

## Freedom, Power and Causation

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Received: 1 July 2018 / Accepted: 29 November 2018


*Abstract:* Freedom or control of how we act is often and very naturally understood as a kind of power—a power to determine for ourselves how we act. Is freedom conceived as such a power possible, and what kind of power must it be? The paper argues that power takes many forms, of which ordinary causation is only one; and that if freedom is indeed a kind of power, it cannot be ordinary causation. Scepticism about the reality of freedom as a power can take two forms. One, found in Hume, now often referred to as the *Mind* argument, assumes incompatibilism, and concludes from incompatibilism that freedom cannot exist, as indistinguishable from chance. But another scepticism, found in Hobbes, does not assume incompatibilism, but assumes rather that the only possible form of power in nature is ordinary causation, concluding that freedom cannot for this reason exist as a form of power. This scepticism is more profound—it is in fact presupposed by Hume’s scepticism—and far more interesting, just because freedom cannot plausibly be modelled as ordinary causation.

*Keywords:* Causation; chance; compatibilism; freedom; Hobbes; Hume; incompatibilism; law of nature; power; reason; scepticism; Suarez.

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## 1. Power

We think that, within limits, we have control over our actions—that it is up to us what actions we perform. A very natural conception of this control is as a kind of power. Our control of our actions is a power to determine for ourselves what we do—a power of self-determination in the form of freedom. But what then is the nature of freedom so conceived—as a power to determine our own actions for ourselves?

Many philosophers think or write as if power were a rather uniform phenomenon. It is often proposed that power is by its very nature a causal phenomenon:

In the first place, the notions of power or disposition are already causally laden notions and it can thus reasonably be argued that unless one already has a grasp of causation, one cannot have a grasp of power. Powers, indeed, are often called causal powers.<sup>1</sup>

But is all power causal by its very nature? And if control or freedom is a kind of power, must it in particular be a form of causal power?

Of course, the claim that all power is causal could be so understood as to be trivial. ‘Causation’ could be used as no more than a general label to apply to whatever power turns out to be. But in the passage just cited the claim that all power is causal is presented as a substantial thesis—as something that is not trivial, but to be ‘reasonably argued.’ In which case the idea might be to inform the theory of power by importing a definite and specific conception of causation. And this has certainly been a project of much metaphysics since Thomas Hobbes. One very intuitive case of power is the very familiar kind that appears to be involved in obvious cases of causation, and to be possessed and exercised, not by causes and effects indifferently, but specifically by causes. This is the power of stones to break windows or the power of fire to melt ice—the power that ordinary causes have to produce their effects. Is all power, then, power in this specific form? The project would then be to understand all forms of power in terms of this particular form of power—the

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<sup>1</sup> (Harre and Madden 1975)—as cited and endorsed in (Mumford and Anjum 2011, 7).

power involved in ordinary causation. All genuine power is like the power of stones to break windows and of fire to melt ice.

I shall understand the claim that all power is causal as a claim that is substantial in just this way. The claim is that all power is like the power to produce outcomes exercised by ordinary causes—such as by stones to break windows and fire to melt ice.

At this point it is useful to step back, and raise the question why causation itself is so widely viewed as involving power—and, more specifically, a power possessed and exercised by causes over what they affect?

Power involves a kind of capacity. Causal power constitutes, after all, a capacity to produce effects. But, of course, it is not the mere presence in them of a capacity that makes it true that causes possess power. And that is because the idea of a capacity extends far wider than that of power. For example, there are capacities not to cause and affect, but to be affected. But the capacity to be affected hardly constitutes any kind of power over anything, and the process of being affected is hardly the exercise of power. The contrary is true: to be affected is to be subject to power that is possessed and exercised by something else. Contrast my view with Locke's. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke divides power into active and passive (Locke 1975, 234). Active is defined as the power to make a change, passive is the power to receive it. As an account of power this is certainly defective. For, of course, Locke ignores powers to prevent change from occurring. But more importantly, Locke's 'passive power' involves the opposite of any exercise of genuine power. It is a form of powerlessness—subjection to the power of another.

Power, then, is a very special capacity. And what, I conjecture, is common to power in all its forms is a capacity to produce or, at the upper limit, to outright determine the occurrence or non-occurrence of outcomes. It is this capacity to determine what happens that causes possess, but which their effects lack. Causes determine the occurrence of their effects, and not vice versa. Furthermore, linked to the general notion of determination, where power is concerned, is an equally general notion of responsibility. Whatever exercises a power to determine outcomes is in some corresponding way responsible for what that exercise of power determines. Causes possess power in so far as they can influence or determine an outcome. And in so

determining that outcome they are responsible, causally responsible, for its happening. Causes are responsible for the occurrence of their effects, and not the other way round, just as anything that possesses power is correspondingly responsible for what that power's exercise determines.

Freedom is a capacity to determine one very important kind of outcome—that involved in the performance of action. So understood, as a capacity to determine, freedom is definitely a case of power. But how far, in discussing freedom, are we concerned with power in specifically causal form—the kind of power that is involved in stones breaking windows and in fire melting ice?

