**Free Will and Agential Powers**

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What is free will, or (as it might be called) freedom of the will? It was once common to think of it as a power (or powers) of some kind. Locke, Hume, and Reid, for example, despite advancing very different accounts, all couched their views in terms of powers.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Fashions come and go. And come again. Lately several theorists have revived talk of powers or dispositions in their theories of free will.[[2]](#footnote-2) There’s good reason to think they’re on to something. Even when not explicitly invoked, powers are often implicit in what accounts of free will require. Powers of some kind are implicated in an agent’s having rational capacities—capacities to recognize and weigh reasons, to believe, desire, intend, and act for reasons, and to engage in practical reasoning and make decisions on its basis—which virtually every theorist takes to be required. The reasons-responsiveness of an action-producing mechanism (which is the central requirement of one influential contemporary view)[[3]](#footnote-3) is that mechanism’s instantiation of a certain power. Being able to perform an action of one type or another is commonly advanced as a requirement; and having such an ability is at least partly a matter of having certain powers. Even a characterization of free will in terms of the *absence* of obstacles or impediments implicitly appeals to powers, for an obstacle limits one’s freedom only to the extent that one lacks a power to circumvent or surmount it.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Several recent accounts that make explicit appeal to powers are beset by problems of one sort or another.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rather than engage in critique, here we’ll offer some proposals of our own. Our aim is to contribute to a balanced assessment of the prospects for one very attractive approach to free will.

We’ll begin by offering a construal of *willing to do a certain thing,* with *willing* understood to be an action with respect to which an agent might be free. We’ll then identify what we take to be a constraint on any theory of free will that aims to capture our ordinary notion of the phenomenon. We’ll discuss conceptions of powers that might be employed in an account of free will. Many such views invoke powers that are in an important respect like the dispositions of inanimate objects. Following this lead, we’ll offer several suggestions concerning how an account of this type might go, and we’ll discuss a problem that any such view faces. We’ll conclude with brief consideration of alternative approaches that invoke powers of quite different kinds.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*1. Willing*

Locke’s own treatment of what he called liberty or freedom illustrates a typical shortcoming of accounts expressed in terms of powers. His initial—and his main—proposal characterized freedom with respect to *doing what one might will to do*, not freedom with respect to *willing to do a certain thing*. One is at liberty to *A*, Locke said, just in case one has a power to *A* or not *A*, according to which of these one wills to do. And as he pointed out, being at liberty to *will* to *A* can’t sensibly be understood in the same fashion.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Now, our exercise of free will might well be, in part, our freedom in doing what we will to do. But we submit that free will is, in the first instance, freedom with respect to willing to do this or that.[[8]](#footnote-8) Shortly we’ll advance an understanding of willing appropriate for this view of free will.

Locke himself rejected the notion that the will might be free. Will, he said, is a power, and freedom is a power; and it’s nonsense to think of a power having a power.

Let us grant these premises. Still, just as we can ask whether an agent is free with respect to doing a certain thing that she might will to do, so we can ask whether she is free with respect to *willing* to do that thing. If the latter freedom consists in some power, that power would be (as Locke insisted freedom is) a power *of the agent*, not a power of her will.[[9]](#footnote-9) Having such a power is at least part of what constitutes having free will.

As long as willing is the kind of thing that can be done freely, it makes sense to ask whether we might be free with respect to doing it.[[10]](#footnote-10) What we’ll offer, then, is an understanding of willing on which it makes sense to think that one might freely will one thing or another.

If we can do anything freely, we can *act* freely, or freely *perform actions*. We’ll take it that willing is performing an action of some kind. And although one might do something freely without doing it intentionally,[[11]](#footnote-11) commonly when one freely *A*-s, one *A*-s intentionally. Paradigmatic instances of what we’ll call willing, then, will be instances of intentional action (though not every intentional action is an instance of what we’ll call willing).

It bears emphasizing that the understanding of willing we’ll propose *isn’t* meant to capture what might be expressed when one speaks of someone having the will to do a certain thing, or being willing to do it, or of strength or weakness of will. Our target is something an agent’s powers with respect to which might be said to constitute (at least to an important extent) freedom of the will. We’ll use ‘will’, ‘wills’, and ‘willing’ as terms of art for this purpose.

In light of these considerations, we propose to include as instances of willing—or, as we’ll say, acts of will—two kinds of thing: decisions, and beginning portions of attempts. We’ll first note some things that *don’t* count and then describe further these two kinds of thing that do.

Given our purposes here, neither *wanting* nor *intending* to do a certain thing counts as an instance of willing. Wanting and intending are states, not actions. Further, one can want, and even intend, to do a certain thing without so much as beginning to act as one wants or intends.

Nor will *coming to have an intention* always count as an instance of willing. True enough, one can come to have an intention to *A* by deciding (or choosing) to *A*. And a decision to *A* is, we take it, an intentional action. (We’ll give our reasons for saying so shortly.) But one can come to have an intention in a way other than by deciding. Deciding settles practical uncertainty, uncertainty about what to do. However, on many occasions when we act, it’s perfectly clear what to do; there’s no uncertainty about it. When this is so, one can come to intend to do a certain thing, and do it intentionally, without deciding to do it.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Still, we count *deciding* as a kind of willing. Making a decision commonly has a phenomenal quality characteristic of action; it often seems to oneself, at the moment when it’s done, that it’s something that one is actively doing. We take the appearance not generally to be illusory. Making a decision is actively forming an intention to do a certain thing, and intentionally forming that intention. (We don’t say that to intentionally decide to *A*, one must intend to decide to *A*; perhaps an intention to make up one’s mind whether to *A*, or something of this sort, will do.) A decision to *A* is an action distinct from *A*-ing, one that can be performed well before, or without ever, doing (or even attempting to do) what one therein decides to do.[[13]](#footnote-13)

If Al *decides* today to drive to his office tomorrow, then we’ll say that he *wills* today to make the drive tomorrow. He actively settles on doing that; he *sets his will* on performing that future action. Similarly, when one decides to do a certain thing right away, the making of the decision is itself something that we’ll call an instance of willing, or an act of will.

Another thing that we’ll count is a beginning portion of an attempt to do something. By attempts we mean instances of trying. And we employ here a notion of trying on which it can be effortless; some attempts are easy. When you intentionally raise your arm, even in normal circumstances, you’ve made a successful attempt to raise your arm. And a successful attempt is an attempt, or an instance of trying.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Like decisions, attempts are intentional; if you try to *A*, you intentionally try to *A*. Although intentionally trying to *A* might require having some intention, it doesn’t require having an intention to try to *A*. When you try to raise your arm, you might simply intend to raise your arm.

We don’t say that trying is itself willing. To see why, consider an action such as sinking a putt during a game of golf. It’s fruitful to think of such a thing as a process, one that begins when certain changes occur in the agent’s head—when her having an intention to putt the ball begins to activate certain motor neurons[[15]](#footnote-15)—that continues with the delivery of motor signals to certain muscles, and includes motions of her shoulders, arms, and hands. Philosophers disagree about whether such an action includes such things as the motion of the club, the striking of the ball, the rolling of the ball across the green, and the descent of the ball into the cup.

