Omissions and Different Senses of Responsibility

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Can we be morally responsible not only for actions but also for omissions? If we can be morally responsible for decisions to act, surely we can also be responsible for decisions not to act. But can we also be responsible for failing to decide to act? Take as given that we can be responsible for the outcomes of decision and of failing to decide. Can we similarly be responsible for the outcomes of decisions not to act and for the outcomes of failures to decide? Supposing we can, are we ever responsible for outcomes of failures to decide that we did not foresee? I will argue that we can be morally responsible in all of these various respects, but that countervailing intuitions can be accommodated by noting that our practice involves different senses of responsibility, a number of which don't involve desert. I contend that the senses that don't involve desert should predominate in the kinds of circumstances under consideration. [1]

An asymmetry between actions and omissions?

Carolina Sartorio (2005, 2015) argues that the following two Frankfurt cases generate an asymmetry between responsibility for the outcomes of actions and responsibility for the outcomes of omissions:

Active Frank: A child is swimming in a pond. Frank wants him to die, so he jumps in and pushes the child's head under water until he drowns. An evil neuroscientist, who also wanted the child to die, had been monitoring Frank's brain activity. Had Frank wavered in his decision to kill the child, the neuroscientist would have intervened by manipulating Frank's brain in such a way that he would have made exactly the same decision.

Omissive Frank: Frank notices that the child is starting to drown. Since he wants the child to drown, he decides not to jump in. This time there were no sharks in the water, but there was a neuroscientist in the background. Had Frank wavered in his decision not to jump in, the neuroscientist would have manipulated Frank's brain in such a way that he would have made the same decision.

About these cases Sartorio (2015) says:

The philosophers who reject the asymmetry between responsibility for/by actions and responsibility for/by omissions would suggest that Omissive Frank is just as responsible as Active Frank: he is responsible for his decision not to save the child, for his failure to save the child, and for the child's death. This is so even though he couldn't have made a different decision and thus he couldn't have saved the child. Hence, they would suggest, Frankfurt-style

omission cases show that responsibility for/by omissions doesn't require the ability to do otherwise in the same way that Frankfurt-style action cases show that responsibility for/by actions doesn't require that ability.

John Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998: 254-55) affirm this sort of symmetry. Sartorio argues against it by pointing out that although Omissive Frank is responsible for his decision not to save the child, a positive mental action, he is not responsible for his omission to save the child or for the child's death. Frank's responsibility for his decisions doesn't carry over to his not saving the child, or to the child's death, because it doesn't bear the right kind of relation to those things. For "the child doesn't die as a result of what Frank in fact decided to do, but as a result of what he *didn't* decide to do (i.e. because he didn't decide to jump into the water to save him)." And "it's not at all clear that he is responsible for not having made the relevant decision (an omission, or an absence); all that's reasonably clear is that he is responsible for *having* made certain decisions" (Sartorio 2005, 2015; cf. Clarke (2014: 138-143) and Swenson (2015)).

Here we might pause to ask: what notion of moral responsibility do we have in mind when we ascribe moral responsibility for outcomes? One possibility is a desert-involving notion – the idea would be that agents deserve blame or punishment not only for bad actions but also for bad outcomes. But many theorists deny resultant moral luck (Zimmerman 1987; see also the general discussion of resultant luck in Sartorio 2012): they affirm that agents who do not differ in their decisions but differ in the outcomes of these decisions do not differ in the degree of blame or punishment they deserve. One might deny this and claim that there is

resultant moral luck. But those who affirm it and reject resultant moral luck contend that agents do not deserve additional blame or punishment for outcomes. Consider two assassins who each of whom makes a decision to shoot the leader, but differ only in that one misses and the other hits the leader. Such theorists would deny that the second assassin deserves more blame or punishment than the first. If these theorists were nonetheless to affirm that agents are morally responsible for outcomes, it would have to be in a sense not involving desert. One possibility is that the responsibility invoked is only causal, that something for which the agent was morally responsible caused the outcome, and nothing more. This is a way in which the outcome might be placed on the agent's moral ledger without deserving blame or credit for it (Zimmerman 1988: 38). Another is that the agent is responsible in the sense that she has an obligation compensate for the bad outcome. Yet another is that agent can be responsible for outcomes in one of a number of forward-looking senses (see below).

