

## **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 could be such a person, then it seems that they either achieve this goal of theirs or they do not. But 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 their 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 I recently encountered in an article, not yet in print, which involves two people, rather than one (Jerzak 2018: 2). 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.

## References

- Jerzak, E. 2018. Paradoxical Desires. Forthcoming in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2018 from: <https://philpapers.org/archive/JERPD-2.pdf>
- Landau, I. 1995. The Paradox of the End. *Philosophy* 70: 555-565.