## 2. Powers causal and non-causal

If a power is a capacity to determine, a causal power must be a capacity to determine causally. And that immediately suggests the possibility, at least at the conceptual level, of power that is not causal. A power that is not causal is going to be a power the exercise of which determines outcomes, but without determining them causally. And so understood, we certainly entertain ideas of other kinds of power besides the causal. We do deploy an understanding of capacities that determine outcomes without determining them causally.

There are, for example, various kinds of moral power, such as powers to impose or release from moral obligations. Consider promising, for example. Promisors have the power to impose an obligation on themselves—an obligation, owed to a promisee, to act as promised. And then promisees can release the promisors from the moral obligation of their promise by declaring them released. The promise determines or produces an obligation; and then the promisee's declaration determines the removal of the obligation and the promisor's release. But in neither case is the obligation or release from it produced as an effect, by virtue of some causal law. Rather the promise constitutes the imposition of the obligation and the promisee's declaration constitutes the promisor's release from it; and each does so by virtue of something very different from causal laws, namely the moral principles governing promising.

As with moral powers, so too there are legal powers. A creditor has the power to release his debtor from a debt—a power exercised through making

some legally valid declaration of release. By making the declaration, such as by declaring ‘I release you’, the creditor determines that the debtor is released, and so is responsible for the occurrence of that release. But again the power here is not causal. Uttering the declaration does not cause the debtor to be released. Rather, thanks not to some causal law but to rules governing credit, the utterance constitutes that very event of release. The declaration determines the release, but does not determine it causally. But uttering the declaration is no less an exercise of a power or capacity to determine outcomes for that.

Then there are normative powers attaching not to agents, but to things that cannot be causes at all, to which we readily attribute capacities to move and to determine nonetheless. Suppose you entertain in thought a mathematical truth. That truth might determine or strongly incline you to assent. But what about the truth moves you to assent? The everyday answer in such cases is clear: its evident nature—in other words you are moved to believe by the clear justification there is for believing the truth. Perhaps indeed you are not only led to believe the truth, but that there is justification for believing it. Either way, what leads you to form the mathematical belief, and possibly also the belief in the justification, is the truth and the justification for believing it. Now in this case what is described as moving you is not the sort of feature involved in ordinary causation. You are contemplating, not an entity with a location in time and space, but an object of thought—a mathematical truth. And if the object of your thought is true, its truth is plausibly necessary, and certainly not something that functions as an ordinary cause. For ordinary causes and effects are contingent. And what moves you to believe it is the evident nature of the truth, the clear justifiability of believing it. And this is a normative property attaching to the truth—something that, no matter if it moves or even determines your assent, is again not the sort of feature involved in ordinary causation.

As with mathematical truths, so too with desirable options by way of actions and outcomes. The evident goodness or desirability of a possible action might move you to form a desire for its performance or believe its performance desirable, and eventually even to decide on and intend its performance. What led you to want to perform that action or to believe performing it desirable and then to decide to do it? We have just given the

answer: the evident desirability of doing it. And such an answer reveals you as rational animal, responsive to and moved by the good—just as you might also be moved, as rational animal, by the true. The action that is so desirable may never be performed, of course. What moves you is not some contingent event in the world, but, again, an object of your thought—such as the truth that a given kind of action is desirable. You may be moved by the justifiability of desiring and intending the action. But the desirability or justifiability of a given kind of action is again something normative, and not the sort of property involved in ordinary causation.

We readily use a vocabulary of power, influence and determination to pick out normativity as well as causation. We talk of being moved by the *force* of an argument. And we use this vocabulary of force just because we think of normatively forceful arguments as really possessing the capacity to influence or move or even to determine our assent—and to move or determine it through the justifications they present. Our capacity for reason or rationality is a capacity to be moved by argument—and by the normative force of an argument in particular. So reason or rationality involves responsiveness to a kind of power—the power of good argument and genuine justification.

It is tempting to dismiss this talk of normative power as not literal, just because the power envisaged is not causal. At best we have here, it might be alleged, a manner of speaking or a metaphor. But there is an obvious difficulty with this move. Power follows from a genuine capacity to determine or move or influence. And surely we think it true that the very quality of an argument can be what moves people to assent to it. But for that to be true the quality of an argument must actually have a capacity to move. Good arguments must have genuine force—a power that is non-causal because located in the normativity attaching to objects of thought, but which is a genuine capacity to move nonetheless.

Again, consider the normative powers, not of objects of thought, but of agents themselves. Our talk of promisors and promisees as having the capacity to determine moral obligations—as imposing those obligations on themselves or releasing others from them—does not appear to be metaphorical. That is exactly how promising is understood: as an act by which moral obligations to promisees may be imposed, and from which obligations promisees may in turn generally provide release should they so choose. Whatever

moral principles underlie these powers, we very clearly do understand them as genuine powers—genuine capacities, possessed by promisors and promisees, to determine outcomes. But the powers are not causal. For the powers are underpinned by moral principles and not by causal laws.

