



Destinism

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Abstract

I raise a puzzle concerning Destinism -- the view that that the only things we can do are those things we in fact do.

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Destinism, let us say, is the thesis that the only things we *can* do are those things we *in fact* do. It follows from Destinism that if you *didn't* do something, you *couldn't* have done it. Destinism is a consequence of the conjunction of incompatibilism and determinism. But that conjunction is by no means the only route to Destinism. For Destinism may well be equivalent to a thesis sometimes called 'fatalism' and so supported by the usual arguments for that depressing hypothesis.

One more preliminary. Let p be something -- anything at all -- that you believe. Consider now:

Consequence: If Destinism, then: if something can be done, it is done.

Belief: You believe p .

Should: For any x , if x is not true, you should not believe x .

From Should to Can: For any x , if x should be done, x can be done.

These four claims, together with Destinism, generate a puzzling conclusion:

1. Therefore, for any x , if x is not true, you can not believe x (from Should and From Should to Can)
2. Therefore, if Destinism, then: for any x , if x is not true, then you do not believe x (from 1 and Consequence)
3. Therefore, if Destinism, then p is true (from Belief and 2)
4. Therefore, p is true (from Destinism and 3)

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That doesn't seem right. It mustn't be that easy to prove that, for some arbitrary thing you believe, it is true. Sure, there are some values for ' p ' that need not trouble us -- *true* things that you believe. But -- I'd wager (and I suspect you'd wager too) -- there's *something or other* you believe that isn't true. Just let p be like *that*. And yet we can derive from our opening claims the truth of anything at all that you believe. If you aren't yet convinced we have a puzzle on our hands, recast the claims to be about something *I* believe that you deny; we'd then have a proof that I am right.

Something is amiss. But what? Consequence is a restatement of Destinism. Belief is also true by definition; we selected p from among your beliefs. The first two constituents of the puzzle, then, seem beyond reproach. The problem must lie elsewhere.

Three options remain: Should, From Should to Can, or Destinism. Should encodes, in the second person singular, a plausible view about a more general duty to avoid believing what is not true. From Should to Can is version of that venerable theory that ought implies can. And then there's Destinism itself. One of them has got to go.

And so I conclude that either Destinism is false -- we can do some things we don't do, or Should is false -- we're allowed to believe some falsehoods, or From Should to Can is false -- ought doesn't, after all, imply can. Either way, we've got a puzzle on our hands.¹

I have framed the puzzle in terms of belief and a general duty to avoid believing what is not true. This detail is not essential. We could replace "not true" throughout with "not justified", for example, and arrive at the conclusion that none of your beliefs are not justified. Or, if that's not bad enough, that none of *my* beliefs are not justified. We could also leave the epistemic realm altogether. Let d be something you've done, and let something be *bad* just if it is gratuitous -- harmful and without outweighing benefits, say.

Done: You did d .

Should*: For any x , if x is bad, you should not do x .

These two claims, together with Consequence and From Should to Can (as defined above) are equally puzzling:

5. Therefore, for any x , if x bad, you can not do x (from Should* and From Should to Can)
6. Therefore, if Destinism, then: for any x , if x is bad, then you do not do x (from 5 and Consequence)
7. Therefore, if Destinism, then d is not bad (from Done and 6)
8. Therefore, d is not bad (from Destinism and 7)

¹ My puzzle resembles an argument independently offered in Huemer ([unpublished](#)). Where Huemer presents an alleged proof of free will, I present theses that are jointly puzzling. Huemer's argument concerns determinism; mine uses a more circumscribed Destinism. My development of the puzzle in terms of what is bad, finally, is novel.

The conclusion we can draw -- nothing you've ever done is bad -- is no less startling than the view that all your beliefs are true. It, too, demands an answer.²

References

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² Note that this puzzle makes use neither of the claim that moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise nor the claim that if something is wrong, something else ought to be done instead. It thus differs importantly from another puzzle in the neighborhood as discussed in, e.g., Fischer (2003) and Yaffe (1999). Thanks to Soufiane Hamri, Philip Swenson, and Patrick Todd for comments and conversation.