Suppose that it does. How much of this process consists of the agent’s willing to sink the putt? Surely not the ball’s falling into the cup; indeed, we might well deny that this occurrence is any part of the attempt.[[16]](#footnote-16) But what about the back and forth motion of the agent’s hands? This is part of the attempt, but we decline to count it as part of the agent’s act of will.[[17]](#footnote-17) One consideration against doing so is that, while the motion of the hands might be swift or slow, and might describe an arc, it seems wrong to say that a portion of the willing is swift or slow, or describes an arc.

But consider an early part of this process, a beginning portion of the execution of the agent’s intention to make the putt. As we suggested, this takes place when the agent’s having an intention to putt the ball activates certain motor neurons in her head. This is something that, for our purposes here, we take to be willing. It is an intentional action, an agent’s freedom with respect to which might well be thought of as (an aspect of) her freedom of the will.

There will be a string of beginning portions of such a process occupying several moments, as long as the agent’s having that intention continues to excite the appropriate motor neurons. Indeed, one’s willing to do a certain thing, understood as consisting of beginning portions of the execution of one’s intention to do that thing, might go on just about as long as does one’s doing that thing, when one’s action extends no further than motions of one’s body. When you intentionally raise your arm, your willing to raise it occupies about the same time period as does your raising it.

It’s sometimes said (e.g., by Mele [2000]) that deciding is a momentary act. If this is correct, should we take the acts of will that we’ve just identified to be momentary as well? If we do, we should observe that many an action, such as the sinking of the putt or the raising of the arm, involves one or more continuous strings of such momentary willings, each a beginning portion of a continuing attempt. We might instead take the act of will in such a case to be the series of beginning portions of the attempt. We’ll couch the subsequent discussion in terms of the former view, though we don’t see that anything of importance to our purposes here hinges on which alternative is adopted.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We’ve identified two things that we count as willing: making a decision, and engaging in a beginning portion of an attempt. (There might be other things that should count;[[19]](#footnote-19) we’ll confine our attention to these two.) Our aim, as we’ve said, is to identify a kind of action one’s freedom with respect to which might be one’s freedom with respect to willing. A powers-conception of free will, we maintain, needs to provide an account of the latter, for freedom of the will is, in the first instance, freedom with respect to willing to do this or that.

It’s quite common for theorists of free will to focus on decisions (or choices—we take these to be the same). The second sort of thing we’ve identified shares some features with what some have called volition, which, again, is often a focus of free-will theorists. We think the focus well intentioned, but the sort of willing we’ve identified differs in important respects from volition.

Theories that appeal to volition commonly take it to be a distinctly mental action with representational content, in the same way in which a decision to *A* has content, representing one’s *A*-ing. But engaging in a beginning portion of an attempt to *A* is no more a distinctly mental action than is trying to *A*, and trying to *A*, when one succeeds, is no more a distinctly mental action than is one’s *A*-ing. Unlike deciding, the second kind of willing we’ve described isn’t the coming to have or the formation of some psychological attitude. It is, rather, a beginning portion of the execution of some such attitude—a portion of the execution of an intention.

Volitionists often locate volition, in cases of overt, bodily action, causally or temporally (or both) between desiring or intending to do a certain thing and beginning to activate one’s motor system.[[20]](#footnote-20) What we’ve called trying isn’t such an intermediary, and neither is a beginning portion of an attempt. In cases of overt, bodily action, a beginning of the activation of the motor system *is* a beginning portion of an attempt to do a certain thing; and when one succeeds, it might be a beginning portion of one’s doing that thing. We see no need, either in action theory or in an account of free will, for the sort of intermediary between intention and beginning of execution to which volitionists appeal.

We contend that our view captures something that is right about certain volitional accounts: one’s freedom with respect to engaging in beginning portions of attempts is a crucial aspect of free will. But we reject the appeal to volition as something in addition to intending, deciding, and trying. Our view thus avoids what we see as questionable aspects of many volitional accounts.

*2. Up to You*

It’s a common thought that if you have free will, then at least sometimes when you act, it’s up to you whether you do the thing you do on that occasion. Applying this idea to willing, we can say that if on some occasion you’re free with respect to willing to *A*, then on that occasion it’s up to you whether you then will to *A*.

Where the willing at issue is the making of a certain decision, say, the decision to *B*, if on some occasion you’re free with respect to making that decision, then it’s up to you whether you then decide to *B*. Where a beginning portion of an attempt to *C* is in question, if on some occasion you’re free with respect to that beginning portion of the attempt, then it’s up to you whether you then engage in that act of will.

The expression ‘it’s up to you’ is often used in a way that *isn’t* concerned with free will. A father might have said to his daughter on some occasion: “You can straighten up your room, or you can stay home; it’s up to you.” A certain outcome—whether she goes out or stays home—is made to depend on whether she straightens up her room. Whether she does the latter or not will be the difference-maker. The choice is hers. But all this might be so whether anyone has free will or not.

Similarly, if someone has no preference regarding what you do on some occasion, or doesn’t wish to express one, or refuses to offer any suggestions or advice or exert any pressure, she might say the matter is up to you. Make the decision without her direction. That’s something you can do whether we have free will or not.

But if we have free will, then not only do certain outcomes depend on what we will to do, but also it’s sometimes up to us whether we will to do certain things. And its being up to us whether we will to do certain things isn’t a matter of no one’s offering us advice or direction. Indeed, it can be up to you whether you will to do a certain thing even if someone *is* offering you advice, expressing her preference about what you do, or exerting pressure on you to do a certain thing.

We take this requirement to impose a constraint on any theory of free will that aims to capture our ordinary idea of this phenomenon. And we’ll take it as a constraint on construals of powers possession of which by an agent amounts (perhaps with further conditions) to that agent’s having free will. It must be the case that having these powers (perhaps together with satisfaction of the further conditions) can suffice for its sometimes being up to an agent whether certain of the powers are exercised.

It might *not* be a requirement of *moral responsibility* that we have such powers. It might be that one can be responsible for doing something even though it wasn’t up to oneself on that occasion whether one willed to do that thing. We take the possibility here to be the possibility that agents might not have to have free will in order to be morally responsible for some of the things they do.[[21]](#footnote-21)

That human agents commonly have such powers is nevertheless, we submit, part of our ordinary conception of our agency. When one is deliberating about whether to *A*, one ordinarily takes it as given that it’s up to oneself whether one decides to *A*. One presumes not just that one’s decision will be a difference-maker with regard to what happens subsequent to it, but that it’s up to oneself whether one makes one decision or another. And one might presume this even if one knows that someone else is pressing one to decide a certain way. It is free will of the sort that is presumed in this kind of case that is our target here.