The idea of power in non-causal form is very controversial—a controversy that, as we shall see, was raised in especially sharp form in the seventeenth century by the work of Hobbes. But two different issues are involved that we must take great care to distinguish. One issue concerns our very concept of power, while the other concerns the metaphysics of power.

Some philosophers would insist that whatever we might ordinarily think or say, all genuine power is causal, at least regarding its fundamental constitution. No outcomes are determined without being determined causally. Now this claim is about metaphysics. It is about the true constitution of power, and the reality of its operation. And this metaphysical claim might turn out to be correct. But this is not the sort of claim proposed by Mumford and Anjum above, which is about our very concept of power. That claim is that our very concept of power is causal. To think of a power operating to determine an outcome just is to think of it as determining the outcome causally. But this conceptual claim is not obviously true; and it should not be assumed to be true just because of the metaphysical conviction that only power in causal form is real. We may have a concept of power that allows for power to take non-causal form, even if it indeed turns out that all the cases of power that do really exist are causal.

Take our psychology as it involves rationality or what we ordinarily take to be our receptiveness to justifications. The metaphysician who believes that all genuine power and determination is causal must claim that if my belief in a mathematical truth or in its justifiability really is produced or determined by anything, it cannot be determined by the normative properties of an object of thought. If anything really is determining me to believe in the truth or in the justifiability of assenting to it, this must be some genuine cause, and the determination must be causal. Perhaps, for example, the immediate cause of my belief in the mathematical truth is a prior psychological event—such as the event of entertaining that truth. It is this psychological entertaining that is the immediate, and causal, determinant of my belief. To describe me as rational is just to describe my beliefs as

susceptible to a particular kind of causal force—the causal force of those entertainings that present good justifications for believing. Similarly with desires: what determines me to desire an outcome is not its desirability, but the psychological event of entertaining that outcome. Agents are rational if their desires are susceptible to the causal power of those entertainings of outcomes that are in fact desirable.

Now it might in the end prove true that causation is the only real case of power in nature. But if so, that is still not what we ordinarily assume. Take the prior entertaining of the object of thought. It is certainly not this event alone that we ordinarily think of as determining belief or desire. For we ordinarily take a rational agent's belief to be determined not simply by the fact that they have entertained a claim, but by the evidence for or clear justification for the truth of what is entertained. Similarly a rational agent's desire is motivated not by the mere fact that they have entertained a given option, but by the desirability of the option entertained. Rational or reasonable agents respond to justifications not because the event of entertaining them just happens to produce that effect, but because the justifications are good ones. The quality of these justifications really is what moves rational agents to respond as justified. That is rationality as ordinarily understood—not susceptibility to causal forces merely, but susceptibility to the force of justification.

Again, consider the moral powers we ordinarily ascribe to promissors and promisees. These are powers to produce moral obligations and remove them. And the principles that base these powers, as we have observed, are not causal laws but moral principles—the moral principles governing promising. These principles are, in particular, distinct from any psychological laws that might cover what we actually, whether rightly or wrongly, do. For moral principles are concerned not with what we actually do, but with what we are under an obligation to do. Now it might be that these moral powers and the obligations they are exercised to produce and remove do not really exist. It may be that moral principles transcending and normatively corrective of actual human practices are entirely imaginary; and so are the moral powers those principles supposedly constitute. But again this claim is highly controversial. If true, it will be made true by metaphysical reality, not by the fact that our concept of power is just a concept of causation. For our entertainment of various



moral and normative powers—powers reflecting moral and normative principles, and not causal laws—seems to suggest that our concept of power is considerably broader than any concept of causation.

We need then to make an important distinction. One question is whether we think of some capacities to determine outcomes as determining those outcomes non-causally. And it seems that we do. It is then a further and importantly different question whether these non-causal powers really do exist and operate—as we so clearly assume them to. That is, we should distinguish analytic claims about our concept of power from metaphysical claims about what powers actually obtain. For it seems plain that whether or not moral and normative powers actually exist, we do at least suppose them to exist, and to operate non-causally.

What seems to distinguish cases of power that, real or not, are at least understood by us to be non-causal? There seems a range of possible differences from ordinary causation, from the breaking of windows by stones and the melting of ice by fire, not all of which need be exemplified together. There may be many different forms of non-causal determination.

In some cases, two things combine together to differentiate the power from ordinary causation. First there is the nature of the determining or moving entity, which is not an entity contingently located and operative in space and time as a stone must be, but an object of thought. And then secondly there is the mode of determination or influence, which is through properties that are normative—that are to do with the justifiability of responding to the object in certain ways, such as by forming a desire or a belief directed at it. It is these normative properties that move us so to respond. It is the evident truth or desirability of what we are thinking of that moves us to believe or want it to be true—or so we suppose. And not everyone is so moved, of course. Our rationality reflects our susceptibility to the power of justifications. We will be moved by justifications, but only to the extent that we are indeed susceptible to their normative power—only to the extent that we are indeed rational.

