Praise and Prevention

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Abstract: I argue that it is possible to prevent (and to be praiseworthy for preventing) an unwelcome outcome that had no chance of occurring. I motivate this position by constructing examples in which it makes sense to explain the non-occurrence of a certain outcome by referring to a particular agent’s intentional and willing behavior, and yet the non-occurrence of the outcome in question was ensured by factors external to the agent. I conclude that even if the non-occurrence of an unwelcome outcome is ensured, the agent whose action explains this non-occurrence is praiseworthy for preventing the outcome. My examples are similar in important respects to Frankfurt-type cases. In the second half of the paper, I discuss the relationship between my examples and Frankfurt-type cases involving both actions and omissions. I conclude that while I may be responsible for the consequences of an action even if those consequences are unavoidable, this is not necessarily so for the consequences of omissions.

Keywords: Praise, Prevention, Frankfurt-type Cases, Consequences, Omissions

Our actions sometimes have the consequence that we prevent something from happening, and sometimes we are praiseworthy when we prevent unwelcome occurrences. In most cases, a person deserves praise for preventing an unwelcome occurrence if she intentionally and willingly prevented it. It may also seem that a person can prevent an outcome only if that outcome had some chance of occurring, and that one cannot prevent, or be praiseworthy for preventing, an outcome that could not have occurred.

I will argue that this last claim is false. In fact, a person can deserve praise for preventing an unwelcome outcome that had no chance of occurring. I motivate this conclusion in the first half of the paper by constructing examples in which (i) the non-occurrence of a certain outcome is intuitively explicable in terms of an agent’s intentional and willing behavior, and (ii) the non-
occurrence of the outcome is ensured by factors external to the agent. I argue that even if the
non-occurrence of the outcomes in these examples is ensured, the agent whose (intentional and
willing) behavior explains the non-occurrence of the outcome is praiseworthy for its prevention.

In the second half of the paper, I consider the relationship between my examples and the
account of responsibility for consequences of actions and omissions offered by John Martin
Fischer and Mark Ravizza. Fischer and Ravizza claim that agents may be responsible for the
unavoidable consequences of both their actions and omissions, but I argue that this is not true in
cases of complex omissions. Even if an outcome is ensured, my *actions* may explain the
outcome’s occurrence such that it makes sense to attribute the outcome to my agency, and to
hold me responsible for its occurrence. However, if a certain outcome is guaranteed to *not* occur
regardless of how I act, then often no omission of mine will explain this non-occurrence in a way
that is relevant to ascriptions of responsibility. Thus, while I may be responsible for a
consequence of an action regardless of whether that consequence is avoidable, the same is not
necessarily true for the consequence of an omission.

1. *Praise and Prevention*

Here is an example that supports the view that only possible occurrences are preventable.
Suppose that the porcelain statue on your mantle has fallen and that I catch it before it hits the
floor. I might take myself to have earned your praise for preventing the statue from breaking.
However, if it turned out that the statue was not made of porcelain but of a more durable material
like plastic, then I would not have prevented your statue from breaking. I may have prevented the
statue from striking the floor, but in doing this, I did not prevent the statue from breaking
because striking the floor would not have caused it to break. This is not to say that the plastic
statue was unbreakable, it is just to say that the fall in question was certainly not sufficient to break the statue regardless of whether I intercepted it. In this case, I should not demand praise for saving your statue. You might praise my good intentions and my quick reflexes, but you would be quite right to demur if I insisted that I deserve praise for preventing the statue from breaking.\footnote{Some might insist that moral praise and blame should respond solely to our intentions and motivations, and not to whether these happen to lead to good or bad consequences. On this view, the fact that the statue turned out to be plastic would not affect the praise to which I am entitled. However, I shall assume in this paper that it makes sense to hold people morally responsible for, and to praise or blame them on account of, the consequences of their actions.} Apparently, I did not prevent the statue from breaking because there was no chance of it breaking even if I had not caught it.

There are, however, other cases in which my power to prevent an occurrence does not seem to depend on whether that occurrence might have occurred. If I am playing basketball, I may prevent an opponent from making a basket by blocking her shot, and in some cases in which I prevent a basket, there may be good reason to believe that if I had failed to prevent the basket, then one of my teammates would have succeeded in doing so. It makes sense in these cases to credit me with preventing a basket insofar as my intentional and knowing efforts play a crucial role in explaining why the basket was not made. It seems, then, that I can prevent an occurrence even if someone else was likely to prevent it if I had failed to do so.

We can strengthen the preceding example by imagining conditions that ensure that if I fail to prevent a basket, a teammate will succeed in doing so. Suppose that Superman is on my team and that he is superhumanly good at preventing his opponents from making baskets. Superman may be so good at preventing baskets that it is impossible to score against Superman if he tries to keep you from doing so. If this were so, then perhaps no one would ever make a basket when playing against Superman and me. Of course, my talents would be unnecessary to ensure this outcome. Still, even if Superman is capable of, and intent upon, making sure that our
opponents score no baskets, it does not follow that *he* will block all the attempts they make to score baskets.

It is consistent with it being impossible to score against Superman’s team that sometimes I block an opponent’s shot instead of Superman. Suppose that, in addition to being highly motivated to see our opponents not score, Superman also values team play. If this were so, then Superman would have reason not to block every shot that he could block. If Superman is a “team player,” I may block some shots, and in a case in which I block a shot, it makes sense to credit me with preventing a basket. The fact that Superman would have blocked any shot I failed to block does not alter this conclusion.

