Explaining What We Omit

1. For many of our intentional omissions, there seem to be no practical attitudes that can rationalize them. (Sartorio 2009) This is a problem: if we account for intentional actions in terms of how they are rationalized by practical attitudes (such as desire and intention), and no similar account account can be given of intentional omissions, then our account of intentional omissions will be arbitrarily disjunctive: we account for intentional action in terms of rationalizing attitudes, and we account for intentional omission in some other terms.¹ (Buckareff 2018, 4630) I think we can forestall the move to a disjunctive view, because there is a practical attitude, so far overlooked in this debate, that can widely rationalize intentional omissions.² This is an attitude of deliberative bracketing: we commit to not giving weight to the reasons in favor of the omitted action in practical reasoning. I provide an account of the nature and functioning of this attitude, showing how it rationalizes omissions in the same general way that practical attitudes rationalize actions.

2. Listening to my coworker talk about his child’s birthday party last weekend, I suddenly remember that I left the birthday card for my father sitting at home on the kitchen table, and there is a good chance that, if it does not go out in the mail today, it will arrive late. I decide that I am fine with the card arriving late and continue on with my day. I intentionally omit to send the card today. In virtue of what is my omission intentional? The most natural answer is that I come to intend not to send the card today. But such an intention is not necessary and, in fact, does not fit well with the case. Intending rationally requires means-end coherence, which would imply that, if I realized further means were required to ensure that I do not send the card today, I would be under rational pressure to take

¹ I assume that rationalizations must appeal to attitudes, but this is controversial – see (Dancy 2000), (Thompson 2008).
² I should note that my account does not depend on whether omissions are events or mere absences and thus does not turn on what causal properties they have – see for some recent discussion, (Clarke 2014, ch. 2), (Bacchini 2018), and (Silver 2018) – beyond requiring that they can figure as the explananda of rationalizing explanations.
those means or else change my mind about the card arriving late. But it is most natural to think that I
am under no such rational pressure.\(^3\) Intentional omission thus does not require, and often does not
involve, intending to omit (here, intending not to send the card). (Clarke 2014, 65-6)

If not an intention to omit (i.e., an intention not to perform the omitted action), then what? Randolph Clarke (2014, ch. 3) broadens the scope of his account to include, not just intentions to
omit, but intentions “with relevant content.” (70ff) In the previous case, Clarke would claim that, even
though I do not intend not to send the card today, I do have an intention with relevant content, most
plausibly my intention to continue on with my work day.

This does not help. Clarke leaves the notion of relevant content mostly unspecified, but that
is not my main concern. (Ibid., 71) My worry is that, taking Clarke’s proposal as it stands, there will
not always be an intention with relevant content.\(^4\) If an intention has relevant content, then it will
make sense of the omission from the agent’s perspective, at least if the content is relevant enough to
rationalize the omission in question (more on this rationalizing condition below). Oftentimes, none
of the potentially relevant intentions can render the omission intelligible. For instance, in the above
case, my potentially relevant intention is to continue on with my work day. Continuing on with my
work day may be entirely compatible with going home to send the card. If so, then my intention to
continue on with my work day does not make sense of my omission of sending the card. There is
nothing about the intention that renders the omission intelligible from my perspective.\(^5\)

This might lead you to weaken the link between intentional omissions and the relevant inten-
tions. (Shepherd 2014; Buckareff 2014) Or you might avoid appealing to practical attitudes altogether.

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\(^3\) Imagine that a (very) nosy postal worker peeks into my kitchen window, notices the card, and calls me to offer to use the
house key under my doormat to retrieve the card and send it. I am plausibly under no rational pressure to accept the offer.

\(^4\) One caveat: my proposal posits reasoning-focused policies that you might understand as a special kind of intention (even
though I do not think of them that way – see sec. 3 below).

\(^5\) Carolina Sartorio (2009, 519) makes a related point about why the actions that agents perform in place of their omitted
actions often are not relevant as causes of those omissions. And while Andrei Buckareff’s (2018) and Joshua Shepherd’s
(2014) proposals improve upon Clarke’s in some ways, they falter for the same basic reason, because they assume that, for
the intentional omissions in question, there will be intentions whose execution requires those omissions.
But you could maintain that intentional omissions are rationalized by practical attitudes if you could identify a practical attitude that is compatible with not intending to omit and that makes sense of an agent’s omission from her perspective.