In other cases the outcome is certainly determined, just as in ordinary causation, by a specific entity located in time and space, such as by an agent doing something. What in these cases establishes the non-causal nature of the power is the mode of determination involved taken together

with the nature of the outcomes immediately determined. In the case of moral and legal powers, determination of the outcome seems to involve the application not of some causal law, but of moral or legal principles to determine specifically moral and legal outcomes, such as obligations. Thanks to these principles, the utterance of certain words constitutes the incurring or removal of an obligation.

What of freedom? As a power freedom belongs not to truths or objects of thought, but to agents—and so to potential bearers also of power in causal form. Moreover, as with causation the outcomes immediately determined need not be legal or moral, and are not determined according to specifically legal or moral principles. Which is no doubt why it is so especially tempting to assimilate freedom to some form of causation. But freedom may yet prove not to be a form of causal power. Though as agents we may also be bearers of causal power, and though the outcomes we control may be outcomes that could also be produced by us through mere causation, the way we determine those outcomes through exercising freedom may prove to be very unlike the way causes such as stones or events involving these would determine them. Free agents may determine outcomes, but quite differently from the way causes determine outcomes.

English-language philosophy has tended to suppose that the causal nature of power in general is somehow a conceptual truth, so that it is not only unproblematic but actually mandatory to assimilate the capacities to determine outcomes that we postulate in ordinary thinking to various cases of causal power. Freedom, especially, has been treated by philosophers in just this way. Even the sceptic has tended to assume that though our belief in freedom may be belief in a power that does not exist, it is still a belief in some non-existent form of causal power. But this approach to understanding the concept of freedom may be misconceived. Whether freedom exists or not, our conception of it cannot be assumed to be of some kind of power in causal form.

### 3. Thomas Hobbes on power

Thomas Hobbes pursued each of the two philosophical projects that tie power exclusively to causation—the metaphysical project of claiming that

causation is the only power there is, and the analytic project of identifying the very concept of a power or capacity to determine outcomes with the concept of causation. We shall shortly be examining Hobbes's disbelief in the existence of freedom as a power involving alternatives. But Hobbes's attack on freedom was part of a wider scepticism. He denied the very intelligibility of any kind of power or determination beyond ordinary efficient causation. For example, Hobbes's scholastic Aristotelian opponent Bramhall was happy to talk of the desirability of the goal or object of an action as moving or determining the action's performance, but without doing so as an efficient cause. The source of the motivation involved an object of thought; and its mode of determination was characterized by Bramhall not as natural, as in efficient causation, but as normative or moral:

Secondly, for the manner how the understanding doth determine the will, it is not naturally but morally. The will is moved by the understanding, not as by an efficient, having a causal influence into the effect, but only by proposing and representing the object.  
(John Bramhall in Hobbes and Bramhall 1656, 55–56)

We can now see what Bramhall has in mind. The understanding moves us by presenting us with a claim or with an option. But to the extent that we are rational, what finally determines our belief or will is not the understanding, or some occurrence within it, operating merely as an efficient cause. What determines our belief is not simply the psychological event of entertaining the claim or option. What determines us to believe a claim or to decide on an option has to do with the object that the understanding presents and, specifically, its normativity—such as its evident truth or desirability.

The acknowledgement of powers or capacities to determine that are normative, and that do not simply involve ordinary causation, was a central feature of scholastic ethical theory—and a feature, in particular, of its theory of action and motivation. Motivation is naturally conceived by us often to involve our subjection to a form of power: something *moves* us to act as we do in pursuit of goals. Modern philosophers, taking it to be a conceptual truth that power is inherently causal, assume that any motivating power must be understood by us in causal terms. Those contemporary philosophers, therefore, who oppose Hobbes and Davidson, and who assume that

motives are not causes, tend to write as if motivation, as ordinarily understood by us, had nothing to do with power at all.<sup>2</sup>

But Hobbes's scholastic opponents were quite different. They took motivation to involve a variety of kinds of power. One sort might be efficient causal, as where the motivation of voluntary actions by prior decisions and intentions so to act was concerned. Intending to do something would indeed move us to do it by causing us to do it. But motivation was provided not simply by attitudes operating as ordinary causes, but also by the objects at which those attitudes were directed—a motivation that explained those attitudes themselves as well as the further voluntary actions that those attitudes caused. We could be moved to want something, as well as to decide on it and to pursue it as our goal, by its clear goodness and desirability. And here some form of determination was again involved—but a determination that was moral rather than efficient causal.

