A paradox of failure

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

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.[1] 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 been around for some time (see Wind 1946). 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). But it may not be such a problem to fail on this occasion.

---

[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.

References

Bradley, B. 2007. A paradox for some theories of welfare. *Philosophical Studies* 133: 45-53.

Jerzak, E. 2019. Paradoxical Desires. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119: 335-355.

Landau, I. 1995. The Paradox of the End. *Philosophy* 70: 555-565.

Wind, E. 1946. Blood, Iron, and Intuition. *Polemic* 5: 54-57