3. Return to my frame of mind when I intentionally omit to send the birthday card. I do not intend not to send the card, but I am somehow settled about not sending the card; this is indicated by my decision to be fine with the card arriving late. I propose that we understand this as a settled state of no longer giving consideration to the card arriving late in pertinent reasoning. That is, I am settled about the card arriving late in virtue of bracketing this factor from any further reasoning about courses of action that concern whether to send the card today.

How should we understand this settled state of deliberative bracketing? I think it can take one (or both) of two forms: (i) a conclusive normative judgment, by which I judge that the reasons to allow the card to arrive late outweigh and/or undercut the reasons to get the card in the mail today, or (ii) a practical policy, by which I commit to not give weight to the reasons for getting the card in the mail today in my practical reasoning. Either attitude will dispose me to not give consideration to the card arriving late in further practical reasoning, provided that I do not uncover further relevant reasons (e.g., I learn my father is ill). (Being settled about the card arriving late does not preclude taking up the further reasons in deliberation and, given that reasons interrelate in complicated ways, deliberating with the bracketed considerations anew.)

Before going further, we already can see how an attitude of deliberative bracketing, of either of the above forms, would help account for my intentional omission of sending the card today. They

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6 In using the label “deliberative,” I do not mean to narrow our focus to self-conscious, voluntary forms of reasoning. (Arpaly and Schroeder 2012) The bracketing of reasons can extend to a wide array of “question-settling” processes (Hieronymi 2014), some of which do not involve self-consciously weighing reasons.

7 What I have in mind is the idea that the normative significance of one reason can be augmented (or diminished) by the existence of other reasons, which is one of the ways that reasons combine non-additively; see, e.g., (Dancy 2004, ch. 3).
both are compatible with my not intending not to send the card, because bracketing my reason to send the card today (the fact that it will arrive late), either by a conclusive normative judgment or practical policy, does not require intending not to send the card. And either attitude could rationalize my omission, because, at a first pass, their guidance of my thought and action would seem to require the omission and render it intelligible from my perspective (more on this sec. 4).

I am going to treat practical policies as the central form of deliberative bracketing, for two interrelated reasons. First, oftentimes we intentionally omit actions when we cannot reach a conclusive normative judgment about whether or not to carry them out. In such cases, we need practical policies to be settled about our omission (provided, again, that we do not intend to omit). Second, and relatedly, oftentimes our reasons for omitting an action \( A \) include pragmatic considerations about the importance of being settled about not \( A \)-ing, which are not among the possible grounds of a conclusive normative judgment about whether or not to \( A \). And as I discuss below, such pragmatic reasons are among the possible grounds of our practical policies.

To explain, start with Michael Bratman’s (2007a) idea of “policies about weights” – practical policies about how to treat different considerations in practical reasoning. An important feature of policies about weights is that they can go beyond the verdicts of our normative judgments. (Bratman 2007b, 239-40) Even if one’s normative judgments entail that a consideration \( C \) has weight \( W \) relative to some practical matters, one could form a policy of treating \( C \) as having some other weight \( \sim W \) in deliberating about those matters. Now, it is a good question to what extent such policies can rationally or stably depart from one’s normative judgments. All I assume here is that we have stable, psychological (even if not always rational) leeway to maintain negative policies of not giving weight to considerations that we judge to have some normative weight.

Specifically, the practical policies that lie behind deliberative bracketing are policies of not giving weight to the reasons in favor of an omitted action in one’s pertinent reasoning. (I assume that
reasoning is pertinent just when it focuses on whether to carry out actions that preclude, make more difficult, or otherwise dim the prospects of carrying out an omitted action.\textsuperscript{8} It is important to clarify here that deliberative bracketing concerns a defined set of reasons, specifically those that, at the time one becomes settled about an omitted action, one takes to count in favor of that action.\textsuperscript{9} So a policy of not giving weight to the reasons in favor of an omitted action $A$ need not involve the bracketing of any and all reasons in favor of $A$; it need only concern the defined set of reasons that, at the time one forms the policy, one takes to count in favor of $A$. Applied to the card-mailing case, such a policy would involve a commitment to not give weight to the fact that the card will arrive late (or to the various considerations that, at the time of decision, capture the undesirability of the card arriving late) in any further reasoning about courses of action that would preclude sending the card today (e.g., attending a meeting until 5 pm, long past when I could get the card in the mail). In this way, I become settled about the card arriving late.\textsuperscript{10}