There is a familiar tension in the common-sense psychology of action between two kinds of power. There is the power involved in motivation—a power of motives to get us to perform actions. This is a power to which we as agents are subject, and by which we may be influenced or even determined. We are being moved to act by something else—a motive. And then there is a power that we ourselves exercise—the power of self-determination, our power to determine actions for ourselves. The long-standing debate about freedom or free will between compatibilists and incompatibilists is a general debate about the compatibility of freedom or self-determination with determination of the agent by prior factors, and therefore concerns the tension between these two forms of power in particular. How far is an agent's capacity to determine for themselves what they do compatible with the determination of what the agent does by prior motives? Are some forms of motivating power incompatible with our power to determine for ourselves what we do?

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<sup>2</sup> Thus in his *Teleological Realism* Scott Sehon claims that the explanation of action by motivating psychological attitudes is teleological not causal. But, in his account of common-sense psychology, the only power involved is causal—as exercised not by our attitudes themselves, but by the physical states that underlie our attitudes. Our attitudes themselves and their objects appear not strictly to *move* us after all.

Just because scholastic action theory allowed room for more than one kind of motivating power, so for this reason there existed within the scholastic tradition more than one problem about the compatibility of freedom with prior determination, and with motivation in particular. There was of course a problem specifically about causation and causal power—about the compatibility of freedom with the determination of the agent by causes outside his control. But there was also a parallel problem to do with the compatibility of freedom with normative power. If evidences or proofs are sufficiently powerful, can they not outright determine the assent of any rational agent in a way that removes any freedom to believe otherwise? And similarly can there not be outcomes or objects so completely good as, once entertained, to determine the agent's choice in a way that removes the agent's freedom to decide otherwise? God, or the good in infinite and unqualified form was conceived within the Thomist tradition as just such an object. That even now we readily describe proofs or evidence as *compelling* or *overwhelming* shows that we still allow for normative power in a form that can reduce or threaten freedom.

Hobbes, by clear contrast, caustically rejected all such appeals to powers other than ordinary causation:

Moved not by an efficient, is nonsense. (Thomas Hobbes in Hobbes and Bramhall 1656, 59)

In Hobbes's view, any determination of anything, including any action, must be by an efficient cause. Hobbes therefore turns Bramhall's motivating object of thought into a prior psychological occurrence. Rather than being moved into a decision by a normative property—the desirability of an option—we are moved causally by a psychological event, such as a prior passion for or desire for that option, an occurrence located in the world as is any efficient cause, and of the same metaphysical kind as the action it motivates and causes.

#### 4. Freedom as power over alternatives

What I shall call the *causal theory of freedom* says that, whether freedom actually obtains or not, our concept of freedom is not only of a power,

but of a causal power. It is a conceptual truth, the causal theory says, that to exercise freedom is to exercise power causally, so that any outcome determined through the exercise of freedom is determined causally. What we determine to happen through the exercise of our control occurs as an effect that we cause:

The exercise of active control is essentially a causal phenomenon.  
(Clarke 2003, 151)

The causal theory is widely believed. But even if the Hobbesean metaphysical view, that all real power is causal, is true, the causal theory of freedom—an analytic theory of our concept of freedom—may still be false. It may still misrepresent our understanding of what freedom is.

We certainly understand causation as extending freedom. Given control of how I act, I can control what causally depends on my actions. If flicking the switch would cause the lights to go on or off, controlling whether I flick the switch will give me control over whether the lights go on or off. But the fact that freedom is causally extendible does not show freedom itself, as ordinarily conceived, to be a causal power. For other powers besides causation can extend our freedom too. Indeed, any powers attaching to my actions may further extend my freedom, what I have control over, provided I control those actions. If my actions have the power legally to determine a given outcome, such as your release from debt, then my control of how I act can give me further control over that outcome too; I gain control over whether you remain in debt to me. So the power of freedom is legally extendible. But freedom is not shown by this to be itself a legal power. No more does freedom's causal extendibility show it to be a causal power. All that has been established thus far is that freedom is a power that can be extended by a variety of other powers, whether causal or non-causal. What kind of power freedom itself amounts to remains quite open.

Freedom is ordinarily understood by us to be a power to determine alternatives—a power of control over which actions we perform. Our conception of our power of self-determination is as up-to-usness—a conception of self-determination that immediately characterises it as a power over more than option. Freedom is a power that leaves it up to us whether we do A or refrain; it is a power of *control* over which actions we perform. Central to the idea of freedom, then, is power over alternatives. This involvement of

alternatives is picked out by the ‘up to me whether’ construction, which is completed by specification of alternatives by way of actions and outcomes within my power; freedom is the power to determine for ourselves which alternative occurs.

This constitution as power over alternatives seems to distinguish freedom from other forms of power, and from ordinary causal power in particular. The power under given circumstances to produce more than one outcome seems essential to the character of freedom. It is not obvious that there is anything left of our ordinary understanding of up-to-usness if we subtract this capacity to produce more than one outcome. That is just what the power is: control of how I act. So to have the power, at least in its complete form, there must be more than one outcome that I can determine. How can my action be within my control if I lack the power to refrain as well as to do? Our conception of causal power, on the other hand, is quite different. We have an understanding of causation as commonly a power to produce but one outcome. Heavy bricks hurled at fragile windows may have a causal power then to do but one thing—to break the window. We have no tendency to understand causal power as being always and by nature a power to produce alternatives.