Having noted this complex issue, let's return to Sartorio's account. In her view, the structure of Omissive Frank is relevantly similar to Sharks (Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 125):

> **Sharks:** Again, a child is swimming in a pond. This time, John notices that the child starts to drown on his own. Like Frank, he wants the child to die; so, even if he thinks he could easily rescue him, he decides not to jump in and let him die. The child dies. Unbeknownst to John, there were some hungry sharks in the water that would have attacked him and prevented him from rescuing the child.

Sartorio maintains that in each of these two cases, the agent is morally responsible for his decision, but not for the outcome, the death of the child. And the agent is not responsible for the outcomes in these two cases because what the agent is directly responsible for does not cause the death of the child.

At this point one might wonder whether there is a successful Frankfurt case in which it's intuitive that Frank is directly responsible for what he didn't decide to do. If there is, and, as Sartorio specifies, what he didn't decide to do can cause the death of the child (she is supposing that absences can be causes), then what Frank is directly responsible for would cause the death of the child. Randolph Clarke (1994) sets out an example in which the responsibility hinges on the agent's forgetting a promise. However, an agent's direct responsibility for forgetting (supposing this can be the case, by contrast with responsibility for forgetting always being derivative) isn't clearly an example of direct responsibility for not deciding or not intending to do something – although perhaps it is.

But there may be a kind of case in which it's more clearly plausible that the agent is directly responsible for what he didn't decide to do. Perhaps in the circumstances described in Omissive Frank the only way it can be that Frank not make the decision to rescue the child is by making the decision not to rescue the child. But arguably this is only because of the gravity of this decision: if he's psychologically normal, he can't notice the child's plight and simply not make any decision about saving it. However, there may be circumstances in which the harm that threatens is less severe, in which a psychologically normal agent notices that she can act to help, but as a result of preoccupation with other concerns, her mind

ceases to focus on that situation and turns to those other concerns without making a decision either to help or not to help. Then she would not make a decision to help without making a decision not to help.

Consider the following example:

Stranded Motorist: Frank is driving along a lightly-traveled highway thinking about Frankfurt cases. He notices a motorist struggling to replace a flat tire. After momentarily being distracted by the thought that the motorist would benefit from his help, Frank resumes thinking about Frankfurt cases without ever deciding not to stop to help. He just stops thinking about the motorist's plight and resumes thinking about Frankfurt cases. The motorist continues to struggle with the flat tire.

Aren't we be strongly tempted to say that Frank is directly responsible for not making the decision to stop and help, and that by virtue of this, he's also responsible for the motorist continuing to struggle? And given the assumption that absences can be causes (which Sartorio (2005, 2015) affirms), wouldn't we want to say that Frank's not making the decision caused the motorist's continued struggle, and this is why his direct responsibility for not deciding transmits to this outcome?

We can now add in the neuroscientist:

A neuroscientist is monitoring Frank's psychological states. In Frank's case, deciding to stop and help requires seriously considering doing so in advance, and suppose he can in fact do this. But had Frank seriously considered deciding to stop and help, the neuroscientist would have intervened and

caused him not to decide either way. Frank does not seriously consider doing

so, and so the neuroscientist does not intervene.

If absent the neuroscientist we judge that Frank was responsible for not deciding to

stop and help and for the motorist continuing to struggle, then, given that the

neuroscientist does not intervene, Frank would be as responsible as he is in the case

in which the neuroscientist is not present. Or at least so the Frankfurt-defender

would argue.

If this is right, then there is no general asymmetry between omissions and

actions, and the Fischer/Ravizza (1998) view is vindicated. On actions, I agree with

Sartorio: if what the agent is directly responsible for – a decision, or more

inclusively, an intention-formation – causes an external-world outcome and the

agent is sufficiently aware in advance that it will have this result – then the agent is

responsible for the decision and the outcome. In the case of certain kinds of

omissions, such as Frank's failure to decide to stop and help, this pattern also holds.

Frank is responsible for the failure to decide, and given that the failure to decide

causes the motorist's continuing to struggle, and he is aware that it will result in this

outcome, he is responsible both for the failure to decide and this outcome.

It would be odd if Omissive Frank and Stranded Motorist were different in

their patterns of responsibility-assessment (Swenson (2015) raises this sort of

challenge for such similar Frankfurt cases). One way to get these assessments to be

relevantly similar is by contending that in Omissive Frank, Frank's decision not to

help *constitutes* his not deciding to help, and as a result he is directly responsible for

both.[2] Then because in Omissive Frank his not deciding to help causes the death of the child, and he is aware of this in advance, he is responsible for that outcome.

