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Neither the time nor the place: Omissive causes yield temporal inferences

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Abstract

Is it reasonable to draw temporal conclusions from omissive causal assertions? For example, if you learn that not charging your phone caused it to die, is it sensible to infer that your failure to charge your phone occurred before it died? The conclusion seems intuitive, but no theory of causal reasoning explains how reasoners make the inference other than a recent proposal by Khemlani and colleagues (2018a). We present that theory and describe its consequences. If people conceive of omissions as non-events, i.e., events unmoored in space and time, they might refrain from drawing conclusions when asked whether an omissive cause precedes its effect. Two experiments speak against these predictions of the non-event view and in favor of a view that omissive causation imposes temporal constraints on events and their effects. We conclude by considering whether drawing a temporal conclusion from an omissive cause constitutes a reasoning error.