There are other ways in which freedom differs from ordinary causation. One way is especially obvious. Any exercise of the power of freedom has to occur through agency—and specifically through agency that is intentional or deliberate. If I am to exercise my power to determine for myself what happens, then I must do so either through deliberately and intentionally doing something or through intentionally refraining. If it is to be up to me whether the lights are on or off, there must be some action available to me—up to me to perform or not—such as flicking a switch, by which I can affect whether or not the lights are on or off. And actually to be exercising my power I must either be intentionally performing the action—intentionally flicking the switch—or be intentionally refraining from its performance. But ordinary causation carries no such tie to agency. I can produce many effects other than through doing or refraining. I can crush something just through my very weight, independently of any action I may perform or omit performing.

Furthermore, this power over alternatives by way of action seems to matter to moral responsibility as ordinary causation does not. I may, just

through my weight and size and other features of me, produce many effects. But that I have produced effects does not come close to establishing any moral responsibility on my part for their occurrence, unless I had some control over what led to these effects—or so it is very natural to suppose. Whereas that it was up to me whether or not something occurred seems immediately relevant to the question of my moral responsibility for the occurrence.

There is much to be said about freedom's peculiar tie to agency and its distinctive relevance to our moral responsibility. But I wish to concentrate here on freedom's essential character as involving power over alternatives.

Thomas Hobbes saw in freedom's involvement of a power over alternatives a central and very problematic difference between freedom and ordinary causation. The way in which freedom is supposed to involve alternatives violated, in Hobbes's view, central truths about causation. Since in his view causation was the only power in nature, Hobbes concluded that there could not be such a power as freedom. Hobbes was not even a compatibilist about freedom as a power. He denied its very existence outright. Freedom consisted not in a power over alternatives, but in something quite different: namely, in an absence of obstacles to the satisfaction of an ordinary one-way causal power—the power of a motivation to cause its satisfaction. Freedom consists, for example, in the absence of external constraints, such as chains, that might prevent my desires from causing movements by me that might satisfy them:

Liberty is the absence of all impediments to action, that are not contained in the nature, and in the intrinsic quality of the agent. (Thomas Hobbes in Hobbes and Bramhall 1656, 285)

Indeed Hobbes not only denied the existence of freedom as a power. He denied its very intelligibility. He claimed that we lacked even the concept of a power to determine things for ourselves. Talk of such a power was mere philosophers' jargon. He mounted his assault on the very intelligibility of self-determination as part of a radical programme to detach ethical and political theory from reliance on the notion. How did Hobbes propose to detach ethics from self-determination? Some of the time Hobbes did what Hume would do later as well—which is to treat moral blame as no more than negative evaluation:



[Why do we blame people?] I answer because they please us not. I might ask him, whether blaming be any thing else but saying the thing blamed is ill or imperfect [...] I answer, they are to be blamed though their wills be not in their power. Is not good good and evill evill though they be not in our power? And shall I not call them so? And is that not praise and blame? But it seems that the Bishop takes blame not for the dispraise of a thing, but for a praetext and colour of malice and revenge against him that he blameth. (Thomas Hobbes in Hobbes and Bramhall 1656, 40)

In other contexts Hobbes seems to allow for a distinctive responsibility for how we act:

The nature of sin consisteth in this, that the action done proceed from our will and be against the law. (Thomas Hobbes in Hobbes and Bramhall 1656, 185)

But the responsibility here involves a kind of legal responsibility—according to a view of that responsibility which avoids appeal to self-determination. Holding someone responsible, in Hobbes's view, seems to involve no more than holding them to sanction-backed directives on the voluntary—something that presupposes no more than their rational responsiveness to such directives. To be morally responsible, on this model, we have merely to be legally governable. But, for Hobbes, that only requires that we be capable of performing or avoiding actions on the basis of a desire so to do, as a means to avoiding sanctions. And this presupposes nothing more than what Hobbes termed *voluntariness*—action occurring as an effect, through ordinary causation, of prior desires or appetites, such as desires to avoid sanctions. And this was something that Hobbes thought had nothing to do with self-determination. We were not determining for ourselves what we did. Rather our actions were being determined by our desires and appetites, and not by us.

Hobbes's opponent Bramhall was effectively a spokesman for the ethical and psychological theory of the late scholastic Francisco Suarez. And it is Suarez who is the ultimate target of much of Hobbes's writing in this area. In Suarez the idea of freedom really is the idea of a special kind of power—a power that, though still for Suarez a form of causation, is causation of a quite distinctive kind. Freedom is causal power in what he describes as *contingent* form [see (Suarez 1994, disputation 19)]. As a free agent I am not

a necessary cause as causes in wider nature are—a cause that under any given circumstances can operate in only one way. A massive brick that strikes a window can determine but one outcome—that the window breaks. Whereas, by contrast, I have a power, freedom, by which in one and the same set of circumstances I could equally well determine any one of a range of alternative outcomes. So under a given set of circumstances I have the power, say, to lower my hand or to raise it—and my nature as possessor of the power leaves it contingent how I will exercise it, and so which action I shall perform.

