

Negative Actions: Events, Absences, and the Metaphysics of Agency . By JONATHAN PAYTON.

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If I had forgotten to review Jonathan Payton's excellent new book, *Negative Actions: Events, Absences, and the Metaphysics of Agency*, what might I have done instead? One pleasing possibility is that I could have gone swimming somewhere off the coast of Italy. On Payton's view of things such as my omitting to review his book, my omission would be *identical* to my swimming in the Mediterranean sea. More precisely, negative actions such as omissions and refrainments are identical to the events which ensure that one doesn't do what one omitted or refrained from doing. So, if Alice refrained from being rude to Charlie by biting her tongue, since Alice's biting of her tongue was the event which ensured she was not rude to Charlie, that event *is* her refrainment. If Alice omitted to kiss Beth because she just stood there a nervous wreck, then the event of Alice's standing there *is* her omission. Negative actions are identical to the positive actions which play the relevant ensuring role.

This is a bold, original, and highly controversial thesis, which Payton develops and defends through the course of this book methodically and forcefully. In Chapter 1, after defending some general claims concerning the ontology of actions, he gives a spirited defence of a Quinean criterion of ontological commitment according to which we are ontologically committed to whatever true sentences in our language quantify over (p.25). This criterion guides Payton's methodology throughout, meaning that much of the book is taken up with semantical considerations about the logical form of negative action sentences like 'Alice omitted to kiss Beth'. Payton's strategy, in brief, is to show that these sentences *do* quantify over positive actions with the role of ensuring something

doesn't happen, and then show that, since these sentences are often true, by the Quinean criterion, omissions are the positive actions which play the ensuring role.

Chapter 2 spells out a trilemma which structures the book. Where 'NEG- ϕ ' is a catch-all schematic verb which captures 'omit', 'refrain' etc.:

- 1) Necessarily, if x NEG- ϕ s, then x acts by NEG- ϕ -ing

- 2) Necessarily, if x acts by ϕ -ing, then there exists an event that is x 's token ϕ -ing

- 3) Possibly, x NEG- ϕ s, and there exists no event which is x 's token NEG- ϕ -ing

(1) is plausible because omitting and refraining are manifestations of our agency; we can do them intentionally, for reasons, and with control. (2) is justified by powerful Davidsonian arguments for thinking that action sentences report the existence of events (p.20-30; 88-93). And (3) is motivated by the highly plausibly Deflationist thought that 'Alice omitted to kiss Beth' reports the negative existential proposition that *there is no event of Alice's kissing Beth*. But (1-3) are inconsistent: if omitting and refraining are ways of acting, and action sentences commit us to the existence of events, there must be events of NEG- ϕ -ing; but if Deflationism is true, then either omitting is not a way of acting, or the Davidsonian thesis about action-sentences is false. Ultimately, Payton's solution is to deny (3), along with its Deflationist motivation, and the rest of the book attempts to show how and why we should do this.

After arguing (very convincingly) in Chapter 3 that we should accept (1), in Chapter 4, Payton compares Deflationism with a simple Neo-Davidsonian View (Simple-ND), on which 'Alice

omitted to kiss Beth' is analysed as 'There is an event of which Alice is the agent, Beth is the patient, and which is a refrainment from kissing'. It is simple because it contains only one event variable; it is Neo-Davidsonian because it maintains (2) whilst denying (3). Although this is Payton's aim too, he argues that Deflationism is much better than Simple-ND because Deflationism captures and explains adverb-involving inferences regarding negative action sentences, whereas Simple-ND fails. Throughout this chapter, Payton does a fantastic job of providing arguments like this to show that Deflationism is not just superficially attractive, but that it really does provide a powerful analysis of negative action sentences. Anyone looking to *defend* the Deflationist semantics should start with Payton's own arguments.

However, he is not out to defend Deflationism, but a more sophisticated Neo-Davidsonian view (Sophisticated-ND). On Sophisticated-ND, negative action sentences like 'Alice omitted to kiss Beth' are analysed as 'There is an event, e , of which Alice is the agent, Beth the patient, and e ensures that *there is no event e^** , which is Alice's kissing of Beth'. Chapter 5 sets out the account in fine detail, giving semantics for ' e ensures that p ', and showing that Sophisticated-ND captures and explains the same adverb-involving inferences as Deflationism. Having shown that they are at least on par, in Chapter 6, Payton argues that Sophisticated-ND is *preferable*, since it both explains how negative action sentences interact with perceptual locutions like 'Charlie saw Alice omit to kiss Beth', and gives a better analysis of how adverbs like 'intentionally' and 'in the kitchen' modify negative action sentences. Having argued that Sophisticated-ND is superior to Deflationism, Chapter 7-8 consider and reject a vast battery of arguments against Sophisticated-ND.

It is a very good book. Payton's discussion is extremely detailed, cautious, and densely packed with arguments. He succeeds in showing, I think, that it is very plausible to identify negative actions with positive events, and he does this by employing many ingenious, often technical, arguments.

Moreover, I think he shows that, whilst there are other views out there, the two best contenders are Deflationism and Sophisticated-ND. It is therefore essential reading for anyone remotely interested in these issues. However, it is worth saying that the book is highly technical and often very difficult. It presupposes familiarity, not just with Davidsonian semantics, but with very complex machinery from formal semantics and the philosophy of language. This makes some sections quite slow-going, and if, like me, your formal chops aren't up to much, some patience is required in the fiddly parts.

I want to end with a critical comment. Payton treats Deflationism as motivated by a linguistic concern: if positive action sentences quantify over events, then negative action sentences are negative existentials (p.58-9). However, another motivation for Deflationism comes from the highly plausible view that events are *changes* (Lombard, 1986). This is because, if events are changes, then many relevant cases don't seem to involve events at all. Say I refrain from eating another chocolate. Instead, I just sit there watching TV. There seems to be no change that we can identify as the event of my refrainment. Therefore, the analysis of 'I refrained from eating another chocolate' cannot quantify over an event.

When discussing examples which involve no movement, Payton treats someone's staying still as an event which ensures that the agent doesn't do something. But this requires that he deny that events are changes in favour of something like the popular view that they are property exemplifications. Now, Payton clearly prefers the latter view (p.172-178), and is at pains to show that Sophisticated-ND is consistent with it. But it now seems that his view *requires* it. Otherwise, he has no events to witness the quantification over ensuring events in his analysis of sentences reporting these cases. This invites a number of questions: how might Payton respond to the metaphysical motivation for Deflationism; is Sophisticated-ND consistent with other views of events; and if it isn't,

how problematic is that? After all, although the property exemplification view is popular, it is also controversial.

Disputations aside, this book is an excellent, wide-ranging, and compelling addition to the literature on both negative actions, and agency more generally. I thoroughly recommend it.

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References

1. Lombard, Lawrence (1986) *Events: A Metaphysical Study*. Routledge.