Of course, in order to deserve praise for preventing a basket, I must (knowingly and willingly) perform certain actions such that I block a particular shot. I must, for example, place myself on a certain part of the basketball court, I must raise my hands in a certain way, jump in a certain way, and so on. It would be difficult to list all the actions one might perform to block a shot, but there is little reason to think that my ability to perform any of these actions depends on whether it was possible for a shot to go in the basket.

However, whether I prevent a basket does depend on whether the shot would have gone in the basket if nothing had interfered with it. For example, we would not say that I prevent a basket when I intercept a ball that is heading out of bounds instead of toward the basket. But an attempt to score a basket can meet this counterfactual condition regardless of whether it was actually possible for the shot to make it into the basket: even if it is impossible to get a shot past Superman when he is on the court, it may still be true that a given shot would have gone in the basket if Superman had not been on the court.
Still, we may worry that if Superman will block any shot that I do not block, then my actions during the game cannot explain why any particular attempt at making a basket fails. Here is one way of pressing this worry. Imagine that before the match, a member of the opposing team says: “We’re not going to score any baskets – you’ve got Superman on your team and it’s impossible to score against him.” This claim is correct. The opposing team can know in advance that they will score no baskets, and referencing Superman’s presence on my team is a sufficient justification for this claim. But it does not follow that when the game is over referencing Superman’s presence on my team will be the most natural way of explaining why the opposing team failed in all their attempts to make baskets.

This last point can be supported by noting that it is possible for Superman to bear the same relation to his teammates that I bear to Superman. Suppose that Superman has Captain Marvel as his teammate. In terms of superhuman abilities, Captain Marvel is roughly Superman’s equal, so it is impossible for a normal human to score a basket against Captain Marvel. In this case, it will be true of both Superman and Captain Marvel that they have a teammate whose presence on their team is sufficient to ensure that no one scores against them. The opposing team can confidently predict that they will score no baskets by citing the presence of either superhero, but it would be strange to conclude that when the game is over there is no justification for attributing the prevention of any baskets to either Superman or Captain Marvel. In fact, we would have a ready method for determining whether one of the heroes prevented a given basket: we would look for actions of one or the other that proximately explain why the progress of a shot toward the basket stopped.

There may be cases in which it is unclear what counts as a “proximate explanation,” but if the progress of a particular shot is halted because, say, Captain Marvel alone placed his hand

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2 I am grateful to a referee for Philosophical Explorations for suggesting this way of expressing the worry.
in the path of the ball, then this is a fairly clear case in which Marvel’s action proximately explains why the ball did not go in the basket. It would be reasonable, in such a case, to credit Marvel with preventing a basket even though his opponents knew in advance that they would score no baskets because Superman is on his team. Why should we not say the same thing about me? Why should we not say that when I stop a ball, this constitutes the relevant sort of explanation for why a basket was not made, and that it is therefore reasonable to credit me with preventing a basket? Of course, I am different from Captain Marvel (and Superman): it is impossible to score against him, but it is possible to score against me. But when we want to explain why it is that Marvel blocked a particular shot, I find it much more natural to cite his particular actions than to cite the general impossibility of getting a shot past him. Now I am as capable as Marvel of performing some of these particular actions—such as putting my hand in the right place at the right time—so when I perform these action, I deserve the same sort of credit for blocking a shot that we would give to Marvel.

It seems, then, that the conditions for knowingly and willingly preventing a basket can be met without it actually being possible for the basket to be made; so this possibility is not a necessary condition on being praiseworthy for preventing a basket. I submit, furthermore, that if we do not accept the reasoning I have presented in my superhero cases, it becomes difficult to sustain intuitive responses to more prosaic cases of prevention. As I noted above, it is very plausible to say that basketball player A can prevent a basket—and be praiseworthy for the fact that a basket was not made—even if she is on a team with other players who were ready and able to prevent the basket. Of course, we are typically unsure whether another player would have prevented a basket if A had failed to prevent it, but the plausibility of attributing the prevention to A, and our willingness to praise A for it, does not depend on this uncertainty. We do not, I think,
typically analyze our intuitions about other players’ abilities before praising a given player for preventing a basket. For the most part, our attributions of prevention seem to depend, as they should, on the actual causal factors that explain why something did not occur rather than on what might have happened, had the prevention not been successful. But prevention is not entirely a matter of actual causal factors. As I have pointed out, there are counterfactual constraints that also apply to prevention; I discuss these constraints in more detail in the next section.

2. Two Types of Prevention Cases

How do we explain the difference between the case involving the plastic statue and the Superman case? In the plastic statue case, I do not prevent the statue from breaking because it would not have broken even if I had not caught it, but in the Superman case, I prevent a basket regardless of whether Superman’s presence made it inevitable that the basket would not be made. The following cases help explain the difference between the two earlier cases.

