in the argument.

It is not controversial that there are cases which are naturally referred to in terms of absences. What is controversial, and difficult, is working out how to account for those cases within a plausible and well-grounded theory of causation. Goldschmidt’s paper may be pithy, but, for the reasons above, as a contribution to an otherwise sophisticated debate, we find it lacking.  

References


1 In fact, this absence of discussion is a partial cause of our response, though that should be fairly obvious.

2 [Acknowledgements redacted]