Expressing what’s required for free will in this way—in terms of something’s being up to oneself—is preferable to some common alternatives. Sometimes it’s said that one has free will only if, at least sometimes when one acts, one can do other than what one actually does. But the statement doesn’t clearly indicate what’s required. Even when she’s sleeping, it’s true that Elena can speak French; but she isn’t just then free with respect to whether she does so. Similarly, stating what’s required in terms of an ability to act is problematic; despite lacking a guitar, one might have a general ability to play that instrument.[[22]](#footnote-22) Even putting things in terms of what’s within an agent’s power might fall short, if, as seems possible, one might have a power and yet it not be up to oneself whether that power is exercised.[[23]](#footnote-23) And freedom with respect to *A*-ing isn’t well expressed in terms of having a choice about whether one *A*-s, when one’s *A*-ing might itself be one’s making a choice (say, to *B*).[[24]](#footnote-24)

The penultimate point suggests a difficulty for a powers-conception of free will: what must an agent’s powers be such that on some occasion it’s up to her whether and how they’re exercised? We think that this is indeed a difficulty. It’s one to which we’ll repeatedly return.

*3. Powers*

We’ve offered a view of what willing is, one that can be employed in an account of freedom with respect to willing; and we’ve identified a crucial feature of the kind of freedom with respect to willing that is at issue with free will. What about powers?

Powers are a class of properties including dispositions, capacities, abilities, tendencies, susceptibilities, and liabilities. We include here both what Locke called active powers and what he called passive powers. Perhaps the common feature of such properties is what’s sometimes called *directedness*: each is directed at some manifestation (or perhaps some plurality of manifestations).[[25]](#footnote-25) A manifestation of fragility is breaking, one of narcolepsy is falling asleep at apparently random moments.

Powers differ in several respects, and proponents of powers-conceptions of free will thus face some decisions about the kind of powers they’ll invoke. Some powers are what we’ll call *causal dispositions*. Each of these has one or more characteristic stimuli in response to which the disposition is manifested, when it is; and the stimuli are among the causes of the manifestation. Fragility is such a power. Striking is a characteristic stimulus of it, and when a struck object manifests its fragility, the striking of that object is a cause of the object’s breaking.

Several recent powers-conceptions have invoked causal dispositions. We’ll call views of this sort *dispositional accounts of free will*. While we think the recent proposals have fallen short, we want to see how far one can go with such a view. Most of what we say in the remainder of the paper is an exploration of this question.

But different kinds of powers might be invoked. And we think it important to acknowledge explicitly the choice one makes on this matter.

On some views of free will, when an agent freely makes a certain decision, the *agent* causes something, such as her coming to have a certain intention, and the agent’s causing that thing isn’t causation by any occurrence or state. It’s causation by an enduring substance, which, on this kind of account, is what a rational agent is.[[26]](#footnote-26) If we take it that an agent who causes something has a *power* to cause, then on this view having free will requires having a causal power, albeit one whose manifestation is something caused by the agent. Such a power might have characteristic stimuli that are somehow relevant to its manifestation, but, it’s usually said, any such stimulus isn’t a cause of the manifestation (or of the agent’s causing that manifestation).

Other powers-conceptions appeal to spontaneous powers. Free will aside, there seem to be powers whose manifestations are independent of any stimulus. The instability of certain particles and elements is manifested in spontaneous decay. There seems to be no stimulus needed, and none relevant, to whether the kind of decay in question occurs. And some theorists maintain that having free will is having a spontaneous power, though one that, unlike the instability just described, is a rational power, one that is exercised for reasons.[[27]](#footnote-27)

We’re doubtful that either of these alternative approaches improves on an account appealing to causal dispositions. Toward the end of the paper we’ll briefly explain the ground of our doubt. But our main task from here forward is to offer some proposals concerning how a dispositional account might best go.

One difficulty for any such effort stems from the requirement, identified earlier, that if one has free will, then on some occasions it’s up to oneself whether one wills this or that. Setting aside for the moment the possibility of indeterminism, whether a causal disposition is manifested on some occasion is just a matter of whether sufficient causal antecedents occur. When a fragile glass is struck, it breaks—or it doesn’t—depending on how it’s struck, how fragile it is, and perhaps other features of the glass and the situation. Plainly it isn’t up to the glass whether it breaks. And now, if an agent’s powers are all of this general sort—if they’re all causal dispositions—then whether they’re manifested on some occasion is likewise just a matter of whether sufficient causal antecedents occur. It’s then hard to see how it can be up to an agent on some occasion whether some power to will that she possesses is manifested.[[28]](#footnote-28) Among the things we’ll want to see is what a proponent of a dispositional account of free will can say in response to this difficulty. (Later we’ll drop the assumption of determinism and consider whether doing this helps.)

*4. A Power to Try*

Imagine a young child who sees a shiny object across the room, crawls over to the object, and grasps it.[[29]](#footnote-29) The child, we may suppose, lacks certain rational capacities that would be needed for her to have free will. But we shouldn’t deny altogether that she’s an agent. She has, and on this occasion exercises, many of the powers that are distinctive of agency. Her behavior is motivated, goal-directed, and guided by her in light of her perception of her environment.

The child exercises a power to crawl over and get the shiny object. In crawling to get the object, she carries out an attempt to do that—she tries to crawl and get it—and she exercises a power to make that attempt. (Recall that trying to *A* doesn’t require intending to try to *A*; when trying to *A*, one might simply intend to *A*.)

When the child makes the attempt, there occur a series of beginning portions of that attempt. Employing the notion of willing developed earlier, we may say that the child wills to crawl and get the object. (Again, she might so will without intending to will anything, and indeed without having a concept of willing.) [[30]](#footnote-30) She exercises—and hence has—a power to so will.

The child can have this power even if, as we may presume, it isn’t up to her whether she exercises it on this or any other occasion. One can have a power to will without having free will, without having a power to freely will.

We might manage an account of a power to will to do a certain thing if we set our sights lower than free will, on something that the young child has despite lacking free will. When one is trying to *A*, one is executing an intention. To be engaged in such a thing is to be willing to do something; it is to manifest a power to will.

Consider a construal of a power to engage in a beginning portion of an attempt to *A* as a power to engage in such a thing in response to coming to have an intention with relevant content—for example, an intention to *A*. This proposal allows us to see a power to will as a causal disposition, one whose manifestation has among its causes a characteristic stimulus.[[31]](#footnote-31) One advantage of the proposal is that we have a reasonably good understanding of causal dispositions. And it might be thought that, in any case, an account of agency must see intentions (or acquisitions of intentions) as causes, for (one might think—and we’re inclined to think) that’s the way to understand the implementation (the carrying out) of an intention.

In any event, having powers to engage in beginning portions of attempts to do various things apparently requires having a host of other powers. For one thing, one must have a power to come to have intentions (or functionally similar executive states). Intentions are themselves commonly motivated in light of beliefs. Hence, it seems, in order to have powers to will, one must have powers to come to have cognitive and motivational states.

A power to engage in a beginning portion of an attempt to do some *specific* thing would require, it seems, having some specific motivational and conceptual capacities. An agent who lacks a power to become motivated to *A*, or motivated to try to *A*, or to have any other relevant motivation, would lack a power to engage in a beginning portion of an attempt to *A*. Likewise for an agent who lacks a power to come to think of doing a certain thing.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Even setting aside the problem of free will, then, a power to will includes or depends on a variety of powers, many of them not powers to do things intentionally. We have no proposal concerning these further powers beyond the suggestion that they, like a power to will, might be seen as causal dispositions, with characteristic stimuli that are among the causes of their manifestations, when the manifestations occur.