Suppose that a gambler wants to make sure that no one scores against my team, so he installs a permanent, impenetrable force field around my team’s goal so that no ball will enter it. In this case, it seems to me that I do not prevent baskets when I do things (such as intercepting an opponent’s shot) that would count as “preventing a basket” in situations in which no force field is present. But now suppose that the gambler ensures that my opponents cannot make a basket by installing a force field around my team’s goal that is briefly (and automatically) activated if and only if a ball comes within five inches of going in the basket. I suggest that in this case, I do prevent a basket when I intercept an opponent’s shot that is moving toward the basket, and I prevent the basket even though the gambler has arranged things so that if the ball gets by me (and my teammates), it will not go in the basket.
The case featuring the temporary force field is similar to the one in which Superman is my teammate, and the case with the permanent force field around the basket is similar to the case involving the plastic statue. Here is one way of articulating the difference between these two pairs of cases. In all the basketball examples, if a basket is not made, then something will explain this fact. If I prevent a basket, then what explains the fact that a basket was not made is that I have, through my actions, brought about certain pertinent changes in the world. For instance, I may change the world in a way that explains why a basket was not made by putting my hand in the path of the ball. If Superman is my teammate, and I have not already done so, then he may change the world so that the ball does not make it into the basket by putting his hand in the path of the ball. The same is true of the temporary force field: if I do not change the world so that the ball does not go in the basket, then the temporary activation of the force field will constitute such a change.

However, in the permanent force field case, I do not prevent a basket because after the force field is in place, and before I take any action, the world is already such that the ball will not go in the basket. No change needs to be brought about by me or anyone else for a basket to not be made, so nothing I do will change the world in a way that explains why a basket is not made.³

Now it may seem that the temporary force field and Superman cases have the same relevant feature as the permanent force field case: in all three cases, prior to any effort I make, no ball will go into the basket. But the similarity between the three cases is not exact. What is

³ Some with whom I have discussed the permanent force field case have been reluctant to agree that I do not prevent a basket in this case. It can help to consider the following variation. Suppose there is a basketball court inside a brick gymnasium and that outside the gym a child is bouncing a basketball against its walls. Sometimes the child throws the ball in such a way that it would go into the basket inside the gym, if the gym walls were miraculously to vanish. Now suppose a second child sometimes intercepts the ball before it hits the wall. Even in those interception cases in which the ball would have gone in the basket if it had not been intercepted and if the walls of the gym had vanished, we would not say that the second child prevented the ball from going in the basket: he merely prevents the ball from hitting the wall. We should say something similar in the permanent force field case—namely, that I merely prevent the ball from encountering the force field—for it would be no less miraculous for a ball to pass through the impenetrable force field than it would be for the gym walls to disappear.
already true in the Superman and temporary force field cases is that no basket will be made, but unlike the permanent force field case, something still needs to happen in these cases so that the ball will not go in the basket: I need to move my hand, or Superman needs to move his hand, or the force field needs to activate. If I move my hand and stop the ball’s progress, then I prevent the basket, if Superman moves his hand and stops the ball’s progress, then he prevents the basket, and so on. But in the case of the permanent force field, after the force field is in place, no agent will alter the world in a way that pertinently explains why the ball will not go in the basket—as far as prevention goes, everything has already been taken care of. Similarly, in the plastic statue case, no changes to the world are required to make it so that the statue does not break—the fact that the statue is plastic has already taken care of this, so my interfering with the statue’s fall does not prevent it from breaking.\(^4\)

The point can be put this way: in a case like the one involving the plastic statue (or the

\(^4\) A referee for Philosophical Explorations suggests that we might reject my interpretation of the temporary force field case on the following grounds. Since the force field is triggered automatically, no one needs to do anything for the force field to prevent the ball from entering the basket, so the case is too similar to the permanent force field case to justify drawing different conclusions in the two cases. However, if the gambler had to watch the progress of the ball, and press a button to trigger the force field, then—the referee suggests, and I concur—I would prevent a basket if I kept a ball from reaching the point at which the gambler would trigger the force field. And this is so even if it is certain that the gambler will always press the button at the right moment. If a reader shares this reservation about the temporary force field example, I think she can substitute this new “watchful gambler” case without threatening the argument in the rest of the paper. However, I think the cases of the temporary and permanent force fields are sufficiently different to justify different conclusions about whether I prevent a basket. Moreover, it seems to me that the temporary force field case is relevantly similar to the watchful gambler case. While the temporary force field activates automatically, this does not mean that it will necessarily activate; it will do so only if nothing has already kept the ball from getting close to the basket. Presumably, the mechanism that generates the force field has some means of registering a ball’s trajectory, and reliably correlating this with the activation of the force field. But this is very similar to the role that the watchful gambler (or Superman) is supposed to play—at least if we are certain that the gambler will stop the ball from reaching the basket (if it has not already been stopped). Of course, the gambler triggers the force field intentionally and on the basis of certain motivations, and this does not happen if the force field is triggered automatically, but I do not need to think of this as a relevant difference in this context. Since the temporary force field will not necessarily activate, the possibility of its activating is one of several changes that might occur to stop the ball; of course, the force field is a “fail safe,” but the watchful gambler (or Superman) play the same sort of role. The permanent force field, on the other hand, is already activated before I do anything, so its activation is not one of several possible changes in the world that might explain why a ball does not make it to the basket. The permanent force field is, rather, a background feature of the causal landscape against which events unfold. In the temporary force field case, one of the relevant background features is that the force field might activate (and is guaranteed to do so in certain circumstances), just as in the watchful gambler case it is a background feature that the gambler might stop the ball (and is guaranteed to do so in certain circumstances). This difference between the two force field cases seems to me to account for why I prevent a basket in one case, but not the other.
permanent force field), an already activated causal power ensures that a certain event will not occur. Since this ensuring power is already activated, it is part of the background against which other events unfold. If this background includes conditions that ensure that a particular outcome will not occur, then events that unfold against the background are not crucial to an explanation of why the outcome did not occur. However, in the Superman case and the temporary force field case, while it may be ensured that a basket will not be made, what ensures this is the certainty that one of several potential causal factors will intervene in the casual sequence that is already underway.

