

Free Will and Agential Powers

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Free will is often taken to be a power (or to consist in certain powers) of agents. Since free will is not freedom to do what one wills to do, but rather freedom with respect to willing, the powers in question would not be powers to do what one wills, but rather powers to will. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the project of spelling out what such powers might come to.

In the first place, we need an understanding of willing that can be employed in such a conception of free will. Willing must be an act, and one that can be performed freely. Making a decision to act is one thing that will count. Initiating an attempt to do something will count as well. The paper focuses on what freedom with respect to such acts might come to, when it is conceived as a power (or powers) of agents.

On a widely accepted view, if you have free will, then sometimes when you act, it is up to you whether you do the thing you do on that occasion. Applying this idea to willing, we can say that if you are free with respect to willing on some occasion to *A*, then on the occasion in question it is up to you whether you will to *A*. I take this requirement to be a constraint on construals of powers possession of which amounts (perhaps with further conditions) to an agent's having free will. It must be the case that having these powers (perhaps together with satisfying those further conditions) can suffice for its being up to the agent whether the agent wills a certain thing or not on some occasion. Powers are a class of properties including dispositions, capacities, abilities, liabilities, and susceptibilities. I include here what are sometimes called active powers as well as what are called passive powers. Some features sometimes assumed to be common to all *dispositions* do not belong to all *powers*. If we wish to understand free will in terms of agential powers, we cannot simply assume that the features in question pertain to these powers. (Perhaps they do; that is something our investigation must determine.)

For example, it is sometimes taken for granted that attributions of dispositions can be analyzed in terms of characteristic stimuli and characteristic responses or manifestations. But not all powers are amenable to this kind of treatment. Certain susceptibilities, such as narcolepsy, appear not to be so analyzable; a priori conceptual analysis does not inform us what, if any, characteristic stimuli trigger episodes that manifest this illness. Further, some powers with characteristic stimuli lack a priori identifiable conditions that, given possession of the powers, *guarantee* their manifestations; some powers are not sure-fire. (This is so whether or not determinism is true.) Finally, there appear to be powers that simply do not have any relevant stimulus conditions. Some, such as the instability of certain particles and elements, manifest spontaneously, with no stimulus needed and none relevant to whether they are manifested.

If free will consists in certain powers of agents, we need to consider whether these powers have characteristic stimuli; if they do, we must see what the stimuli are, and whether occurrence of these stimuli (together with possession of the powers) guarantees a certain manifestation. Some writers have denied that free will consists in powers with any such stimuli, describing its exercise as a kind of spontaneity.

A consideration that might push in this direction is the requirement that, if one has free will, then sometimes it is up to oneself whether one wills this or that on a given occasion. The manifestation of a disposition that has a characteristic stimulus would seem to be dependent on the occurrence of that stimulus. And now, it is hard to see how it can be up to me whether I now will to *A* if whether I manifest my power to so will depends on whether some stimulus--the occurrence of which is not itself up to me--occurs. And to try to make it out that it is up to me whether this stimulus occurs is to begin a regress, one that certainly looks to be vicious.

The paper focuses largely on the prospects for understanding free will in terms of powers that *do* have characteristic stimuli (albeit not sure-fire powers). Such powers are taken to be causal dispositions; their stimuli are among the causes of the outcomes that occur when they are manifested. Attention is given also to the prospects for alternative construals of the relevant powers. I begin with a conception of a power to will that need not be a power to *freely* will. A child might have a power to initiate attempts to do various things, while lacking a power to freely will anything. Next a conception of certain rational powers involved in agency is offered. It remains difficult, however, to capture the idea that it can be up to the agent whether such powers are exercised, and if so how, on a given occasion. We make progress here if we consider an agent's having opposing powers, such as both a power to decide to *A* in response to intending to make up her mind about whether to *A*, and a power to decide *not* to *A* in response to that same stimulus. It also helps to add various passive powers, such as a power to become motivated to *A* when one takes there to be reason to *A*, and a power to come to believe that *p* when one takes there to be preponderant evidence that *p*.

I consider an objection that what is done for a reason cannot be something that is caused, and hence that rational powers cannot be conceived as causal dispositions. The objection fails, I argue. It is also considered whether, in order to capture the idea that it is sometimes up to an agent whether she wills this or that, we must appeal to non-causal or spontaneous powers. The appeal, I argue, does not seem to help.

I also consider whether an appeal to agent-causal powers helps with this problem. Such powers are causal, but their manifestations are said to be caused by the agents who have these powers, and causation by an agent is said not to be causation by any of the agent's states or any changes undergone by that agent. Again, I argue, the appeal does not seem to help. Finally, it is considered whether it helps to require that exercises of the powers in question be undetermined. Again, I doubt that we find help here. If it is hard to spell out the idea of its being up to an agent whether she wills this or that given an assumption of determinism, it is also hard to spell this out given an assumption of indeterminism.