A paradox of failure

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Abstract. I present a paradox concerning a person who desires to fail to achieve the goal that matters most to them. I recently encountered a similar paradox, but radical solipsism is a solution to it. This is not a solution to the paradox that I present.

Imagine that a youth reads a number of novels in which the main character fails to achieve the goal that matters most to them. For example, in one novel, the main character’s goal is to escape from a certain island. In another novel, the main character’s goal is to win a certain war. In a third novel, the main character’s goal is to win the heart of their beloved. Influenced by such novels, the youth forms a goal for himself: to fail to achieve the goal that matters most to him. And, throughout his life, this is the goal that matters most to him. The person described so far is perhaps rather odd in character, but it seems that there could be such a person. However, if there actually is such a person, then does he achieve this goal of his or does he not? Here we encounter a paradox.

Let us provisionally assume, for the sake of argument, that the youth achieves this goal of his. But the goal was to fail to achieve the goal that matters most to him. Therefore from this assumption, we can infer that he actually fails to achieve the goal, which contradicts the assumption. So we must reject the assumption.

Let us assume instead that the youth fails to achieve this goal of his. But the goal was to fail to achieve the goal that matters most to him. Therefore from this assumption, we can infer that he actually achieves the goal, which contradicts the assumption. So we must reject the
assumption.

This paradox seems related to the paradox of the end, which arises from reflecting on the feeling of emptiness a person sometimes has when they achieve their goals (Landau 1995: 557). But the person I have described need not have chosen his goal to avoid this feeling. He may just be a quixotic character, in the sense that he has read many fictions of a certain kind and these have influenced him to form an extreme goal. The paradox also resembles one that has very recently been proposed, which involves two people, rather than one (Jerzak 2019: 336). The similarity led me to wonder whether these are even distinct paradoxes. However, if the prospective solutions that need to be considered are different, then they are distinct. And there is a solution which only works for the two-person paradox: a radical solipsism, according to which there cannot be multiple selves. The author of the article does not seem to be aware of this solution. He does not refer to it when discussing why one might say that the scenario he presents is impossible. Nevertheless, in addition to a paradox, the article contains a lot of valuable information about how best to respond to it and about relevant contemporary literature.

Appendix

After putting a draft of this paper online, I noticed that the general idea of a paradox relating to failure has occurred to various other people, but there is some difference in the filling in of detail. I have come across a discussion of a paradox that, if it is different from the one I present, may require careful analysis to show this (Bradley 2007: 45). I am going to leave this

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1 One way of arriving at a radical version of solipsism is by combining the problem of other minds with the view that only verifiable statements are meaningful. If the youth himself is a radical solipsist, he would have to suppose that he wrote the novels at some point and forgot that he did so.

2 Discussing 1950s literary opposition to “Bloomsbury,” L.A. Fiedler writes “In the book of the Angry Young Man, nothing fails like success.” (1958: 79) Lewis R. Gordon refers to a problem in the psychoanalysis of failure (2015). I believe there is also a joke by Jerry Seinfeld: “If a book about failure does not sell, does it succeed?” To fully formulate the paradox you would have to spell out the arguments for contradictory conclusions, but here there is the intuition of one.
paper online, in case some people prefer the version above. One has to ignore a lot for it to be plausible that there is little new under the Sun, but there is a question of what the alternative is!

References