Of course, as I noted in the last section, for me to prevent a basket in the Superman example, it must be true that if no potential causal interveners had intervened, then the basket would have been made. This suggests a sense in which we might say that it is true after all that only possible occurrences are preventable. Here the pertinent sense of “possible” is possibility relative to a set background factors.

To see whether an occurrence is possible in this sense, we should keep certain background conditions fixed and consider how things would unfold if all unactivated causal powers remained unactivated.⁵ In the case of the plastic statue, we should keep fixed certain facts that obtained as the statue began to fall: e.g., the fact that the statue is plastic, that it is falling from a certain height, and so on. What would happen if nothing interfered with the statue’s fall? It would strike the floor but (given the fixed background factors) it would not break, so it was not possible (relative to fixed background factors) for the statue to break. Similarly, in the permanent force field case, if we keep everything fixed just as the basketball leaves my opponent’s hands, and we subtract any later interference with the ball’s progress, the ball will not go in the basket

⁵ As will become apparent in Section 4, my approach here is very similar to the one taken by Fischer and Ravizza in their account of responsibility for the consequences of actions.
because of the permanent force field. Again, it was not possible (relative to fixed background factors) for the basket to be made; therefore, my actual interference with the ball did not prevent the basket.

However, in the Superman and temporary force field cases, if we hold things fixed just as the basketball leaves my opponent’s hands, the ball would have gone in the basket because nothing was already in place to prevent this outcome. Thus, in the Superman case, it was possible—at least relative to the fixed background factors—for a basket to be made. And we would be right to say that this sort of possibility is essential to my ability to prevent a basket in the Superman case. This is why I said in the last section that if a ball is heading out of bounds instead of toward the basket, then I do not prevent a basket by intercepting the ball. If a ball is heading out of bounds, then background factors are enough to ensure that the shot does not go in the basket.

But even if possibility-relative-to-background-factors is required for prevention, it is still true that outcomes that could not actually have occurred can be prevented. The following three things may all be true: (i) an opponent’s shot would go in the basket if no one interfered with it, (ii) I intentionally intercept the shot, and (iii) if I had failed to do this, Superman certainly would have succeeded in doing so. In a case in which all three of these things are true, I would be praiseworthy for preventing a basket that had no chance of being made.

3. Frankfurt-Type Cases and Prevention Cases

Compatibilists often advance Frankfurt-type cases against the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), which claims that we are morally responsible for our actions only if we could have done otherwise. In Harry Frankfurt’s original example of this sort, Jones plans to φ,
and his φ-ing is meant to be ensured by the presence of another agent, Black, who would make Jones φ even if Jones should reconsider doing so [Frankfurt 1969]. Frankfurt argues that if Jones φ’s for his own reasons, and without Black’s intervention, then Jones is responsible for his behavior even though Black’s readiness to intervene excluded any other alternative for Jones. The ensuring role played by Black is similar to the ensuring role played by Superman in my example: both ensure an outcome regardless of the actions of certain other agents.

Many compatibilists take Frankfurt-type cases to undermine the claim that moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise; one way the cases do this is by highlighting the way in which an agent may reflectively guide her behavior even if she cannot avoid performing a certain action. Similarly, the Superman example undermines the claim that responsibility for preventing an outcome requires the possibility of that outcome occurring by focusing our attention on the way an agent may intentionally and willingly perform actions that are sufficient for preventing an outcome even if the outcome could not have occurred.

Of course, incompatibilists who believe that moral responsibility requires access to alternative possibilities tend to disagree with compatibilists about the significance of Frankfurt-type cases. However, and despite the similarity between my examples and Frankfurt-type cases, incompatibilists need not disagree with the conclusion I have advocated about prevention. To see this, note that what is ensured in a Frankfurt-type case is a particular action of a particular agent, but in the Superman example, no particular agent’s action is ensured; what is ensured is that, one way or another, some outcome will not occur. Since no particular agent’s action is ensured in the Superman example, it is possible that the agent who is portrayed as praiseworthy in the example could have done otherwise.  

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6 We would have a prevention example that is also a traditional Frankfurt-type case if we posited a counterfactual intervener who is ready to ensure that Jones (in particular) will prevent a certain outcome. An incompatibilist will
Incompatibilists can consistently hold (i) that people deserve praise for preventing events only when they keep them from occurring by exercising a type of free will that involves genuine access to alternative possibilities, and (ii) that in some cases, people deserve praise for preventing events that had no chance of occurring. These two claims are consistent because there may be cases in which it is true both that agent \( A \) can prevent an unwelcome outcome by exercising her incompatibilist free will, and that if \( A \) does not prevent that outcome, then \( B \) will be causally determined to prevent it. In such a case, what is determined is that a certain outcome will be prevented, but it is not determined that a particular agent will act in a certain way, so if \( A \) prevents the unwelcome outcome by exercising her incompatibilist free will, then incompatibilists should call this a case of praiseworthy prevention.

For related reasons, an important incompatibilist criticism of Frankfurt-type cases does not undermine the cases I have introduced. This criticism holds that in Frankfurt’s example, Jones could have done otherwise in some relevant sense, and that this can be seen by focusing on the difference between the actual and counterfactual causal sequences in the example. In the actual causal sequence, Jones performs an action for his own reasons, but in the counterfactual sequence, Black’s intervention explains Jones’s action, so Jones has access to at least this alternative: he can \( \phi \) for his own reasons, or he can \( \phi \) because of Black’s intervention.\(^7\) Thus, Jones’s action may not be ensured in a way that supports the compatibilist’s interpretation of Frankfurt’s example.