At the same time, there may be an asymmetry between action and omission cases with respect to backward-looking desert-based responsibility. In Frankfurt-style action cases like Active Frank, it's open that the agent is responsible for the decision and the outcome of that decision in a desert-involving sense, and also in some non-desert-involving senses. By contrast, in Frankfurt-style omission cases such as Stranded Motorist, the agent may only be responsible for the failure to decide and the outcome of that failure in the non-desert-involving senses. I will address this issue in subsequent sections.

Responsibility without awareness for outcomes of omissions

In *Who Knew*, George Sher (2009) considers and proposes to justify our practice of holding people responsible for outcomes of omissions in cases in which the epistemic conditions on responsibility appear not to be satisfied. He sets out a number of examples to illustrate this phenomenon, and here is one of them: Alessandra, a soccer mom, has gone to pick up her children at their elementary school. As usual, Alessandra is accompanied by the family's border collie, Bathsheba, who rides in the back of the van. Although it is very hot, the pick-up has never taken long, so Alessandra leaves Sheba in the van while she goes to gather her children. This time, however, Alessandra is greeted by a tangled tale of misbehavior, ill-

[2] See Pereboom (2011), Chapter 7, for an account of constitution that might be adapted to fit this case.

considered punishment, and administrative bungling which requires several hours of indignant sorting out. During that time, Sheba languishes, forgotten, in the locked car. When Alessandra and her children finally make it to the parking lot, they find Sheba unconscious from heat prostration. (2009: 24).

Many find it intuitive that Alessandra is morally responsible for the bad outcome, despite the fact that the outcome did not result from a decision or intention on her part to leave the dog in the car for a long period of time. One might hypothesize that her responsibility derives from what Holly Smith calls a benighting act, and act in which the agent "fails to improve (or positively impairs) his cognitive position" so as to evidently result in a risk of performing the action at issue (H. Smith 1983; Sher 2009: 34). But Sher contends that there are cases of negligence for which we hold agents morally responsible that lack this feature. When Alessandra arrived at school with the dog, "the dispute that she encountered was not one that she could have anticipated. Because she had no previous reason to expect to be distracted, she also had no previous reason to take precaution against being distracted." (2009: 35-6). Clarke models a case on Sher's, and makes a similar assessment (2014: 171-2). Alternatively, one might claim that Alessandra has a defective quality of will – she does not care enough about her dog -- and her having been aware that she should care more about the dog and failing to do so is what grounds her blameworthiness (Sher 2105). But Sher points out, correctly, that people in these sorts of situations typically feel horrible when they discover what has happened, and this is strong reason to believe that there is often no failure of caring in such cases. Yet we judge the agent morally responsible for the outcome.

Sher's positive view involves the key claim that an agent can be morally responsible for an outcome even if it did not derive from some cause in her of which she was aware:

> ...we should think of each responsible agent not merely a conscious centers of will, nor yet as an entity that attempts to evaluate its practical and theoretical reasons and to base its beliefs and actions on them, but rather as an enduring causal structure whose elements interact in ways that give rise to these responsibility-related activities. (2009: 121)

Alessandra is morally responsible for the outcome because her action flows from the enduring causal structure that constitutes her, despite the fact that the sector of the causal structure at issue does not involve any relevant conscious awareness, either immediately preceding the act, or at an earlier time to which the act might be traced.

One concern for this proposal is that in order to preserve our ordinary tendency to judge Alessandra blameworthy for the dog's suffering, it makes a radical adjustment to our practice of holding responsible. Because we can't ground her responsibility in a morally defective conscious psychological state, as our practice would have it, the proposal would have us ground it in some other feature of her, perhaps a psychological state that is not morally defective, or, more likely, a neural constitution without a psychological correlate. Given such alternatives, it might be preferable to give up the judgment of blameworthiness. One might claim, then, that either there is a morally defective conscious psychological state in which

Alessandra's blameworthiness for the outcome can be grounded, or she is not blameworthy.