Is such a policy a kind of intention, as Bratman (1989; 2007a) maintains? He thinks that practical policies (including but going beyond policies about weights) can be understood as intentions directed toward general, indefinitely recurring behaviors (e.g., buckling one’s seat belt, or, as above, not giving weight to certain reasons) rather than discrete ends (e.g., driving home tonight). I agree that

\textsuperscript{8} What about reasoning about courses of action that involve (or prompt) the omitted action? Such reasoning need not be included within the scope of the kind of deliberative bracketing in question. In the card-mailing case, for instance, suppose I receive the fortuitous (albeit disquieting) call from the nosy postal worker discussed in n. 3 above. It is not incompatible with my being fine with the card arriving late that, in deciding whether to allow the postal worker to take the card, I revisit the facts about why it would be undesirable for the card to arrive late. However, if I am wrong about this, there is a simple way to extend my account: we can take pertinent reasoning to concern courses of action that either preclude (or hamper) or involve (or prompt) the omitted action.

\textsuperscript{9} It may not even concern all of the considerations that, at the time one becomes settled, one takes to count in favor of the omitted action. It may be sufficient that one brackets a certain subset of them, but I cannot address this issue here.

\textsuperscript{10} Lara Buchak and Dylan Murray (forthcoming) make a related but importantly different claim. They argue that rational decision-making requires forming deliberative policies that constitute risk attitudes, which concern how much weight to place on good or bad outcomes given the likelihood of better or worse outcomes. While I agree with them that rational decision-making involves policies about weights, the role that such policies play as risk attitudes only partially overlaps with the role they play as bracketing policies. A risk attitude will suffice for a bracketing policy only when it calls for placing no weight on a given set of considerations, and a bracketing policy will serve as a risk attitude only when it concerns the probability of more or less undesirable options than the option whose supporting reasons it brackets.
practical policies share some of the broad features of intentions, in virtue of which they both count as practical commitments. But I worry that, in lacking the characteristically end-directed structure of intention (and the associated rational requirements), practical policies have an importantly different form — of norm-following, not goal-achieving.\(^{11}\) (Darwall 2006, ch. 7)

Setting that issue aside, on what basis do we form policies of not giving weight to the reasons in favor of omitted actions — what I will simply call “bracketing policies”? How do we reason our way to bracketing policies? We do so in part by reasoning about the relative weight and import of the considerations in favor of the omitted action. Realizing that the reasons in favor of an action are clearly outweighed or undercut by the reasons to omit it (and/or to take an alternative option that is incompatible with it) can lead to a policy of not giving weight to those reasons in deliberation. The reasons to omit the action (or take an alternative) thus serve as reasons for the bracketing policy.

But this cannot be the whole story, because it is not yet clear why we form policies of not giving weight to the reasons in favor of an omitted action over and above judging that these reasons are outweighed or undercut by the reasons in favor of omitting the action.\(^{12}\) This brings us to how pragmatic reasons support bracketing policies (and practical policies more generally). Oftentimes we need a bracketing policy because, even though we realize that the reasons in favor of an action are outweighed or undercut, they will occupy our attention and lead us to needlessly reopen the question of whether to perform the action unless we form a policy of not giving them weight in our deliberations. Or sometimes we are unable to reach a conclusion about whether the reasons favoring an action

\(^{11}\) This difference between policies and intentions can be illustrated by noticing what happens when a practical policy comes into conflict with a standard end-directed intention, e.g., one has a policy of going to bed by 10 pm, and one intends to finish watching a movie at 10:30 pm. Sticking with the policy rationally requires giving up the intention, but following through on the intention does not require giving up the policy. This is because going to bed at 10 pm tonight is not a necessary means to going to bed at 10 pm as a general principle — that is not how applications of norms relate to the norms themselves — but staying up until 10:30 pm is a necessary means to the end of watching the movie. Bratman (1989, 461-4) notices this feature of policies, but he does not take it to imply a deep difference between policies and intentions, as I do. See, for some further discussion of this and related matters, (Thompson 2008, ch. 9-10).

\(^{12}\) A further, importantly related issue is akratic omission — omitting \(^A\) against one’s conclusive judgment that one ought to \(^A\). I think, but cannot argue here, that my account of bracketing policies is needed to explain akratic omissions.
are outweighed or undercut by the reasons to omit it (or take an alternative). Yet it still may be important to become settled about the omitted action, if not by intending not to perform the action, at least by setting the reasons favoring it aside in deliberation so that we can move on to other matters. Unlike attitudes for which such pragmatic considerations are the “wrong kind” of reason, there seems to be no problem with forming practical policies partly on the basis of pragmatic reasons.