But in the Superman example, what is supposed to be ensured is the non-occurrence of a certain general outcome (rather than a particular route to that outcome), and reflecting on the differences between the actual and counterfactual causal sequences in the example does not give

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\(^{7}\) Fischer [2006] offers a critical discussion of several incompatibilist approaches along these lines—in each case, the incompatibilist aims to find what Fischer has dubbed a “flicker” of freedom.
us reason to doubt that the non-occurrence in question is ensured. In the actual causal sequence of the Superman example, I prevent our opponents from scoring a basket; in the counterfactual sequence, Superman prevents the basket. It may well have been undetermined which of these two sequences would be actualized, but this is compatible with it being ensured that the basket would be prevented one way or another.

4. Positive and Negative Consequences

In Responsibility and Control, John M. Fischer and Mark Ravizza appeal to a number of examples to support the claim that a person “can be morally responsible for bringing about a consequence that is inevitable for him, that is, a consequence that he cannot prevent from obtaining” [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 93].

In a case Fischer and Ravizza call “Missile 2,” Elizabeth freely fires a missile at Washington, D.C. However, had Elizabeth refrained from firing the missile at D.C., Carla would have done so [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 94]. Fischer and Ravizza say that Elizabeth “can be held morally responsible for the fact that Washington, D.C., is bombed, although she cannot prevent this fact from obtaining” [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 94]. “Missile 2” is similar to the Superman example in which an agent is responsible for preventing an occurrence that had no chance of occurring. This similarity is not surprising since, as I noted at the start of this paper, prevention is a special sort of consequence that our actions can have. More precisely, to refer to an instance of prevention is to emphasize the negative aspect of a consequence: the fact that some outcome did not obtain.

Just as the Superman example (in which prevention occurs) can be contrasted with the example involving the plastic statue (in which prevention does not occur), “Missile 2” (in which
an agent is responsible for a consequence) can be contrasted with Fischer and Ravizza’s “Train” (in which an agent is not responsible for a consequence). In “Train,” Ralph cannot stop the train he is on, however, he can make the train take the right or the left fork at a junction. According to Fischer and Ravizza, if both forks lead to Syracuse, then “Ralph is not morally responsible for the consequence, that the train ends up in Syracuse” [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 94].

But since Ralph’s non-responsibility seems to issue from the fact that he cannot prevent the consequence in question, we have a problem. Why is Elizabeth responsible for a consequence that she cannot prevent in “Missile 2,” but Ralph is not responsible for a consequence that he cannot prevent in “Train”?

An approach similar to the one I used to explain the difference between the Superman example and the plastic statue example can be applied here. In “Train,” prior to any contribution that Ralph makes, there are conditions in place that are sufficient for the train to end up in Syracuse; therefore, no action of Ralph’s explains why the train ends up in Syracuse, so he is not responsible for the obtaining of this consequence. In “Missile 2,” however, while the consequence, D.C. is bombed, is ensured, it is still possible (before Elizabeth acts) for that consequence to be brought about by diverse means, and if it is Elizabeth’s behavior (rather than Carla’s) that explains the consequence in question, then she is responsible for it.

Fischer and Raviazza have a related way of resolving the tension between “Missile 2” and “Train.” They argue that in order to be responsible for a consequence, an agent must have “guidance control” of the consequence. Among other things, if an agent has guidance control of a consequence, then “the process leading from the [agent’s] bodily movement to the event in the external world must be ‘sensitive to action’” [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 107]. By “sensitive to action,” Fischer and Raviazza mean that the consequence would not have occurred if: (i) the agent
had not acted as he did in fact act, and (ii) we hold fixed the non-occurrence of various “triggering events” that did not occur, but which would have triggered the consequence in question if they had occurred [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 110-15]. In “Missile 2,” for example, we can say that the consequence, *D.C. is bombed*, is appropriately sensitive to Elizabeth’s action because, if we hold fixed Carla’s failure to fire the missile, then, if Elizabeth had not fired the missile, then D.C. would not have been bombed [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 116]. By contrast, in “Train,” the train’s arrival in Syracuse is not sensitive to Ralph’s action of turning the train: given the structure of the tracks, the train would have arrived in Syracuse regardless of Ralph’s action.

Earlier, I noted that in order to be praiseworthy for an instance of prevention (i.e., for a *negative* consequence) it must be true that if certain factors had been absent (e.g., if neither Superman nor I had interrupted the movement of the basketball toward the basket), then the outcome that was actually prevented *would have occurred*. By contrast, in a case of responsibility for a *positive* consequence, such as “Missile 2,” it must be true that, given the absence of certain factors (e.g., if neither Elizabeth nor anyone else had fired a missile at D.C.), the consequence that did occur *would not have occurred*.8

It seems, then, that we can draw the following general conclusion about consequences. For an agent to be responsible for a *positive or a negative* consequence, it must be true that if neither the agent, nor anyone else, had acted in a way sufficient to bring about the consequence, then the outcome would have been the reverse of what it actually was. If the outcome does not

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8 Of course, we can reinterpret an instance of prevention as a positive causal consequence, and vice-versa. Instead of saying that I am responsible for preventing a basket, we could say that I am responsible for the consequence that the basket was not made. This new responsibility claim would be true only if, when we exclude any interference with the path of the ball, the consequence that did in fact occur (i.e., that the basket was not made) would not have occurred. Likewise, “Missile 2” can be described as an instance of prevention. We could say (albeit awkwardly) that Elizabeth is responsible for preventing D.C. from not being bombed. In this case, there should be an associated counterfactual scenario in which the thing that was actually prevented was not prevented.
reverse under these counterfactual conditions, then the outcome must have been ensured prior to the agent’s action by already active causal factors, and this leaves the agent’s action unable to do the explanatory work upon which I have argued responsibility for (positive or negative) consequences depends.