Hobbes denied that such a contingent power is possible, because it is unrecognizable as causal power. For Hobbes's scepticism about freedom is based on a clear view of the only form that power can take in nature. The only possible form that power, the capacity to produce or determine outcomes, can take, in Hobbes's view, is as ordinary causation—the kind of power that bricks, or motions involving them, possess and exercise to break windows. We shall see that Hobbes is right on one point at least. Whether or not the power of freedom is real, our conception of it radically distinguishes freedom and its operation from ordinary causation. In particular, freedom involves modes of determination not to be found in ordinary causation. In exercising freedom we exercise a power to determine that does not determine causally.

It is tempting to think that Hobbes's problem with freedom is mainly with what I have called *multi-wayness*. Freedom or control of what we do involves alternatives. To have control of whether one does A is to be capable of determining either that one does A or that one refrains. And it is very natural to view this control as a single power that could under given circumstances be employed in more than one way—hence multi-wayness—to produce either the outcome that I do A or the outcome that I refrain. That is the nature of control as a power: to leave it up to me which I do, and to be employable in doing either. Hobbes's case, on this reading of him, is simply that there cannot be such a thing as a multi-way power—a power that can, under a given set of circumstances, be used in more than one way, to produce one of a variety of outcomes.

However, we should beware of this tempting assumption. It should not be assumed that freedom, understood as its being up to me to determine a range of alternatives, need involve multi-wayness as just defined—a single

power employable in more than one way, to produce any one of these alternatives. Indeed, I shall suggest, even if freedom did not involve multi-wayness, it would still involve a form of power which Hobbes denied.

Moreover, it seems there could be cases of multi-way power that are not at all like freedom, but much more like (possibly slightly unusual) cases of ordinary causal power. True, much ordinary causation seems not to be multi-way—as the case of the brick hitting the window reminds us. Causation here seems to take one-way form. In a given set of circumstances, when the massive brick hits the window, the brick or its motion can exercise its power to produce but one effect—that the window breaks. But need this be true universally? Can there not be probabilistic causes with a power that could, under certain circumstances, operate in more than one way, to produce a range of outcomes? Perhaps the power of one particle to accelerate another could produce in the other particle, with some probability, one acceleration; or perhaps, with another probability, another slightly different acceleration instead. This would still be recognizable as ordinary causal power. And it would not involve the causing particle's possession of freedom. It would not be up to the particle which acceleration it produced; that would not be something that the particle 'determined for itself.'

Hobbes was, of course, a determinist. Probabilistic causation is not a possibility on his metaphysics of causation. He thought that a cause's power operates, under any given circumstances, to produce but one outcome. But the issue of multi-wayness—the possibility of a causal power's operating under given circumstances in more than one way, to produce more than one possible outcome—is not what was fundamental to Hobbes's scepticism about the very reality of freedom, or indeed of self-determination in any form at all. Hobbes's scepticism has more to do with something that can be detached from multi-wayness, and that radically distinguishes freedom from ordinary causation. I shall call this factor *contingency of determination*; and it has to do with how the possessor of a power, such as a cause, *determines* an outcome when it does.

In Hobbes's view, if an entity has the power to determine a specific outcome, and the conditions required for the successful exercise of the power are all met—then the power must be exercised. The determining entity's

very presence, with its power, must necessitate the occurrence of the outcome it has the power then to determine. It follows on this view that an entity cannot really possess the power to determine, under one and the same set of circumstances, more than one alternative outcome. For an entity really to be capable of determining each outcome, Hobbes argues, it must simultaneously produce each outcome. Referring, abusively, to Suarez's contingent cause as an 'indetermination,' Hobbes writes:

But that the indetermination can make it happen or not happen is absurd; for indetermination maketh it equally to happen or not to happen; and therefore both; which is a contradiction. Therefore indetermination doth nothing, and whatsoever causes do, is necessary. (Thomas Hobbes in Hobbes and Bramhall 1656, 184)

Suarez was right about one thing. Contingent determination is part of our ordinary understanding of freedom, and distinguishes freedom from ordinary causation. In the case of freedom, the power-bearer may have the power to determine the occurrence of a particular outcome, and all the conditions required for the power's successful exercise may be met—without the power being exercised to produce that outcome. Freedom can involve the power to determine alternatives, only one of which can actually be produced, only because this is so.

Suppose by contrast an ordinary cause has under given circumstances the power to produce a range of possible effects. The cause is probabilistic: any one of these effects might with some probability occur, or it might not. In such a case the cause does not count as determining the effect that it produces. A probabilistic cause at most influences the occurrence of that effect, but without determining it in a way that removes all dependence of the final outcome on simple chance. Whereas we do think of the free agent as determining that he does what he does, but without the action's performance being guaranteed just by his presence as a free agent with the power then to determine it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I made this distinction between freedom and ordinary causation, and discussed the problem it poses for a view of freedom as a straightforwardly agent-*causal* power in (Pink 2004, 114–15).

