



Destinism: Puzzle Solved

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Abstract

In a recent article in this journal, “Destinism,” Andrew Bailey presents a puzzle (in different versions) for “Destinism,” the view that the only things we can do are those we in fact do. The puzzle is intriguing and important in part because it challenges a doctrine (Destinism) that many philosophers think could be true compatibly with our being morally responsible. Destinism is at least a viable view. Bailey’s puzzle derives from very plausible assumptions, but I argue that these assumptions are not as plausible as they appear. Interpreted in a way that renders one of them acceptable makes another problematic. There is no one interpretation on which the puzzling arguments are uncontroversially sound.

Keywords Bad actions · Destinism · False beliefs · Frankfurt-Style cases · Freedom · Ought-implies-can

1 Introduction

In an intriguing paper Andrew Bailey presents a puzzle for the doctrine he calls “Destinism,” the thesis that we never have the freedom to choose or do otherwise, because the only things we *can* (in the relevant sense) do are what we *in fact* do. Bailey ([forthcoming](#)). The puzzle is developed in the epistemic and action contexts. The argument is that, given certain plausible assumptions, Destinism would imply that we never believe anything false or never do anything bad. Although this would be an existentially “happy” result of destiny (Kismet!), it would be philosophically infelicitous.

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Bailey does not argue that Destinism is true. He points out that this doctrine would follow from other theses (such as the conjunction of causal determinism and incompatibilism) and explores the apparent consequences of it. One can interpret Bailey as issuing a challenge to anyone who is willing to accept Destinism: what assumption in his arguments must be jettisoned? This is an interesting challenge, because the assumptions are very plausible.

Bailey writes:

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 cannot 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). Bailey ([forthcoming](#)).

He claims that the same assumptions, *mutatis mutandis*, generate the conclusion that we never do anything bad:

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 cannot 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 3) Bailey ([forthcoming](#)).

Let's first consider the argument in the epistemic context. Note to begin that Bailey treats belief—or better forming a belief—as an action under the agent's control. It is however generally agreed that one can't simply "believe at will." The assumption of the voluntariness of belief vitiates the argument.

Consider.

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

As applied to belief, the idea is that if (say) you should believe x , you can believe x . Let's interpret the notion of belief here as "forming a belief," so: if you should form

the belief that x , then you can form the belief that x . It is not clear what the import of “should” is—it is clearly not a moral should. We can take it that this “epistemic should” holds when an agent has what she takes to be sufficient evidence that x is true. So now we have it that: if you have what you take to be sufficient evidence that x , then you can form the belief that x .

This principle does not hold. It treats belief as forming a belief, and the latter as an action up to you. One might however lack the power to act in accordance with one’s beliefs about the evidence. Specifically, your taking it that there is sufficient evidence that x is true does *not* imply that you *can* form the belief that x . Imagine that you do not actually believe that x —you do not believe there is sufficient evidence that x is true. Suppose further that if you were to have recognized the sufficiency of the evidence for x , and you were about to form the belief that x , a mischievous neurosurgeon (with interests in epistemology) would have electronically stimulated your brain to prevent your formation of that belief. The neurosurgeon has the technology and determination to prevent you from believing x , in a hypothetical situation in which you have what you take to be sufficient evidence for x .

The epistemic argument relies on From Should to Can, but this principle falls prey to the possibility of “counterfactual intervention” that renders it true that you *cannot* conform your beliefs to your evidence. This possibility is an epistemic version of the famous “Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples” (FSCs) in the context of action. Frankfurt (1969) In an action FSC there is a counterfactual intervener waiting in the wings, and the fact that she *would* intervene should the agent be about to choose and do otherwise, makes it true that in fact the agent cannot choose and do otherwise.¹ In an epistemic FSC, it may be that the agent has what she takes to be sufficient reason to believe that x , but she cannot form the belief that x . Thus, From Should to Can fails in the epistemic, as well as the action context.

