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Article

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On a So-called Demonstration of the Causal Power of Absences

David C. Oderberg

WARNING

Abstract

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Tyron Goldschmidt has recently published a non-paper in which he claims to demonstrate the causal power of absences. His non-paper is, precisely, an empty page. The non-paper is ingenious and at first 'glance' the 'reader' might think that the absence of words on the page does prove that negative beings can literally cause states such as surprise or disappointment. Closer analysis, however, shows that Goldschmidt's clever non-paper not only lacks words but also lacks causal power. Serious metaphysical problems pile up if we suppose otherwise.

Key words: absence causation, powers, negative truths, negative being

Tyron Goldschmidt has recently not written what is, to my mind, the best non-paper I have not read in decades.¹ In it he purports to demonstrate, albeit without saying so *in* the paper, that absences have causal power, something many reality-minded metaphysicians vigorously deny.² His non-paper, in other words, consists of no words whatsoever – a mere empty page. True, he does have metaphysicians on his side,³ but in this case the absence of a

¹ 'A Demonstration of the Causal Power of Absences', *Dialectica* 70 (2016): 85.

² See, for example, George Molnar, 'Truthmakers for Negative Truths', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 78 (2000): 72-86; David Lewis, 'Causation as Influence', in J. Collins, N. Hall, and L. Paul (eds.), *Causation and Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Bradford Books, 2004), 75-106; Helen Beebe, 'Causing and Nothingness', in *Causation and Counterfactuals*, 291-308.

³ See, for example, Stephen Barker and Mark Jago, 'Being Positive about Negative Facts', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85 (2012): 117-38; D. H. Mellor, *The Facts of Causation* (London: Routledge: 1995).

good many of them indicates no lack of a sound ontological sense – not so much a taste for desert landscapes, à la Quine, but more a preference for oases over mirages.

To grasp the full force of my response to Goldschmidt, however, each reader must not read his ingenious contribution for himself. Each reader must, in the spirit of Hume, turn their gaze within and inspect their own personal reaction to Goldschmidt's powerful challenge. I do not want to bias the reader with a report of the result of my own inward turn.

You must, I insist, first do the opposite of what St Augustine tells us God commanded him to do. Rather than take Goldschmidt's paper and read it, I command you to take Goldschmidt's paper and *not* read it.

So, have you not read it? Good. I will first report my *unconsidered* reaction. Then I will report my *considered* reaction and you will, I trust, see that these *are* your reactions too once you immerse some sound reasoning upon Goldschmidt's *tabula rasa* temporal order.

I initially reacted thus. (1) How annoying, I've only downloaded the cover sheet of the paper. I must download it again. (2) How incredibly annoying, I've still only downloaded the cover sheet! (3) No, I haven't done anything wrong; my computer is not playing up; my internet connection is fine. So the publisher has made a mistake and not posted Goldschmidt's entire paper. (4) But at the top of the page the paper is reported as being only one page long! (5) Oh, I get it. But wait! Goldschmidt has done it! By Heaven, the lack of text has really – *really* – surprised me. I've been metaphysically smacked in the face by, of all things, an *absence*!

Needless to say, Goldschmidt achieved, at least with me, his intended effect in a way that no philosophy paper I have ever not read has ever done – at least so quickly. A psychological effect does not, however, a piece of philosophical reasoning make. We philosophers are not lacking in vulnerability to intellectual sleights of hand. Fortunately, having been thinking about this topic for quite a while, and not allowing myself to mistake

(1)-(5) above as containing any kind of rational persuasion, I feel on solid ground in objecting that Goldschmidt has not in the least made out his case for absence causation.

Why not? Well, it is hard to deny that I was struck by *something*. I was really *caused* to be surprised. So what surprised me? Was it the negative being constituted by an *absence* of text on the page (apart from the title, author, and a few sundries)? Note that there was *much*

that was absent from the page – not only text but also patches of ink, pictures of daffodils, the names of other philosophers, et cetera and probably an infinitum. After all, if, as

Goldschmidt believes, absences have causal power, then they must be both real and capable of individuation, so he cannot deny that all these other absences exist – those, to be precise,

that are absences *from* his non-paper. So I should have been surprised by all these *other* absences as well, shouldn't I?

Not at all, comes the reply: for you were not *expecting* there to be pictures of daffodils or splotches of ink. True, but what *was* I expecting? Suppose Goldschmidt's non-paper had contained only the text of the first page of *War and Peace*. Then it would still have been a non-paper, only in a different way. I would still have been surprised, but for a different *reason*. In the first case I expected some text; there wasn't any; and I was surprised.