*5. Rational Powers*

Our powers to will are, even if those of a young child aren’t, *rational* powers. And if we’re eventually to have a conception of free will in terms of agential powers, it will have to include a conception of rational powers. No agent with free will entirely lacks the latter.

Among the relevant rational powers are powers to come rationally to believe, desire, and intend. If these are powers to do various things in response to various stimuli, the relevant stimuli might include a kind of seeing-as, or taking there to be evidence or reasons favoring something or other. The powers to come to have intentions that concern us might include powers to do so in response to taking there to be certain practical reasons, or reasons to act (or not act).[[33]](#footnote-33) Likewise, it seems, for the powers to become rationally motivated to do certain things. The powers to come to believe might include powers to acquire beliefs in response to taking there to be reasons to do so or evidence favoring their content.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In addition to taking there to be reason to do this or that, rational agents assess what they take to be reasons, weigh them one against another, and judge options better or worse in light of their take on reasons. The powers of rational agents include powers to do these things, in response to taking there to be reason to do one thing or another, and in response to taking there to be both reason for and reason against doing certain things.

Such powers are partly constitutive of our deliberative capacities. So, too, are powers to decide what to do when we see reasons as not clearly settling the matter, or when we have strong motivation in conflict with our judgments concerning what is better or best. In response to such stimuli, one often comes to intend to make up one’s mind what to do or whether to do a certain thing; and in response to so intending, one commonly makes a decision. Powers to come to so intend, and to so decide, with the indicated characteristic stimuli, would seem to be among those possessed by rational agents.

Free will, and indeed rational agency, might well be thought to require something more than merely procedural or internal rationality; it might reasonably be taken to require being in touch with what evidence and reasons there are.[[35]](#footnote-35) The required rational powers might then include powers to take there to be evidence and reasons of various sorts in response to being presented with such things, and powers to see one’s attitudes as supported by evidence or reasons in response to their in fact being so.

There are many details of these suggestions that remain to be filled in. What, in the first place, are reasons? What is it to be, as we put it, presented with evidence or reasons? What is it to take there to be evidence or reasons for or against something, or to see one’s attitudes as supported by evidence or reasons? What is it to take some reasons to have more or less weight than others? We can’t provide these details, but in any case we intend the proposal to be neutral between various ways in which they might be specified. What we offer for consideration, then, is to a considerable extent a program, a way of approaching a problem.

Nevertheless, the proposal includes a substantive suggestion concerning the nature of the rational powers in question, viz., that they might be causal dispositions, with characteristic manifestations and stimuli, the latter of which are among the causes of their manifestations, when they’re manifested. The idea is controversial, and we lack the space to defend it here.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Even setting this point aside, the proposal faces a familiar problem. Supposing it granted that we can construe in the suggested way a power to rationally will, can we likewise construe a power to *freely* will? For the latter requires not just rational powers; it requires that it’s sometimes up to the agents who have free will whether they exercise some of these powers in certain ways. If on some occasion whether one wills something or other is just a matter of whether sufficient causal antecedents for the manifestation of a certain power occur, how can it be any more up to oneself whether one so wills than it can be up to a glass whether it breaks?

*6. Opposing Powers*

We might find help with this question if we take being free with respect to willing to *A* to require possessing a plurality of *competing* or *opposing* powers. Perhaps, in order for it to be up to you on a certain occasion whether you then will to *A*, you must have a power to will to *A* and also a power to do something incompatible with your willing to *A*.[[37]](#footnote-37)

One such power would be a power to will not to *A*. Another would be the sort of power that Locke appealed to when he finally (*Essay*, Bk. 2, Ch. 21.48) took the notion of free will seriously: a power to suspend the execution of one’s motivational states while one evaluates their objects, considering whether they’re worthy of pursuit. This latter might be called a power to reflect rather than will, though commonly there are acts of will involved in reflecting. (Reflection often includes the active direction of attention and pursuit of certain lines of thought.)

Consider being free with respect to deciding to *A*. For you to have such freedom, it must be up to you whether you decide to *A*. Suppose that you have a power to decide to *A* in response to coming to intend to make up your mind whether to *A*, and also a power to decide not to *A* in response to that same stimulus. It might be that having both of these powers, or two or more similarly opposing powers, is required for being free with respect to deciding to *A*.

Consider being free with respect to engaging in a beginning portion of an attempt to *A*. For you to have such freedom, it must be up to you whether you engage in that act of will. Suppose that you have a power to do so in response to coming to have an intention to *A*, and also a power to suspend execution of such an intention (and reflect on the desirability of *A*-ing) in response to the same stimulus. It might be that having both of these powers, or two or more similarly opposing powers, is required for being free with respect to engaging in a beginning portion of an attempt to *A*.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Some theorists maintain that freedom with respect to willing is a single, multi-track power, one that isn’t decomposable into any plurality of one-way powers.[[39]](#footnote-39) The idea is that a power to freely will is by its nature a power that can be exercised in either of two or more mutually incompatible ways, for example, in willing to *A* or in willing not to *A*.

A power to engage in a beginning portion of an attempt need not be one that can be manifested in one’s refraining from so willing. Further, one can have a power to engage in a beginning portion of an attempt to *A* (in response, for example, to coming to intend to *A*)without having a power to refrain from doing so (in response to that stimulus). (The young child might have a power of the first kind, without having one of the second kind, with respect to willing to go get the shiny object.) Similarly, it seems, one might have a power to decide to *A* (in response to coming to intend to make up one’s mind whether to *A*) without having an opposing power.

Of course, commonly when one has a power to decide to *A*, one *does* have a power to decide not to *A*. However, what is gained by insisting that the power to freely will is no combination of one-way powers but rather a single multi-track power? In having a power of the latter kind, one has a power that *might* be manifested one way, and *might* instead be manifested another. But the problem of understanding how it can be *up to oneself* which way this power is manifested remains. The move considered here, we submit, makes no progress at all.

*7. Stimulus Presence*

Suppose that you have both of the powers to decide just mentioned: a power to decide to *A* in response to coming to intend to make up your mind whether to *A*, and a power to decide not to *A* in response to this same stimulus. But suppose that you don’t now intend to so make up your mind, you’re not going to so intend, and it isn’t up to you whether you so intend. How can it then be up to you whether you decide to *A*?

Circumstances of a similar sort can render it *not* up to an agent whether she does a certain thing. Imagine that in order for Sue to change a light bulb in the chandelier, she’ll have to stand on a tall ladder. Suppose that she isn’t standing on a tall ladder, she isn’t going to be, and it isn’t up to her whether she comes to stand on a tall ladder. Then it isn’t up to Sue whether she changes the light bulb.[[40]](#footnote-40)

It might contribute to conditions in which it’s up to you whether you decide to *A* if the characteristic stimulus of your power to so decide is in fact present. This presence isn’t *necessary* for its being up to you whether you decide to *A*; for it might be that, although the stimulus is absent, it’s up to you whether it comes to be present. (However, to *require* that this presence be up to you would begin a regress, one that might well be vicious.) And perhaps the presence of a stimulus for one of your other powers might make a similar contribution.