Here’s another set of worries for the crucial principles in Bailey’s arguments. Should and Should* are problematic. Suppose x is false (or bad), but I have an enormous amount of evidence suggesting it is true (or good). I take it there is some sense—a “subjective” sense—in which I should believe x (or do x), but on this interpretation, Should and Should* are implausible. Now consider a more “objective” reading, such as “If you are an ideal reasoner and have all the relevant evidence, and x is false (or bad), then you should not believe (or do) x .” This interpretation makes

¹ The FSCs are purported counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, according to which moral responsibility for an action requires freedom to do otherwise. Here is an adaptation of the FSC presented in Frankfurt (1969): Black is a stalwart defender of the Democratic Party. He has secretly inserted a chip in Jones’s brain that enables Black to monitor and control Jones’s activities. Black can exercise this control through a sophisticated computer that he has programmed so that, among other things, it monitors Jones’s voting behavior. If Jones were to show any inclination to choose to vote for anyone other than the Democrat, then the computer, through the chip in Jones’s brain, would intervene to assure that he actually chooses to vote for the democrat and does so vote. But if Jones chooses on his own to vote for the Democrat (as Black, the old progressive would prefer), and he does actually so vote, the computer does nothing but continue to monitor—without affecting—the goings-on in Jones’s head. Now suppose that Jones chooses to vote for the Democrat on his own, just as he would have if Black had not inserted the chip in his head. It seems, upon first thinking about this case, that Jones can be held morally responsible for his choice and act of voting for the Democrat, although he could not have chosen otherwise and he could not have done otherwise. Hence (PAP) is false.

Should and Should* plausible, but then an objective reading of From Should to Can is required, rendering the principle deeply flawed. Even if an ideal observer with all the relevant evidence should believe (or do) x , it does not follow (nor is it plausible to require) that I—a non-ideal reasoner without all the relevant evidence—can believe (or do) x . So: either we go with a “subjective” or “objective” reading of “should.” If the former, then Should and Should* are suspect, and if the latter, then From Should to Can is suspect.

2 Conclusions

Should and Should* and From Should to Can are indispensable to the epistemic and action versions of the argument. So: puzzle solved! Focusing on From Should to Can, Bailey writes, “From Should to Can is a version of that venerable theory [maxim?] that ought implies can.” Bailey ([forthcoming](#)). Right, but this maxim has been challenged, by invocation of the FSCs Fischer (2003). One does not however have to rest one’s objection to this maxim (and From Should to Can) on FSCs: Sinnott-Armstrong (1988), among others.²

Some will no doubt point out that the contention that the FSCs show the falsity of Ought Implies Can and From Should to Can is controversial. The lively and seemingly intractable debates about the “moral” of the Frankfurt stories indicates that I cannot simply invoke them to offer an uncontroversial resolution of Bailey’s puzzle(s). Same with other ways of justifying the rejection of the principles in question.

Fair enough, but two points. First, Bailey’s epistemic argument is, in my view, fatally marred by treating beliefs as actions (or forming beliefs as voluntary in the sense of being up to us). Further, it is difficult to see how a consistent interpretation of “should” in Should (and also Should*) and From Should To Can would yield sound arguments. Second, I believe (and have sought to argue elsewhere) that the FSCs provide good, if not apodictic, reason to reject the contention that moral responsibility requires alternative possibilities (and thus the maxims under consideration here) (Fischer 1994, Fischer and Ravizza 1998, Fischer 2003). My point can be cast as: *if* one accepts this moral of the FSCs—a plausible view, or so I would maintain—then one can resolve the puzzle(s), quite apart from difficulties stemming from the interpretation of “should”: the puzzle(s) presuppose the falsity of a plausible view adopted by many. Even if I have not decisively resolved Bailey’s intriguing puzzle, I’ve offered a roadmap for a solution.

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² Sinnott-Armstrong and various other philosophers argue from moral dilemmas to the falsity of the claim that ought implies can. They hold that in a moral dilemma it can be true that an agent ought to do x and ought to do y , where x and y cannot both be done; that is, the agent can do x , and she can do y , but she cannot do x and y . This argument is only compelling if moral dilemmas are really cases in which it is true that an agent ought all-things-considered to do x and also ought all-things-considered to do y , where she can’t do x and y . This is because the ought implies can maxim is presumably to be interpreted as “if an agent ought *all-things-considered* to do Z , then she can do Z .”

Declaration

Conflict of Interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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