This shows why, as I suggested above, bracketing policies are a more central form of deliberative bracketing than conclusive normative judgments for explaining intentional omissions. First, we need bracketing policies in cases where an agent fails to reach a conclusive judgment that the reasons to perform an omitted action are outweighed or undercut by the reasons to omit it. The card-mailing case can be construed this way. Perhaps I am genuinely unsure about whether the hassle of going home to send the card today outweighs or undercuts my reasons for having the card arrive on time. But still (and without intending not to send the card today) I become settled about the card arriving late by bracketing my reasons for sending the card today. How so? A bracketing policy of not giving weight to the reasons for sending the card today would seem to be my only option. Second, described this way, this is also a case in which, when asked for my reasons for omitting – “Why aren’t you

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13 This happens whenever we take there to be parity, indeterminacy, or incomparability between the reasons to perform an action and the reasons to omit it (or take an alternative). I cannot explore issues of normative underdetermination here, but I do want to suggest that bracketing policies can play an important role in resolving psychological ambivalence in the face of such underdetermination, given that this ambivalence can reasonably persist even if agents are rational in picking an underdetermined option (Ullmann-Margalit & Morgenbesser 1977; Sunstein & Ullmann-Margalit 1999, 24) or they voluntaristically create reasons for chosen options; see, e.g., (Velleman 1997), (Korsgaard 1996; 2008), and (Chang 2009).

14 T. M. Scanlon (2004, 242-4) makes a similar suggestion when he proposes that deciding to $A$ involves intending not to engage in further deliberation about $A$. But Scanlon’s proposal requires too much, certainly more than a bracketing policy requires. For example, I may conditionally decide to $A$ pending information that will arrive tomorrow, and so bracket the current considerations favoring not-$A$ options without intending not to deliberate further about whether to $A$.

15 The claim that the reasons for which we form practical policies can include such pragmatic considerations is implicit in (Bratman 1989; 2007a; 2007b), although he does not explicitly discuss this issue. In this respect, practical policies mirror how the attitude of reliance, as Facundo Alonso (2014; 2016) understands it, responds to both epistemic and pragmatic considerations. My claim here may also point to a further important difference between policies and intentions. How so? Philosophers such as Pamela Hieronymi (2005), who are responding in part to the “Toxin Puzzle” (Kavka 1983), claim that we cannot form intentions on the basis of pragmatic considerations. The pragmatic reasons are the “wrong kind” of reason for intention. For discussion of this issue as applied to a wide range of conative attitudes, see, e.g., (Parfit 2001), (Olson 2004), (Stratton-Lake 2005), (Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen 2006), (White 2009), and (Way 2012).
sending the card today?” – I am likely to give both standard reasons for omitting – “It would be too much of a hassle” or “Birthdays don’t matter in my family” – and pragmatic reasons – “I didn’t want to think about it any longer” or “I wasn’t sure whether it was worthwhile to go home, and so I just continued on with my work day.” That is, when an agent intentionally omits an action A about which she fails to reach a conclusive normative judgment (and does not intend not to A), she often has pragmatic reasons for omitting A that reflect the importance of her being settled about not A-ing. These pragmatic reasons could not ground a conclusive normative judgment by which she brackets her reasons for A-ing; the reasons for such a normative judgment would be drawn entirely from her reasons for A-ing. But in line with the picture of bracketing policies sketched above, her pragmatic reasons could support a bracketing policy of not giving weight to her reasons for A-ing.

This does not yet show how bracketing policies rationalize omissions. I turn to that issue in the next section. But if some attitude of deliberative bracketing is what plausibly rationalizes omissions when agents do not intend to omit (i.e., when they are merely “fine with” foregoing the omitted option), and if a bracketing policy is our only option for deliberative bracketing in many cases (including when agents cannot reach conclusive normative judgments), then a bracketing policy is a prime candidate for an attitude that widely rationalizes omissions. A bracketing policy, again, is a practical commitment to not give weight to the reasons in favor of an omitted action in pertinent reasoning, and it may be formed on the basis of both standard reasons to omit and pragmatic reasons to become settled about the omitted action.