5. Positive and Negative Agency

So far, I have focused on the (positive and negative) consequences of positive agency, but negative agency—that is, omissions—can also have consequences. Fischer and Ravizza say that “the conditions for moral responsibility for positive and negative agency are symmetric: in the case of neither positive nor negative agency does moral responsibility require alternative possibilities” [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 131]. I agree that responsibility for the consequences of positive agency does not require alternative possibilities, but the situation is more complicated when it comes to omissions.

Consider a case of complex omission that Fischer and Ravizza call “Sharks.”9 In “Sharks,” John sees a child drowning in the ocean. John believes that he would save the child if he tried to do so, but he decides not to save the child, and the child drowns. However, if John had tried to save the child, a nearby school of sharks would have eaten John, and the child would have drowned anyway. Fischer and Ravizza correctly conclude that “John may well be morally responsible for deciding not to try to save the child and even for not trying to save the child, but he is not morally responsible for not saving the child” [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 125].

Now consider “Penned-In Sharks,” which is just like “Sharks” except that when John

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9 We can distinguish between simple (“bodily”) omissions, and complex omissions [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 132-134]. Simple omissions are constituted entirely by the fact that a certain agent has failed to move his body in a certain way, whereas complex omissions are constituted by simple omissions and consequences in the external world related to those simple omissions.
contemplates saving the child, there are no sharks in the water. Rather, a “bad man” would have released sharks from an underwater pen if (and only if) John had tried to save the child [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 138]. As in “Sharks,” John decides not to save the child, and if he had tried to save the child, sharks would have eaten John, and the child would have drowned. So in both cases, John cannot save the child; however, in “Penned-In Sharks,” Fischer and Ravizza say that “John is indeed morally responsible for not saving the child” [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 138].

The different conclusions about responsibility in “Sharks” and “Penned-In Sharks” are motivated by considerations about guidance control and the “sensitivity” of the child’s drowning to John’s actions. According to Fischer and Ravizza, the reason John is not responsible in “Sharks” is that he lacks guidance control over the complex omission of failing to save the child. John lacks guidance control because the sharks are in the open water in this case, and in a position to eat him (if he enters the water) regardless of whether he tries to save the child. Therefore, the presence of the sharks should be held fixed as a background condition when we ask whether John’s failure to save the child is sensitive to John’s bodily movements (just as the structure of the tracks was held fixed in the analysis of “Train”). If we hold the presence of the sharks fixed, then John’s failure to save the child is not sensitive to his actions because “even if John had moved his body in the relevant alternative way, the child would not have been saved” since the sharks would have eaten John [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 136]. Thus, John lacks guidance control over, and is not responsible for, the complex omission of not saving the child.

However, in “Penned-In Sharks,” the sharks are not in the open water in the actual sequence of events; the sharks are released from the pen only in the alternative sequence in which John tries to save the child. When Fischer and Ravizza assess whether an outcome is sensitive to an agent’s action, they hold fixed the actual nonOccurrence of factors that would
have brought about relevant outcomes if they had occurred. In “Missile 2,” the issue was whether Elizabeth had guidance control of the consequence, *D.C. is bombed*, so we asked what would have happened if Elizabeth had not fired her missile *while holding fixed* the fact that Carla did not fire her missile. To apply this procedure to “Penned-In Sharks,” we hold fixed the fact that the sharks are in the pen (rather than in the open water), and under these fixed conditions, if John had tried to save the child, he would have succeeded. So the child’s drowning is sensitive to John’s behavior (in a way that mirrors the sensitivity of the consequence, *D.C. is bombed*, to Elizabeth’s behavior), so Fischer and Ravizza conclude that John is responsible for not saving the child in “Penned-In Sharks.”

If Fischer and Ravizza’s conclusions about these cases are correct, then we have an attractive symmetry between these two cases of omission and cases of responsibility for negative consequences like my examples involving the permanent and temporary force fields. “Sharks” would be similar to the case with the permanent force field: in both cases, an outcome is ensured because of already present features of the causal landscape, and a particular agent is *not* responsible for that outcome. And “Penned-In Sharks” would be similar to the case involving the temporary force field as well as to the Superman case: in all three cases, an outcome is ensured because one or another changes in the causal landscape is sure to occur, and a particular agent is responsible for that outcome.