In the second case I also expected text, and I got it; no surprise there. But I also expected *philosophical* text, not a page of Tolstoy; and so I *was* surprised by that. By what – by the lack of *philosophical* text? Well, Goldschmidt's actual non-paper *also* lacks philosophical text, and the absence of text is not identical to the absence of philosophical text. So why was I not surprised by the lack of philosophical text in his actual non-paper? Why no causal 'oomph' (or 'biff'⁴) *both* from the lack of text *and* from the distinct lack of philosophical text? Will Goldschmidt say that I did *not* expect philosophical text, only text? How wrong he

⁴ David Lewis (using Peter Menzies's term), 'Void and Object', in *Causation and Counterfactuals*, 277-90.

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would be, for I can only avow that I *did* expect both from his actual non-paper. So why didn't they both surprise me? Again, I can only report that what surprised me was the lack of *any* text. To be sure, had there been a page of Tolstoy I *then* would have been surprised by the lack of philosophical text, but Goldschmidt's actual non-paper is not like that. I suspect that if he *had* published a page of Tolstoy, under the same title as his actual non-paper, the surprise generated would have been different.

This instance of the 'problem of proliferate causation', as it is called, is a genuine one to crack. Goldschmidt might insist that the absence of text from his non-paper, and the absence of philosophical text, are one and the same absence in *this* world. True, you can have one without the other in some possible world, but in the actual world, as far as his actual non-paper is concerned, they are identical. I find this more dubious: after all, the non-paper also lacked *legible* text, and I expected legible text, but was decidedly *not* surprised by its absence. So what *is* the single, causally operative absence Goldschmidt could have in mind if he made such a move – the lack of black, legible, justified, first-line indented, evenly spaced prose? (Just go through that journal's style guidelines: to be frank, I expected a decent amount of these to characterise the text I expected.) I'm having trouble identifying the absence itself, let alone knowing whether it literally struck my mind, thereby generating surprise.

Yet suppose we have pinned down the absence. Since not all of its components struck me (such as the lack of legibility – although I expected it, I tell you!) – in fact only *one* component did, namely the lack of text – in virtue of what is it the case that this component *did* surprise me and the others did not? What move could Goldschmidt make now? Perhaps rank the expectations in order of strength? He might say that I was only surprised by whatever I expected most of all, which was just *text*. This looks gratuitous. Assuming we

⁵ Peter Menzies, 'Difference-Making in Context', in *Causation and Counterfactuals*, 139-80.

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could even *rank* the levels of strength of my relevant expectations (what a task...), why shouldn't I have been struck by the lack of the *two* features I expected the most, say both text and philosophical text, or the top three (add, say, paragraph spacing or some such)... What remotely plausible principle could beat that one here?

Now Goldschmidt might change tack. I am mistaken, he might argue, in thinking that it is causal 'complication' he is pointing to. No, he might insist, it is another theory of absence causation he is defending, such as a Lewisian counterfactual theory (with, let us not forget, all of its attendant problems).⁶ To say that I am *caused* to be surprised by the lack of text is not to say that there is a causal *relation* at work, only that if there *had* been text I would *not* have been surprised, and so on. We all know the drill. No, I reply, Professor Goldschmidt, you could not get away with that. Is it not causal *power* you are seeking to defend? The clue is in the title of your non-paper! You think absences can be causally *operative*,⁷ not merely causally *relevant*⁸ or causally *explanatory*.⁹ We can all agree that absences, whatever they are, have a causally relevant, explanatory role: you did not have to go to the inordinate effort of not writing your non-paper to convince anyone of that.

The metaphysical problems are piling up. To add a cherry to the cake, consider now my *reaction* rather than the alleged absence I reacted *to*. I was, I admit, quite surprised. I expected there to be text. But note: I also *wanted* there to be text, yet I did not feel that my desire had been frustrated. I *hoped* for text, but I did not feel my hopes had been dashed. I *looked forward* to text, but its absence did not make me feel deprived of an intellectually enjoyable hour or two reading Professor Goldschmidt's limpid prose. Heavens above – I *deserved* text! But did I feel cheated by its absence? Not at all! On the contrary, once I got

⁶ Lewis, 'Causation as Influence'; 'Void and Object'.

⁷ Contra Molnar, 'Truthmakers for Negative Truths'.

⁸ As per Boris Kusko, 'The Reality of Absences', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 84 (2006): 21-37.

⁹ As per Beebe, 'Causing and Nothingness'.

the joke I gave the silent, knowing guffaw that only a smug academic could produce. Oh, by the way: I was *not* expecting, nor did I particularly want, to have an intellectual joke played on me, but I laughed all the same.