Failures of vigilance

But it might be too quick to claim that Alessandra's blameworthiness cannot be grounded in a morally defective conscious psychological state. Consider the parallel case in which a parent finds the unconscious child in the car, and feels horrible as a result. One might agree that there is no failure of caring in such a case, and more generally, no failure of quality of will, but rather a failure of *vigilance*.[3] Vigilance, on this conception, is a persisting attunement to protect, which features, among other things, a standing disposition to respond to danger, triggered by indications of danger in the environment. Mother bears, famously, have such an attunement with respect to their cubs. In human beings, perhaps due to certain environments that are unusually safe given the historical norm, this disposition may be suppressed. But even in such environments, when one first has children, after an early accident or near miss, one becomes aware that one should set one's degree of vigilance at an enhanced level.

Responsibility for the suffering of the child left in the back of the car would then trace back to a past failure to become appropriately vigilant. One might plausibly claim that given the kinds of beings we are, if we are insufficiently vigilant

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[3] Manuel Vargas and Samuel Murray have been awarded a Templeton Foundation grant to study self-control, and the notion of vigilance has an important place in this project.

for our children's safety, we inevitably become aware of this early on. Then failure to become more vigilant would be typically be culpable.

But even given this proposal, there may be cases of apparent responsibility for harms of this kind that do not plausibly trace back to a culpable failure to become vigilant. Suppose a first-time parent, Matt, inhabits one of our especially safe environments, and is insufficiently vigilant. For most other parents in this environment, the experience with danger that serves as the call to become more vigilant does not involve serious harm to the child. Matt is unfortunate, however, because in his case this call does involve severe harm. Here we may want to hold him morally responsible. Nevertheless we waver. I think that this ambivalence can be explained. Our practice of holding morally responsible involves senses of responsibility that are backward-looking insofar as they invoke desert, while other backward-looking senses , such as mere causal responsibility, and mere placement on the moral ledger, do not involve desert. A range of other senses are essentially forward-looking. I will now argue that in Matt's case, and more broadly, in the kinds of cases we've been considering, the senses that don't involve desert should predominate.

Senses of moral responsibility that don't involve desert

Our practice of holding each other morally responsible involves a number of different senses of moral responsibility. It's generally agreed that it includes senses that feature desert. In the basic form of desert, someone who has done wrong for bad reasons deserves to be blamed or perhaps punished just because he has done

wrong for those reasons, and someone who has performed a morally exemplary

action for good reasons deserves credit, praise, or reward just because she has

performed that action for those reasons (Feinberg 1970; Pereboom 2001, 2014;

Scanlon 2013). This backward-looking sense is closely linked with the reactive

attitudes of indignation, moral resentment, and guilt, and on the positive side, with

gratitude (Strawson 1962); arguably because these attitudes presuppose that their

targets are morally responsible in the basic desert sense (Pereboom 2014). Basic

desert responsibility is prominent in the philosophical discussion of free will

because it is the sense most clearly threatened by causally deterministic histories of

action that trace back beyond the agent's control, and it is salient in everyday life

because the emotions connected with it are both vivid and disquieting.

Senses of moral responsibility that involve a non-basic variety of desert have

been proposed, and perhaps our practice features some of these as well. Essentially

forward-looking notions of holding agents deserving of blame and punishment have

been defended on consequentialist or contractualist grounds (Dennett 1984, 2003;

Lenman 2006; Vargas 2007, 2013; Vilhauer 2013). There are in addition further

senses of responsibility that do not involve desert but are nonetheless backward-

looking. I've already noted the causal sense on which something for which the agent

was morally responsible caused the outcome, and nothing more, which is a way in

which the outcome's might be placed on the agent's moral ledger; and the sense that

features an obligation to compensate.

There are other backward-looking senses that don't involve desert. On Sher's

account, blame is essentially a certain belief-desire pair: the belief that the agent has

acted badly or that he has a bad character, and the desire that he not have performed his bad act or not have the bad character (Sher 2006: 112). In his characterization, blame neither essentially involves negative reactive attitudes, nor is it forward-looking. A related backward-looking sense that is arguably also not at play in the free will debate is the notion of normative moral judgment that Angela Smith (2008) invokes. When we judge that Zoë's decision to evade taxes was wrong, we are making a normative moral judgment, and given the appropriate context, this can qualify as a way of holding her morally responsible.