However, I believe that the conditions for moral responsibility for positive and negative agency are not symmetric, and that Fischer and Ravizza reach the wrong conclusion about

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10 Here is the relevant passage from Fischer and Ravizza:

Our account implies that we must hold fixed the actually existing pen, when ascertaining whether the event of the child’s not being saved by John *is* appropriately sensitive to John’s bodily movements. Thus, we must say that John is indeed morally responsible for not saving the child . . . . In “Penned-In Sharks,” one holds fixed the actualized conditions, and “subtracts” or disregards the conditions that *would have obtained* in the alternative sequence [Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 138].
“Penned-In Sharks.” I agree that John’s failure to save the child in “Penned-In Sharks” is sensitive (in Fischer and Ravizza’s sense) to John’s bodily movements. John thus has guidance control of the relevant consequence, but what this shows, I think, is that guidance control is not enough for moral responsibility in certain cases of omission. For John to be morally responsible for the fact that he does not save the child, his decision to not save the child should pertinently explain why he does not save the child in such a way that it makes sense to attribute this consequence to John’s inaction. But, as I shall argue, John’s inaction in “Penned-In Sharks” does not explain why he does not save the child. In both “Penned-In Sharks” and “Sharks,” John’s decision to stay on the beach merely explains his responsibility for not trying to save the child. Thus, John is no more responsible for the relevant consequence in “Penned-In Sharks” than he is for that consequence in “Sharks.”

The difficulty with explaining John’s failure to save the child (in “Penned-In Sharks”) in terms of his inaction stems from the fact that even if John had tried to save the child, it would have drowned all the same. But as I just noted, the Superman example and “Penned-In Sharks” are structurally quite similar, and yet I claimed that even though Superman’s presence ensures that no baskets will be made, my actions might be pertinent to an explanation of why a particular shot failed to go in the basket. In the rest of this section, I will explain why I draw different conclusions in these two cases?

Suppose that prior to the basketball game in the Superman example, someone asks what the outcome of the game will be. I might reply that the team opposing Superman and me will score no points. If I were asked to defend this claim, I could reasonably point to Superman’s overwhelming prowess on the basketball court. But as I argued in Section 1, it does not follow that citing Superman’s presence will be the most natural way of explaining after the game why a
particular attempt to score a basket was not successful. Suppose that after the game someone who is familiar with Superman’s abilities asks, “Why wasn’t the other team’s last shot successful?” In this case, pointing to the general fact of Superman’s abilities does not provide the questioner with the sort of information she seeks—after all, she already knows that Superman’s abilities are sufficient to ensure that no baskets are made. When it comes to assigning credit for the completed game’s statistics, it would be far more explanatorily relevant to note, for example, that it was my hand (and not Superman’s) that stopped the progress of our opponents’ last shot at the basket.

So a person who knows that Superman can block any shot might still reasonably ask why a particular shot was not successful. If this person learns that the shot was not successful because I stopped the ball’s progress toward the net, then she learns something relevant to crediting me with preventing a basket (even though Superman would have blocked the shot if I had not done so). But the situation in “Penned-In Sharks” is different. Imagine that a person knows that if John had tried to save the child, then the sharks would have been released from the pen and would have eaten John. This person will not learn anything relevant to the explanation of how the child died by being told that John did not even try to save the child. It would not be natural, I submit, to answer the question “Why did the child drown?” by citing John’s inaction. We might cite the fact that the child cannot swim, or the fact that the sea was particularly rough that day, but citing the fact that John did not try to save the child will simply be irrelevant if someone already knows what would have happened if John had tried to save the child. However, even if someone knows the setup of the Superman example, it will not necessarily be irrelevant to tell her that my actions stopped a ball headed to the basket; knowing about the setup of the example only tells someone
that every basket will be prevented one way or another, but not how each particular basket will be prevented.

One thing that makes it natural to cite the fact that a child cannot swim in an explanation of why she drowned is our expectation that if she had been able to swim, then she would have been less likely to have drowned. Counterfactual inquiries of this sort often reveal pertinent explanatory relations in actual sequences of events. This is certainly the case in the Superman example: here there is an important difference between the outcome in the actual sequence of events in which I stop the ball from entering the basket, and the outcome in the counterfactual sequence in which Superman stops the ball. The fact that if I had not acted as I did, then it would have been someone else who prevented the basket makes it natural to explain the actual prevention of the basket in terms of my actual action. In “Penned-In Sharks,” however, the outcomes in the actual and counterfactual sequences are the same: in the actual sequence, neither John, nor anyone else, saves the child, so the child drowns, and the same thing happens in the alternate sequence. The difference between the two sequences is just that in the actual sequence the child drowns with John on the shore, while in the alternate sequence the child drowns with John eaten by sharks. And this difference does not help us see how John’s inaction in the actual sequence explains the fact that the child is not saved by him anymore than John’s inaction explains this outcome in “Sharks.”

A referee for Philosophical Explorations notes that we might describe the actual outcome in “Penned-In Sharks” by saying, “the child drowns while John decides not to save him,” and we might describe the alternate outcome by saying, “the child drowns while John’s attempt is thwarted by sharks.” The referee suggests that Fischer and Ravizza might say that this way of characterizing the outcomes makes it clear that John’s actual inaction explains the child’s drowning in just the way my blocking a shot explains why I prevent a basket (as opposed to what happens when Superman blocks a shot). These re-descriptions of the actual and alternate outcomes in “Penned-In Sharks” are fair, but I believe that what they bring out is that John is open to harsher moral assessment in the actual sequence than in the alternate sequence because in the former case John does not try to save the child. John is (we may think) more blameworthy in the actual sequence because his inaction reveals a defect in his character, but this does not mean that the child’s drowning is explained by John’s inaction, or by his character defects. Even if John had had a better character, and had acted better, the child still would have drowned, so it is hard for me to see how the drowning can
I do not mean to say, of course, that John’s failure to try to save the child is irrelevant to every sort of inquiry we might make. We may well think, for example, that if John believed he could save the child, then his inaction reflects poorly on him. So John’s inaction may have moral relevance; it may be something we point to if we want to explain our moral assessments of John, but John’s inaction in “Penned-In Sharks” is no more damning, and no more relevant to the child’s drowning, than it is in “Sharks.”