Suppose that you’re now presented with reason to *A* but you’ve not yet taken there to be such reason—you’ve not yet recognized it. Suppose that you have a power to do so in response to being presented with such reason. And suppose that you have further powers: to become motivated to *A* in response to taking there to be reason to *A*; to weigh what you take to be reasons to *A* against what you take to be conflicting reasons; to judge *A*-ing better or worse in light of your take on reasons; to come to intend to make up your mind whether to *A* when you take reasons for and against not to clearly settle the question; to decide to *A* in response to coming to have such an intention; and to decide not to *A* in response to this same stimulus.

We don’t say that it might be up to you whether you do some of these things. Coming to have a certain motivation, for example, isn’t typically something one does intentionally; it isn’t typically an action at all. And perhaps only in the case of actions—and perhaps also omissions to act—can it be up to us whether they take place. Still, we might consider whether the circumstances just described suffice for its being up to you whether you decide to *A*. The characteristic stimulus for your power to decide to *A* isn’t present, but the stimulus for some prior power is present, and you have that prior power, as well as powers linking its manifestation to the presence of a characteristic stimulus of your power to decide to *A*.

As it stands, our working proposal is that being free with respect to willing to *A* requires having a plurality of causal dispositions, including certain opposing powers, and that it might suffice if also a stimulus condition of at least one of these dispositions is present. But these conditions won’t quite suffice; something else is needed.

*8. Unthreatened Powers*

Powers come and go, and they can be caused to do so. Moreover, it’s possible for the removal of a power to be triggered by something that ordinarily causes that power’s manifestation. Indeed, a power whose removal is so triggered might be eliminated before there’s time for it to be manifested. To give an often cited example: striking a fragile glass might cause a wizard who’s fond of that glass to heat it so that it ceases to be fragile, so quickly that there’s no time for it to break.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The manifestation of a power can also be prevented despite the occurrence of that power’s characteristic stimulus, and despite the continuing presence of the power. A familiar example: packing placed within a fragile glass can prevent the glass from breaking when it’s struck, despite its remaining fragile.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The presence of factors that will eliminate one’s power to decide to *A* should some necessary stimulus occur, or factors that will prevent the manifestation of that power (despite its continued possession) in the event of such a stimulus, can undermine its being up to oneself whether one decides to *A* on such an occasion. If such factors are present and it isn’t up to oneself whether they are; and if given their presence, they’ll operate in this way should any such stimulus occur, and this, too, isn’t up to oneself; then one won’t manifest one’s power to decide to *A*, and it isn’t up to oneself whether one does so.[[43]](#footnote-43)

These observations provide a way of understanding, in terms of powers, what’s going on in a kind of situation introduced by Harry Frankfurt (1969). Here’s one version: an agent, Jones, decides to do a certain thing, *A*. In order to do otherwise than decide to *A*, Jones would have had to direct his attention to a certain reason for doing otherwise, which he was able to do. But had he done so, a second agent, Black, would have intervened and seen to it that Jones decided to *A* (and didn’t decide otherwise). As it happened, Jones didn’t direct his attention to the reason in question, Black didn’t in any way intervene, and Jones made his decision entirely on his own.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Jones might have had a power opposed to the power to decide to *A*—for example, a power to decide not to *A.* Nevertheless, it wasn’t up to Jones whether his power to decide to *A* was manifested on this occasion. And one thing that precludes this is thatBlack stood ready and able to remove Jones’s opposing power, or to prevent its manifestation despite leaving it in place. (Details of the case can be filled in one way or the other on this point.)[[45]](#footnote-45)

However, the prevention of the manifestation of a power to decide to *A* *need not* undermine its having been up to oneself whether one decided to *A*. Suppose that you have both a power to decide to *A* in response to coming to intend to make up your mind whether to *A*, and a power to decide not to *A* in response to this same stimulus. Suppose that you come to intend to make up your mind whether to *A*, and that the second of these powers is then manifested—that is, you decide not to *A*. The manifestation of this power might be the very thing that prevents the first of the powers from being manifested. In this case, the prevention shouldn’t count against its having been up to you on this occasion whether you decided to *A*. For what prevents the manifestation on this occasion of your power to decide to *A* is your manifesting your power to decide not to *A*.

Let’s say that powers to will that are free from removal or prevention, except in the way just described, are *unthreatened*. We might add to our account of free will the requirement that the relevant powers to will must be unthreatened.

Let us take stock. We’ve offered several proposals concerning powers that might be said to be required for free will. We’ve worked with the idea that the powers in question might be causal dispositions, similar in an important respect to the dispositions of inanimate objects. It should be noted, however, that the various powers we’ve mentioned are all *psychological* powers. The proposed view is thus not reductive in the sense of taking free will to consist in some complex of non-psychological—perhaps neurological or microphysical—powers. We don’t deny that the psychological powers we’ve mentioned might be grounded in more basic things. We’ve simply not explored this issue. Our account begins and remains at the level of psychological discourse.

We began with a power to will that need not be a power to freely will, one that even agents lacking sophisticated rational capacities might have, viz., a power to engage in beginning portions of attempts to do this or that in response to coming to have certain intentions. We added various rational powers: to take there to be evidence or reasons of various sorts when presented with such evidence or reasons; to believe, desire, and intend in response to taking there to be reasons for belief or action; to assess and weigh against one another what one takes to be reasons; to judge options better or worse in light of one’s take on reasons; to come to intend to make up one’s mind what to do in response to taking reasons not to clearly settle the matter; and to make decisions in response to intending to make up one’s mind. An agent, we proposed, might have opposing powers of this latter sort, and her powers might be unthreatened. She might likewise have opposing and unthreatened powers with respect to engaging in beginning portions of attempts. She might often be presented with competing practical reasons. Is this enough for free will? Does having these powers and being in these conditions suffice for sometimes being free with respect to willing to do this or that?

*9. Determinism*

We’ve expressed the worry that any account of free will couched in terms of causal dispositions will fail to capture the idea that it can be up to an agent on some occasion whether she wills this or that. Given such an account, whether an agent wills this or that seems just to be a matter of whether certain causal antecedents occur. How then can it be up to her? Turning to the issue of determinism allows us to express this worry in a particularly sharp fashion.

Consider an agent who has various causal dispositions to which we’ve appealed. She has powers to take there to be reason to *A* in response to being presented with such reason, to become motivated to *A* in response to taking there to be reason to *A*, to assess and weigh what she takes to be reasons to *A*, to judge options in light of her take on reasons to *A*, to come to intend to make up her mind whether to *A* should she take reasons not to clearly settle the matter, to decide to *A* in response to intending to make up her mind whether to *A*, and to decide not to *A* in response to that same stimulus; and she has the same sorts of powers with respect to not *A*-ing. Imagine that all of these powers are unthreatened. And suppose that she is presented with reason for her to *A* and with reason for her not to *A*. Why doubt that it’s up to her whether she decides to *A*?