You might object that, if this were true, then it would also be true that, if the agent chose to A (instead of omitting A) when she does not reach a conclusive normative judgment about whether she should A, she would have pragmatic reasons for A-ing and, accordingly, for intending to A. But agents do not have pragmatic reasons for intention. So, the argument concludes, they do not have pragmatic reasons for intentional omission. This objection gets off on the wrong foot. There is a relevant difference between intentional omission, at least when an agent does not intend to omit, and intentional action. When an agent intentionally omits to A without intending not to A, they are neither committed to A-ing nor to not A-ing. This suggests that, in becoming settled about omitting A, they are not (or at least need not be) drawing only on their reasons for and against A. They can also draw on their reasons for being settled about whether to A – their pragmatic reasons. This is not true when they decide to A and have the very same pragmatic reasons to become settled about whether to A; they are committed to A-ing and so, it seems, cannot go beyond their reasons in favor of A-ing.
5. How does a bracketing policy rationalize an omission? To answer this question, I will assume that a practical attitude rationalizes an action if it both guides and makes sense of the action (i.e., renders it intelligible from the agent’s perspective). My aim here, then, is to show how bracketing policies guide and make sense of agents’ omissions.

Let us understand an attitude’s guidance in terms of how it disposes its subject to course-correct in light of the attitude’s object. (Frankfurt 1988, 71-5) Are omissions among the reliable outcomes of the course-correction of bracketing policies? Yes, because a bracketing policy for some action $A$ will reliably dispose an agent to ignore her reasons for $A$-ing and, as a result, to not $A$. When a bracketing policy steadily leads an agent to not place weight on her reasons for $A$-ing, then, it also will be guiding her omission of $A$.

Does this bracketing policy also make sense of the agent’s omission of $A$? Yes, because it reveals, at a minimum, the reasons she set aside in omitting $A$. That is, for an agent’s omission of $A$ to be intelligible, it is sufficient to see how her omission stems from her setting aside the considerations that, at least to her, offered some putative justification of $A$-ing. This setting aside of reasons can take multiple forms – as I suggested above, either a normative judgment or bracketing policy would suffice – but no matter what, it will make some sense of her omission from her perspective. For, in seeking to render an agent’s omission of $A$ intelligible, we assume that there was something to be said for $A$-ing from her perspective. We thus can make sense of her omission simply by identifying the pertinent considerations in favor of $A$-ing that she set aside in omitting $A$.

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17 I will leave open the much-discussed questions of whether we should take “guide” to denote, in part, a species of event causation, and whether “makes sense of” must refer, at least in part, to an agent’s motivating reasons.

18 Of course it would still be possible for the agent to uncover new reasons for $A$-ing and to $A$ as a result. But this is not inconsistent with her being guided to omit $A$-ing, because this would also be true if she were guided by an intention not to $A$, given that intentions are open to revision in the face of uncovering further pertinent reasons. This is widely accepted by philosophers who otherwise disagree about the nature of rational intention stability; see, e.g., (Bratman 1999; 2007c), (Broome 2001), and (Scanlon 2004).
This might lead you to question whether, in intentionally omitting $A$, an agent must have reasons for $A$-ing to bracket. Couldn’t she intentionally omit $A$ without having any reasons to $A$, so long as she has reasons to not $A$? Perhaps; I am interested only in finding sufficient conditions for rationalizing an omission of $A$ in the absence of an intention not to $A$, and so I am not ruling out agents who intentionally omit $A$ without having reasons to $A$. But notice that, in the kinds of cases I have focused on (of intentionally omitting $A$ without intending not to $A$), we expect an agent to have reasons for $A$-ing (i.e., to see something in favor of $A$-ing).\(^{19}\)

My central claim, then, is that an agent’s omission of $A$ is rationalized, and thus intentional, if she is guided to not $A$ by a policy of not giving weight to her reasons for $A$-ing in pertinent reasoning. This means that her omission can be rationalized by a practical attitude even if she does not intend not to $A$ or have any other intention that is pertinent to her omission. Accounting for intentional omissions thus does not require us to move away from the basic idea that we can understand intentionality in terms of rationalizing attitudes.

\(^{19}\) If an agent omits $A$-ing without intending not to $A$ and sees nothing at all in favor of $A$-ing, then it is puzzling how or why she would consider $A$-ing in her reasoning. Her omission of $A$ seems more unwitting than intentional, although she may be responsible for it nonetheless - see several of the essays in (Nelkin and Rickless 2017a), including (Sher 2017), (Talbert 2017), (Smith 2017), and (Nelkin and Rickless 2017b).
REFERENCES