As I have said, the difficulty with explaining John’s failure to save the child (and the child’s subsequent drowning) in terms of John’s inaction stems from the fact that even if John had tried to save the child from drowning, the child would have drowned all the same, and he would have drowned in the same way. This does not mean that there is general problem with explaining outcomes in terms of inaction: if John had actually been able to save the child, then John’s decision to not save the child could plausibly be cited in an explanation of why the child was not saved. The problem with explaining outcomes in terms of inaction seems to arise particularly in cases like “Penned-In Sharks” in which an omission is ensured by factors in addition to the inaction of a particular agent.

The preceding account suggests the following asymmetry between positive and negative agency. If I intentionally bring about a (positive or negative) consequence, then often my

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be on John’s account in a meaningful way. In the Superman case, however, things are different: if I do not stop the ball, then Superman will. Thus, the relevant (unavoidable) consequence in the Superman example is brought about in different ways in the actual and alternate sequences, which makes it intuitive (I have suggested) to explain the actual sequence consequence in terms of my actual-sequence behavior. But in “Penned-in-Sharks,” no matter what John does, the child dies in just the same way, so it is not clear that his actual inaction helpfully explains why the child drowned.

12 In a few passages in this section, I have shifted from consideration of the claim that John is morally responsible for not saving the child in “Penned-In Sharks” to consideration of the claim that John is morally responsible for the fact that the child drowns. This may seem a questionable expansion of Fischer and Ravizza’s claim, but I think it is justified. Very many people fail to save the child from drowning, but John alone is supposed to be morally responsible for his failure in this regard. Since the child actually drowns, and John is morally responsible for not saving the child, this is presumably meant to put the drowning on John’s account in a way that distinguishes “Penned-In Sharks” from “Sharks”; recall that in the latter case, Fischer and Ravizza say that John is responsible merely for not trying to save the child.
exercise of agency explains the occurrence of the consequence in a way that suffices for responsibility. I can even be responsible for a consequence of my positive agency if other forces stood ready to bring about the same consequence, for the addition of other merely potential routes to the same general consequence is compatible with my actual behavior explaining why a particular consequence occurred.

But the situation with omissions is different. If I fail to perform an action, and a consequence that my action would have brought about does not occur, it may often make sense to attribute this non-occurrence to my inaction, and to hold me responsible for it. However, if I do not act to bring about a consequence, and if I had acted, the non-occurrence of the consequence would have been ensured by other means, then it is far from clear that the non-occurrence of the consequence is explained by my inaction in a way that grounds responsibility.

Fischer and Ravizza believe that agents can be responsible for the unavoidable consequences of both their actions and omissions because, as their examples show, it is possible for agents to exercise guidance control of the relevant consequences in both sorts of cases. I have argued, however, that even though John has guidance control in “Penned-In Sharks,” he is not responsible for the unavoidable consequence that the child drowns. Fischer and Ravizza reach the wrong conclusion here because they ignore the way in which responsibility for consequences depends on whether an agent’s actions explain the consequences in such a way that the consequences are attributable to an agent. In cases of positive agency, an agent’s possession of guidance control often means that her actions explain the relevant consequence in a way that supports moral responsibility. But as “Penned-In Sharks” seems to show, an agent can have the analogue, for omissions, of guidance control of a consequence without her inaction explaining that consequence.
Conclusion

I have argued that a person can deserve praise for preventing an unwelcome outcome that had no chance of occurring. The Superman example gives us an instance of this phenomenon: I am praiseworthy for preventing a basket even if Superman’s presence ensured that a basket would not be made. My praiseworthiness stems from the fact that I intentionally and willingly performed actions that intuitively explain why a basket was not made.

One who rejects this conclusion presumably holds, for instance, that basketball player $A$ deserves credit for preventing a basket only if her teammates would not have prevented the basket if she had failed to do so. But I think this is not how we evaluate cases of prevention: our willingness to credit $A$ with preventing a basket is not essentially tied to considerations about whether another player would have prevented the basket. Of course, an incompatibilist might say that for $A$ to deserve praise for preventing a basket, it must have been possible for her to not prevent the basket, but this condition can be met even if it is certain that, somehow or other, the basket will be prevented.

Now it is true that player $A$ prevents a basket only if the shot she blocked would have gone in the basket if nothing had interfered with it. But, again, this condition can be met without it actually being possible for the shot to go in the basket. However, a case like the one involving the plastic statue does not meet this condition. When I catch the falling plastic statue, I do not prevent it from breaking because—given its material construction—the statue would not have broken even if no one had interfered with its fall.

My account of responsibility for prevention is similar in its conclusions (if not in its exposition) to Fischer and Ravizza’s account of responsibility for the positive consequences of
our positive agency: both accounts say that we can be responsible for unavoidable consequences. However, I have raised questions about the corresponding claim about omissions. Fischer and Ravizza’s account of moral responsibility for positive and negative agency focuses on possession of guidance control, and does not sufficiently emphasize the importance of *explanation* for moral responsibility. In cases of positive agency, an agent’s possession of guidance control of a consequence typically means that her actions explain this consequence, but this is not necessarily so in cases of omission.

**References**