Tim Scanlon discusses another backward-looking sense to which desert is not essential. In his analysis, to blame an agent for an action is to judge that it reveals something about the agent's attitude toward oneself and/or others that impairs the relations that he can have with them, and to take one's relationship with him to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations justifies as appropriate (Scanlon 2009: 128-31). Whether blame defined in this way invokes desert depends on how the appropriateness to which this characterization refers is understood. Appropriateness might be taken as a kind of desert. But there is an epistemic or evidential interpretation that does not invoke desert. One of Scanlon's examples illustrates this reading. You trusted Bill, but you then note that on a number of occasions he behaves in an untrustworthy manner. Consequently, it becomes appropriate for you to judge your relationship with him to be impaired to the extent that reflects this diminished trust. In this case the justification is evidential. You make the judgment about impairment on evidential grounds, and

take your relationship with him to be impaired to a degree that this evidence

justifies as appropriate (Pereboom 2014).

There are further senses of moral responsibility that are distinctively

forward-looking. On Moritz Schlick's (1937) and J. J. C. Smart's (1962) proposals, the

point of blaming and praising is to reduce the incidence of bad action and to

increase the frequency of good action. When parents and teachers blame children

for bad behavior, it's often this forward-looking sense that's in play. On one way of

construing this sense, the goal of blaming and praising is to weaken dispositions to

misconduct and strengthen dispositions to good behavior. The dispositions

addressed already exist and in paradigm examples are manifest in past actions. In

the case of blame these dispositions are reasonably assumed to persist unless

corrective measures are taken. Blaming of this kind, then, addresses past

misconduct as a means to moderating or eliminating such a standing disposition.

This conception need not advocate treating agents as if they are merely

stimulus-response mechanisms. When an agent has acted badly, one might ask him:

"Why did you decide to do that?" or "Do you think it was the right thing to do?"

where part of the point of asking such questions is to communicate reasons to

acknowledge and address a disposition to behave badly. If the reasons for his

behavior he provides in response to such questions confirm that he does indeed

have such a disposition, it then becomes appropriate to protest and request an effort

to eliminate it (cf. Hieronymi 2001).[4] Engaging in such interactions will be

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[4] Pamela Hieronymi (2001: 546) proposes that resentment is best understood as a protest;

"resentment protests a past action that persists as a present threat." Resentment is not a

legitimate in light of how they contribute to the agent's moral improvement. This model is a variety of the *answerability* sense of moral responsibility proposed by Tim Scanlon (1998), Hilary Bok (1998), Angela Smith (2008), and Michael McKenna (2012).

A sense of moral responsibility of this sort plausibly features a number of forward-looking moral considerations. My own account of such a sense involves three non-desert-involving moral desiderata: protection of potential victims, reconciliation in personal relationships and with the moral community, and formation of moral character (Pereboom 2014). Immoral actions are often harmful, and we have a right to protect ourselves and others from those who are disposed to behave harmfully. Such actions can also impair relationships (Scanlon 2009), and we have a general moral stake in restoring impaired relationships through reconciliation. We in addition have a moral interest in the reformation of moral character afflicted by dispositions to misconduct. Agents are blameworthy and morally responsible in this sense by virtue of being appropriate recipients of blaming that serves these aims. The immediate target of blame in this sense is often a past action, and in this respect such blaming will have a backward-looking aspect. But insofar as the purpose of blame is protection and moral formation, the past action will be addressed as a means to correct a persisting disposition to act

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feature of the forward-looking notion of blame I set out (Pereboom 2014, Chapter 6), but on my account a core function of forward-looking blame is to protest a past action of his that persists as a present threat, as in Hieronymi's view.

immorally. To the extent that the objective of blame is reconciliation, the past action will also be addressed for its own sake.[5]

There may be instances in which an immoral action has been performed but without a persisting disposition so to act, or without a disposition that poses a genuine threat. Blame can then still have the point of reconciliation. There are also cases of persisting dispositions to act badly where the disposition has yet to be manifested in action. Such an agent can still legitimately be blamed for having the persisting disposition, and, more generally, on the largely forward-looking notion I advocate, persisting dispositions are what blame primarily addresses.

There is an account of praise parallel to this conception of blame. Of the three aims of blaming in this sense – protection, reconciliation, and moral formation – the objective particularly amenable to praising is moral formation. We praise an agent for a morally exemplary action to have her strengthen the disposition that produced it. This can also have a protective function, because strengthening such a disposition reduces threats to others. Corresponding to reconciliation is the function of recognizing success and accomplishment in a relationship. Praising actions can have this aim as well.