Suppose that this agent in fact decides to *A*. Now suppose that determinism is true (and that the world is much older than this agent). With determinism understood in the standard way, a proposition expressing the complete state of the world at some time in the distant past (long before this agent existed), conjoined with a proposition expressing all the laws of nature, entails that this agent decides on this occasion to *A*.[[46]](#footnote-46) There is then the following argument to consider: the indicated conjunction is true, and it isn’t up to the agent whether this is so; if that conjunction is true, then the agent decides on this occasion to *A*, and it isn’t up to her whether this conditional holds; hence, she decides on this occasion to *A*, and it isn’t up to her whether this is so.

What we’ve just presented is, of course, an instance of what’s often called the Consequence Argument.[[47]](#footnote-47) Various versions of the argument, and objections to it, provide welcome clarity to the debate over whether free will is compatible with determinism.

We’re uncertain whether there’s any satisfactory response to this argument. But supposing there is, we see no reason to think that a dispositional account is less promising than compatibilist theories of other kinds when it comes to characterizing what it takes for it to be up to an agent whether she wills this or that.

A view in line with the account we’ve advanced might say, to a first approximation, that when an agent has a complex of powers of the sort we’ve described with respect to willing to *A*, and likewise with respect to willing not to *A*, and she is presented with both reason to *A* and reason not to *A*, it is up to her whether she wills to *A* if whether she does so depends on her manifesting, or failing to manifest, one or another of her prior rational powers. For example, we might have the dependence in question if whether the agent wills to *A* depends on whether she becomes appropriately motivated to *A* in response to recognizing a reason to *A*, or on whether she recognizes a reason to *A* in response to being presented with one.[[48]](#footnote-48)

We’ll have to leave unsettled whether a dispositional account of free will—or indeed any compatibilist view—can provide an adequate characterization of what it takes for it to be up to an agent whether she wills this or that. Before moving on, however, we want to add one further remark: if the answer is negative, then we won’t get a satisfactory view just by adding a requirement of indeterminism to a dispositional account.

Suppose we require that when an agent has a complex of powers of the sort we’ve described and she intends to make up her mind whether to *A*, it’s undetermined which of her powers—the power to decide to *A* or the power to decide not to *A*—is manifested. Whichever decision she makes, her decision will be caused but not determined by, among other things, her having a certain disposition and the presence of a certain stimulus.[[49]](#footnote-49) The added requirement introduces chance: given the agent’s intention to make up her mind whether to *A*, there’s a chance that she’ll decide to *A* and a chance that she’ll decide not to *A*. Either outcome will manifest one of her powers to decide. The chanciness of the outcome might preclude its being up to *anyone else*—for example, someone who put into place some of the prior causal conditions—whether this agent decides on this occasion to *A*. But the chance doesn’t render it any more up to *this* agent whether she makes this decision than it might be given determinism.[[50]](#footnote-50)

If we go with the dispositional account, then we might as well go with a version of it that’s compatible with determinism. Adding a requirement of indeterminism yields a hostage to empirical fortune while gaining nothing with respect to the problem at hand.

*10. Alternatives*

Earlier we described powers of different kinds—different from causal dispositions—to which a powers-conception of free will might appeal. Detailed examination of the prospects for views that invoke such powers is a project for another occasion. But we think it worthwhile to briefly express the grounds of our doubt that any such view will fare better than a dispositional account.

One difficulty for an appeal to agent-causal powers is the plausibility of the thought that, whatever causes are in exercises of free will, causes in general are things of the same category.[[51]](#footnote-51) The thought counts against the view that, although generally throughout nature, it’s events that cause things, in an exercise of free will it’s a substance that is the cause. It strikes us as an untenable metaphysical thesis that causation is a phenomenon that varies in this way.[[52]](#footnote-52)

A recent proposal (Jacobs and O’Connor 2013) avoids this objection by suggesting that *all* causes are substances. On this view, when an object strikes and breaks a fragile glass, strictly speaking it isn’t the event of the striking that is a cause of the breaking; it is, instead, the object that strikes the glass that is a cause. Similarly, when an agent intends to make up her mind whether to *A* and then decides to *A*, it isn’t the coming-to-intend-to-make-up-her-mind that causes the coming-to-intend-to-*A*; it is, instead, the agent who causes this outcome.

Causation, on this view, nevertheless depends on events, on the comings-to-have and havings of properties by the substances that cause things. An object can cause this or that on some occasion because it and the things around it have certain properties then. It might become more or less strongly disposed to cause this or that because of gains or losses of properties. Events of this sort, we might say, empower the object to cause this or that. The object that breaks the glass is empowered to do so just then by its having a certain momentum when it collides with the glass. Thus, certain events that involve substances, though they’re said not to be causes, nevertheless play an ineliminable causal role.

Of course, even on this view, it isn’t up to the object whether it breaks the glass on some occasion. Whether it does is still a matter of what events occur, and perhaps of chance. And now, it is hard to see how the shift to thoroughgoing substance causation has made it any easier to see how it might be up to a human agent on some occasion whether she wills this or that.

What the dispositional account takes as a stimulus for an agential power—one that, when the manifestation occurs, is a cause of that outcome—this view takes as an empowering of an agent to cause some specific thing, or perhaps some increase or other alteration of her agent-causal power. But it still seems that whether the agent wills this or that is a matter of whether certain empowering events occur, and perhaps of chance. More needs to be said if this alternative view is to be seen as superior to a dispositional account of free will.

A second alternative appeals to spontaneous powers, which are taken to be noncausal.[[53]](#footnote-53) A power to freely decide to *A* is one whose manifestation, when it occurs, is entirely uncaused (and isn’t a causing of one thing by another).

But, of course, it isn’t up to an unstable atom, or to anything else, whether that atom’s spontaneous power to decay is manifested at a given moment. How, then, can it be up to an agent whether a similarly spontaneous power that the agent has is manifested? Proponents of this kind of view often point out that, unlike the atom’s spontaneous power, an agent’s power to freely will is a *rational* power. But this remark doesn’t solve the problem, for it isn’t obvious that a power to respond to one’s take on reasons must be one such that, when one has it, it’s up to oneself whether and how it’s manifested. Moreover, a view of this sort faces the objection that believing, desiring, intending, and acting for reasons are causal phenomena.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Finally, a powers-conception of free will might embrace primitivism. It might be said that the kind of power one must possess such that, in having that power, one has free will is sui generis. It isn’t a causal power, and it differs from spontaneous powers such as a particle’s liability to decay precisely in the up-to-the-agent respect. To be free with respect to *A*-ing is simply to have a power with respect to *A*-ing such that, in having it, it’s up to you whether you *A*. End of story.[[55]](#footnote-55)

The plain shortcoming of such a contention is that it sheds no light on what free will is. It’s precisely the up-to-the-agent characteristic of free will that needs explication. A proposal that offers no explication of this gets us nowhere.