Enough. Should it not be obvious what's going on here? Do you see all the *ratiocination* that I had to go through at the time, and then post facto as I write this *real* paper in order to work out, as the President of the United States might have put it, what the *heck* is going on. Here is what went on in my head. I saw a sheet of paper (actually a pdf page, but let's talk the old-fashioned way) with a title, author's name, and some sundries. What impinged on my sense organs, causing a certain sensory experience, was a predominantly white page with a small amount of information on it. The only 'oomph' there could have been came from that. It is of no avail to object – which is not true anyway¹⁰ – that suppose I were – that *all* seeing is seeing *as* or *seeing that*, that one could question whether I even *saw* a page, or *saw* any text at all as opposed to a patch of white and some smaller black shapes overlapping the white. The question is whether the absence of relevant text – the expected philosophical text – could have any 'oomph' of its own, whether or not the other things I am certain I saw *also* have 'oomph'. As long as *something* has 'oomph', even if it be just pixels or ink marks, we have the required contrast with absences.

Once the page and the small amount of text on it had caused my sensory experience, I was surprised – *not* by something *else* I saw, but once I had realised *that* there was nothing else on the page, *that* the page lacked what I expected to see *as well*. My question to myself was along the lines of, 'What am I looking at here? The page is blank save for an author and title!' I *knew* already *what* I was seeing, but I hadn't yet worked out why I was startled. 'Oh, I *see*', my internal monologue continued – 'I am surprised *because* there is no other text'. My

¹⁰ There is a world of difference between the question whether one perceives text and whether one perceives an absence of text, and also between whether one perceives ink marks as text and whether one perceives that a page lacks text at all.

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‘I see’ was not a realisation that I was seeing an additional being, to wit an absence of text.

Were I to have seen that, I would have seen it at the same time as I saw the page, author and title, with no delay for confusion and head scratching. After all, if the absence were real and had ‘oomph’, there is no reason why its ‘oomph’ should have been any less powerful, any slower acting, than the ‘oomph’ exercised by the whole page with its small amount of text.

But I *did* delay. I pondered. I thought I had made a mistake. Then I thought the publisher had made a mistake. Then I came to an *understanding*, in other words, I grasped a truth I had not grasped before – that the author was intentionally surprising me in a performative way, by the very ‘paper’ itself, and this in virtue of the *truth* that the ‘paper’ looked philosophical text and was supposed to lack it.

I defy any reader who has taken a look at Goldschmidt’s non-paper *before* reading this one to not, with all sincerity, that they did *not* go through the same, or a very similar, ratiocinative process before realising what was going on. Now we often ratiocinate, of course, about what it is we are perceiving. We have to interpret the world around us, whether consciously or via unconscious, hard-wired mechanisms. Of itself the need for ratiocination proves nothing. I ask the reader, though, to attend to the *particular* train of thought that accompanied their inspection of Goldschmidt’s purported demonstration. Did you just *see an absence*? No, I insist – you did not. You never *took* yourself to be doing such a thing. You saw a page and you saw a bit of text, but you had to work out what that meant as far as absences themselves are concerned. After all, the title of the paper, which you *did* see, directed you to just such reflection. Ask yourself: if you saw an absence, why did it take you so long to realise that you saw it? Did you have to *train* yourself to see it? How did that work, and why was it even necessary? Or did you, as I contend, come to the realisation, after some ratiocination, *that there was no text* where it should have been?

The metaphysical moral we should draw from all this is that we have here no demonstration of the causal power of absences. We can account for what we need to account for in other, metaphysically palatable ways. We do not need to reduce putative absence causation to explanation, or causal relevance, or counterfactual dependence. All of these do come into play, but we can also keep well away from the Quinean desert landscape. In fact, on the sort of theory I defend, our landscape need not be far more lush, far more exotic, and also far more *living* than anywhere Quine would have felt at home. For we need to recognise the existence of *potentialities*, states of need, normative realities, privations, and the full machinery of a neo-Aristotelian theory of being. With that machinery put to work, we can find positive truthmakers for negative truths without having to postulate real absences with causal powers. We can also account for *real* absence causation by grounding them in real causal processes, in actualities with causal powers and attendant potencies. Absences are not real beings, on this theory, but they are ‘beings of reason’ as the Scholastics put it – what we grasp insofar as we grasp truths in which absences play an ineliminable role.¹¹

Why all the presumptuous psychologising, you may ask? Well, isn’t Goldschmidt’s non-paper just one big exercise in psychology? Isn’t he asking us to turn the gaze within and see what he claims he sees? So I turn my gaze within and I do not see *nothing* as he would have it; but I do see nothing of the sort.

¹¹ For the theory undergirding all of this, see my forthcoming book, *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil*.