In this sense of moral responsibility, the agent's practical rationality is engaged in blaming and praising. In the case of blaming, at the stage of moral address we ask for an explanation of the action, and if it turns out that the agent has acted badly without excuse or justification, we aim for him to recognize that the disposition issuing in the action is best eliminated. In the ususal case, this change is

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[5] Thanks to Dana Nelkin and Randy Clarke for discussion of these points.

occasioned by the agent's recognition of moral reasons to make it, and part of the function of the moral conversation is to occasion awareness of such reasons (cf. Fischer and Ravizza 1998). In summary, then, for this sense of moral responsibility it is the agent's responsiveness to reasons, our moral interest in protection, the agent's moral formation, and our reconciliation with him, together with the fact that he had indeed acted badly, that explains why he is an appropriate recipient of blaming. There is an analogous sense of credit- or praiseworthiness.

Illustrations of non-desert-involving senses of responsibility for omissions

Let's return to the case of Matt, a first-time parent living an especially safe environment, whose first encounter with danger to his child is one in which she is seriously injured. Suppose the child is on the bed, and in the minute it takes him to get the milk bottle out of the fridge, the child crawls to the edge of the bed, falls to the floor, and is badly hurt. Matt's wife Sarah comes home and blames him for what has happened. For a second target case, imagine that in Stranded Motorist when Frank arrives at home and reflects on his trip, he blames himself for not stopping to help the motorist with her flat tire.

In each of these situations we may think that the agent deserves to be blamed, but many of us hesitate to make this judgment. But Frank is also responsible for the outcome in non-desert-involving sense that the motorist's continued struggle was caused by something for which he is morally responsible, on the supposition that absences can be causes. The motorist's continued struggle was caused by Frank's failure to care enough or to become more vigilant or both.

Both Frank and Matt are morally responsible and to blame in Sher's sense that for each a particular belief-desire pair is appropriate: it's fitting to believe that their lack of vigilance or care was are bad and to desire that they would not have failed in these ways. And at least in Matt's case, Sarah's judgment of moderate relationship impairment might well be apt: she may ground justify her judgment of impairment in Matt's lack of trustworthiness due to vigilance-failure. Thus, even in the absence of desert, several backward-looking senses of moral responsibility can be invoked in these examples.

Forward-looking notions also apply. It's evident that Matt is appropriately called to account by confronting him a moral reason to become more vigilant. And Frank might well justified in calling himself to account by confronting himself with moral reason to care more about stranded motorists and for people in need more generally. If he already cares enough, he's justified in confronting himself with a moral reason to become sufficiently vigilant to help them. More generally, in each of these cases, moral formation is at stake, and the agent is appropriately called to account for a forward-looking reason.

In Matt's case, blame might also have the forward-looking aim of reconciliation. Sarah may legitimately judge that their relationship has been moderately impaired, and her blaming Matt may have the goal of restoring the relationship to its status prior to the impairment. In this respect, it may be that Matt is blameworthy specifically for the outcome, and not just for the failure to be more vigilant, in a forward-looking sense. Their relationship is impaired due to Matt's vigilance-failure, but plausibly it's also impaired in addition due to his vigilance

failure causing the baby's injury. Correlatively, reconciliation would involve not only Matt's telling Sarah about his resolve to become more vigilant, but also expressing his sorrow for the baby's being injured due to his lack of vigilance.

In a case like Alessandra's, the agent might be responsible insofar as it would be appropriate for her to compensate. Imagine that the dog is not Alessandra's, but she's agreed to take care of it for a friend, and suppose the dog dies of heat exhaustion. Setting aside desert-involving notions of responsibility, and also setting aside legal requirements, it would be morally appropriate for Alessandra to compensate her friend for the loss of the dog. Here the moral goal may also be reconciliation: compensation is the sort of expression of sorrow for what has happened that can set the stage for the renewal of a friendship that has been impaired.

Conclusion

Just as we can be morally responsible for decisions, it seems that we can be morally responsible for failures to decide. And as we can be responsible for the outcomes of our decisions to act, we can also be responsible for the outcomes of decisions not to act and for outcomes of failures to decide. It appears that we can be responsible for outcomes of omissions that we did not foresee, and that did not trace back to prior shortcomings that we did or should have noticed and could have addressed. Countervailing intuitions can be accommodated by noting that our practice involves notions of responsibility that don't involve desert, some of which

are backward-looking and some of which are forward-looking. I've given reasons for thinking that these senses should predominate in the kinds of circumstances under consideration.

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