*11. Conclusion*

There’s good reason to think that if we have free will, we do so (at least partly) in virtue of having certain powers. Having these powers, perhaps in conjunction with satisfying certain other conditions, would render us sometimes free with respect to willing to do one thing or another. And to be free with respect to willing to do a certain thing, it must be up to oneself whether one so wills.

We’ve offered a view of willing that can be employed in an account of freedom with respect to willing. And we’ve distinguished different kinds of powers that might be invoked in a powers-conception of free will. We then proposed how a view appealing to causal dispositions might go. We left open the question of whether such a view can fully capture the up-to-oneself idea, though we offered a suggestion on this point. Finally, we briefly considered powers-conceptions of free will that appeal to different kinds of powers, and we expressed our doubt that such views do any better.

We take no stand here on the prospects for an affirmative answer to the question we’ve left open. But in this regard it is worth repeating something we said at the start. Accounts of free will that don’t explicitly appeal to powers commonly invoke them implicitly. We think it likely that if a theory of any kind can adequately characterize all that’s required for it to be up to an agent whether she wills this or that, a theory stated in terms of agential powers can do so.[[56]](#footnote-56)

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1. See Locke, *Essay*, Bk. 2, Ch. 21; Hume, *Enquiry*, Sect. 8; and Reid, *Essays*, Essay IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some examples are Fara (2008), Goetz (2008), Lowe (2008), Pink (2004, 2011), and Vihvelin (2004, 2013: ch. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The view is that of Fischer and Ravizza (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Van Inwagen (2008b: 460) makes a similar point in terms of ability rather than power. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For critical examination of these views, see Clarke (2009) and Whittle (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We take no stand here on whether powers are basic features of the world or, instead, reducible in one way or another. Our main proposals are consistent with various views on this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Several writers who advance conceptions of abilities to act in terms of powers likewise advance analyses of abilities to do what depends on willing that are inapplicable to abilities to will; some of them offer no analysis of the latter. Moore (1912) is an example with respect to both points. Fara (2008) and Vihvelin (2004) are more recent examples with respect to one or more of these points. Fara acknowledges that the view he offers applies only to abilities to do things that we do as a result of trying to do them; he offers no account of abilities to try to do such things. Vihvelin maintains that an ability to make choices on the basis of reasons is a bundle of dispositions. But whereas she offers an analysis of the dispositions said to constitute abilities to do things that one might choose to do, in her 2004 she offers no analysis of the dispositions said to constitute an ability to choose. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chisholm says that “the metaphysical problem of freedom does not concern the *actus imperatus*; it does not concern the question whether we are free to accomplish whatever it is that we will or set out to do; it concerns the *actus elicitus*, the question whether we are free to will or to set out to do those things that we do will or set out to do” (1966: 23). We allow that it might concern the former as well, though, with Chisholm, we hold that the latter is included. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Compare Hobart’s remark that “in accordance with the genius of language, free will means freedom of persons in willing, just as ‘free trade’ means freedom of persons (in a certain respect) in trading” (1934: 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Locke himself declared at one point that “in respect of willing, a man is not free” (*Essay*, Bk. 2, Ch. 21.22). Although he might be correct, we do not find his argument persuasive. A key premise is that once an action in one’s power is proposed to thought, it is “unavoidably necessary” to prefer the doing or the forbearance of that action (*Essay*, Bk. 2, Ch. 21.23). But first, the argument doesn’t address the case in which one *doesn’t* consider doing the thing in question. Second, when one *does* consider this, one can indeed fail to make up one’s mind—fail to choose one way or the other—without having decided not to choose. (On this point, see Kane [1996: 156] and Clarke [2014: 100-4].) Third, even if in some case one must either will the act or will to forbear it, one might be free with respect to which of these one wills. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. When one attempts something with little chance of success, if one succeeds one’s action might be too lucky to count as intentional. It can still count as something done freely. Mele (2006: 25) provides an example. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. An example (from Mele [1992: 231]): when Al arrives at his office in the morning, he reaches into his pocket, takes out his keys, and unlocks the door. He does all of this intentionally, and when he does it he intends to do it, and to do it then. The intention to unlock the door right then is something he comes to have on his arrival. But he doesn’t make a decision to unlock the door then. Given his standing plans and his awareness that he’s arrived at the door, it’s perfectly clear to him what to do then. There’s no practical question that needs to be settled, and he comes to have the intention in much the same way that he might come by inference to have a belief. *Executing* that intention, *carrying it out*, is an action he performs; coming to have the intention is not. For another example of acquiring an intention without making a decision, see Audi (1993: 64). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For arguments in support of the view that decisions to act are themselves intentional actions, see McCann (1998b), Mele (2000), and Pink (1996). O’Shaughnessy (2008: 543-47) denies that deciding is an action; for a reply, see Clarke (2010a). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Saying that one tried to raise one’s arm can implicate that it was a difficult matter, or that one didn’t fully expect success. But we distinguish pragmatic infelicity from falsehood; the statement might be nonetheless true. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Brand (1984: 20) suggests this view of when actions begin. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Well before the ball falls into the cup, the agent has ceased to make any movements of her body that might influence whether she sinks the putt. She might at that moment be trading quips with her partner or walking toward her golf bag. She isn’t, while doing any such thing, trying to sink the putt. (We assume that if some portion of an agent’s *A*-ing is occurring at a given time *t*, then the agent is *A*-ing at *t*.) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. O’Shaughnessy (2008) *does* count such motions as included in an agent’s willing to do a certain thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. We’ve said that beginning portions of attempts count as willings. Why not more simply take beginning portions of *actions* to be willings (perhaps except when the actions in question are themselves momentary)? In trying to *A*, one wills to *A*, whereas in *A*-ing one need not will to *A*. Stating the view in terms of trying, we hope, makes it clear *what* is said to be willed on a given occasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. O’Shaughnessy (2009) argues that we have trying only where it is possible to try but fail, and that in mental actions of certain types (for example, imagining moving one’s arm), there is no such possibility. We then have what he calls “a movement of the will” (we might say, a willing) without an attempt. If he is correct, then we have here a third kind of willing, something additional to the two kinds we’ve identified in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ginet (1990: 9-14) takes volitions to be mental actions that, in cases of bodily action, cause bodily exertion. On his view, a volition need not have any cause or any internal causal structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. One might put the intended point of Frankfurt (1969) this way (as, indeed, Frankfurt himself does). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Modalities expressed by sentences using ‘can’ or ‘able’ differ depending on context, and it might be argued that in the context of discussion of free will, stating what’s required using these terms is satisfactory. This might be so, but the frequency with which people talk past each other while discussing free will in these terms gives us little confidence that such sentences are generally understood the same by all participants in the discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Van Inwagen (1983: 8-9) employs all three of these terms in explaining what he means in saying that someone has free will. He also often (e.g., 1983: 16, 2008a) uses our favored expression in characterizing free will. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A much discussed version of the Consequence Argument (van Inwagen 1983: 93-104) is couched in terms of having a choice about whether something or other is so. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The term ‘directedness’ is used by Molnar (2003: 60) to characterize what he calls powers or dispositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For recent views of this sort, see Clarke (1993), Jacobs and O’Connor (2013), Mawson (2011: ch. 5), O’Connor (2000), and Pereboom (2001, ch. 2). Earlier versions are advanced in Chisholm (1966) and Taylor (1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Lowe (2008: chs. 7-8) advances an account of free will that appeals to spontaneous powers. Goetz (2008, ch. 2) and Pink (2011) similarly appeal to powers whose manifestations are said to be uncaused. McCann (1998a: 180) emphasizes the spontaneity of exercises of free will, which he takes to be uncaused, though he doesn’t couch his account in terms of powers. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. On the basis of considerations similar to those presented here, Taylor denies that the “‘can’ of human agency” expresses “the idea of a causal relationship between different events or states” (1960: 81-82); and van Inwagen contrasts an agent’s “power to act” with a “causal power or capacity” (1983: 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. We borrow the example from Vihvelin (2013: 178). The present paper began as, in part, a critique of that work but has evolved into something rather different—an effort to see if we can ourselves produce a view that avoids the problems we see in those of others. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. If the child lacks a concept of trying, or a concept of willing, might it be that her trying or willing to go get the shiny object isn’t intentional? (Stephen Kearns raised this question.) We allow that this might be so. Then our claim that acts of will are intentional actions would need to be qualified, perhaps as applying only to agents who can freely will. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Things are a bit more complicated if we see actions (as some action theorists do), including willings, as causings. The child’s willing to crawl might then be a series of causings—causings of beginning portions of her attempt by her intending to crawl. Let us say that what is caused in a causing is a causing-result. Then intending will cause, not willings, but willing-results. A power to will is still seen as a causal power, even if the respect in which it is so must be understood a bit differently. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. A medieval knight would lack a power to try to find an iPhone, in part because he lacks a power to come to have an intention to search for an iPhone. And he lacks the latter power because he lacks a power to think of doing such a thing. He could very well come to have that power—someone could tell him about iPhones. But that’s to say that he has a potential (a power) to acquire a power that he in fact lacks. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. One can intend not to do a certain thing, and reasons for so intending can include reasons not to do that thing. Such reasons needn’t be reasons to perform any action. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Pettit and Smith (1998) and Smith (1997, 2003) offer accounts of freedom in terms of capacities to believe and desire rationally. Free will includes such capacities, but it includes more; let’s not forget the action! [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. A requirement of this sort is emphasized by, among others, Fischer and Ravizza (1998), Nelkin (2011), and Wolf (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. A manifestation of a rational power is something done for a reason, something responsive to the normativity of reasons. But, it has been objected, causal processes “bring about their effects with complete indifference to the question of whether those effects have cogent considerations in their favour” (Lowe 2008: 156). No doubt some do; but do (or must) they all? We see no reason to think this is so. The issue is a complicated one and can’t be dealt with in the context of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For defense of the view that things can have dispositions that are in this way opposed, see Clarke (2010b). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Choi (2013) argues that it is impossible for a thing to have opposing powers. Although we are not convinced, it is worth noting that his definition of opposing powers is stricter than anything that we need to invoke here. As Choi sees it, two powers are opposing just in case they have incompatible manifestations and *exactly* the same stimulus conditions. Our proposal can allow that the powers we invoke have stimulus conditions that, while overlapping in some respect, are not exactly the same. An agent might have a power to decide to *A* in response to coming to have an intention to make up her mind whether to *A* and taking herself to have reason to *A*, and she might have a power to decide not to *A* in response to coming to have an intention to make up her mind whether to *A* and taking herself to have reason not to *A*. Powers of this sort would count as opposing for our purposes here. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See, for example, Goetz (2008: 9), Lowe (2013: 164-5), and Pink (2011: 363). Pink declares: “If freedom is a power that conforms to our ordinary understanding of it, and therefore is a possible basis of moral responsibility, it cannot be explained in terms of one-way powers attached to distinct motivations with [sic] an agent. It must exist as an irreducible two-way power possessed and exercised by the agent himself. And that suggests that freedom may not be a causal power at all. Freedom, by its nature, is a power that can be exercised in more than one way—which way being under our control. Freedom, by its nature, leaves it up to us which actions we perform. But ordinary causal powers, powers to cause things, are not like this at all” (364). We discuss accounts that appeal to noncausal powers in section 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Sue might have no interest in changing the light bulb, and she might voluntarily refrain from attempting to change it. But she isn’t free with respect to changing it. Locke (*Essay*, Bk. 2, Ch. 21.10) would agree. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. In such a case, the fragility is said to be finkish. The term stems from Martin (1994), and the phenomenon has been much discussed in the literature on dispositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In this kind of case, the fragility is said to be masked. The term stems from Johnston (1992), and this phenomenon, too, has been much discussed. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. What about factors that *might* eliminate one’s power to decide to *A*, or might prevent that power’s manifestation, should its stimulus occur? Perhaps these too, if the likelihood is great enough, can render it not up to oneself whether one manifests one’s power to decide to *A*. We lack the space to examine the question in detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The case we describe resembles one presented by Pereboom (2008: 6-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Fara (2008), Smith (2003), and Vihvelin (2004) have noted the fact that Frankfurt cases can be understood in terms of finkish dispositions or dispositions that are vulnerable to masking. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Van Inwagen, for example, defines ‘determinism’ as the conjunction of these two claims:

    “For every instant of time, there is a proposition that expresses the state of the world at that instant;

    If *p* and *q* are any propositions that express the state of the world at some instants, then the conjunction of *p* with the laws of nature entails *q*” (1983: 65). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. It is so-called by van Inwagen (1983: 16), who advances it in ch. 3 of his 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. One refinement that might be added is the recognition that its being up to an agent whether she wills this or that can be undermined if some of the beliefs or desires that lead causally to her act of will have been implanted in her in some manipulative way. It’s common for compatibilist views to take certain kinds of manipulation to undermine freedom. See, for example, Mele (2009) (though his target there is the freedom needed for moral responsibility). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Some theorists hold that it isn’t the having of a disposition, but instead the having of a causal basis of that disposition, that causally contributes to the disposition’s manifestation, when the latter occurs. See, for example, Prior, Pargetter, and Jackson (1982). Our claim in the text retains its point when stated in terms compatible with this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. This point is developed further in Clarke (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. This point is developed in Clarke (2003: 207-9, 2011: 346). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Agent-causal accounts advanced by Chisholm (1966), Clarke (1993), O’Connor (2000), and Taylor (1966) take causation in exercises of free will to differ in this way from other instances of causation. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. We don’t find it obvious that manifestations of spontaneous powers must be uncaused. An unstable atom with a power to spontaneously decay has that power because it has a certain structure; indeed, its having that structure might *be* its having that power. And its having that power might be a cause of its decay, when the decay occurs. The manifestation of a spontaneous power might lack any further cause, since there might be no stimulus needed. But this is not to say that it occurs entirely uncaused. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. The issue raised here is a big one which, as we’ve said, we lack the space to discuss in detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. We’re not sure that anyone holds this view, but some proponents of noncausal accounts, such as Pink, sometimes seem to suggest it. See, for example, his 2011: 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
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