Contingency of determination distinguishes a free agent from any cause—including a probabilistic cause. But so too does something else—something which involves not the power’s relation to outcomes, but the agent’s or power bearer’s relation to the power.

Consider again ordinary causes. Either their operation is predetermined by the very nature of the power and the circumstances of its exercise: in those circumstances their power is to determine one particular outcome, an outcome which they will then produce. Or, as in the case of probabilistic causes, how the cause will operate is undetermined, that is, dependent on mere chance. But what seems importantly to distinguish freedom, as ordinarily conceived, is that this is not so. It is neither predetermined nor merely chance and undetermined which way a free agent exercises their power. The agent determines for himself how he exercises his power. And it seems impossible to characterize this relation that the agent has to the power without using the concept of freedom. If the agent can determine for himself how the power is exercised, it must be up to the agent whether he exercises his power to produce this outcome or that. If the power of freedom is indeed multi-way, a power employable in more than one way to produce more than one outcome, then in relation to that power there is what we might term a *freedom of specification*: it is up to the bearer which outcome the power is exercised to produce.

Hobbes was very well aware of this element to our conception of freedom as a power. The idea of the agent’s determining his exercise of the power is arguably central to self-determination—to the very idea of determining outcomes *for oneself*. In Hobbes’s view, this idea of a determination of how the power is exercised is viciously regressive.

And if a man determine himself, the question will still remain what determined him to determine himself in that manner.  
(Thomas Hobbes in Hobbes and Bramhall 1656, 26)

So the very idea of self-determination, for Hobbes, is incoherent. And that is because it viciously involves the idea of an agent’s power to determine, the exercise of which that same agent has first to determine.

But it is not obvious that Hobbes is right about the regress. The regress is vicious only if the way in which the exercise of the power is determined—to produce this outcome or that—involves a prior exercise of power distinct

from the exercise of the power determined. But this is not obviously what we ordinarily suppose.

There is in the case of freedom a *conceptual* distinction between (a) the power's relation to outcomes—the power can operate to produce more than one outcome—and (b) the power's relation to me, namely that I determine for myself what way it operates. But we do not suppose there to be any corresponding *ontological* distinction between two distinct exercises of power—an exercise of power to produce outcomes, and then another and distinct exercise of power to determine the operation of that power to produce outcomes. Multi-wayness and determination of the mode of exercise by me are simply conceptually distinct features of a single exercise of control. In exercising control over outcomes I *ipso facto* determine for myself how the control is exercised. That is what control is—a power to produce outcomes the manner of exercise of which I determine for myself. In one and the same exercise of power I produce one outcome rather than another, and I determine how the power is exercised.

This freedom of specification does not involve then any exercise of power over and above that involved in the production of the outcome. But though there need be no vicious regress, we are clearly dealing with a kind of power that is not ordinary causation. In relation to this radically different kind of power the notion of freedom not only conveys a power over alternatives in relation to outcomes, but also the agent's distinctive relation to the power as its bearer.

Freedom, it now appears, brings alternatives into self-determination in two ways, one relating the power to outcomes, the other relating the power to its bearer, the free agent. *Freedom in relation to outcomes* relates self-determination as a power to the outcomes it determines. The power is a power to determine more than one outcome. *Freedom in relation to the power* has to do with the relation of the power to the free agent. This relation again involves alternatives, but this time concerning how the power is exercised or whether it is exercised at all. It might be that there are alternative ways in which the power might be exercised: it is up to the agent how he exercises the power, to produce this outcome or that. This is what we have already termed a freedom of specification. Or it might simply be that it is up to the agent whether he exercises the power at all. This we might term a *freedom of exercise*.

We can separate contingency of determination and multi-wayness. First, we might have multi-wayness but without contingency of determination. Probabilistic causation seems to involve such a possibility, as we have just seen. A probabilistic cause might possess, as we have noted, a power to affect acceleration that could under given circumstances operate in more than one way, to produce acceleration at more than one rate. But this causal power involves no contingency of determination. Given that it is initially chancy how the power will operate, the effect is influenced by the cause but not determined by it.

There might also be, as at least a conceptual possibility (this would not be any kind of power we actually accord ourselves) contingency of determination without multi-wayness. That is, under any given set of circumstances the power can be exercised in only one way—to determine but one outcome. But though the power is outcome-determining, its exercise to produce that outcome is not ensured just by the presence, under the relevant circumstances, of the power's bearer. The agent could possess the power then to determine that outcome, and all the conditions required for that power's successful exercise could be met—and the agent just not exercise it. There could be a power involving contingency of determination that was not multi-way.

Here there would be no possibility of a freedom of specification. It would not be up to the agent how he exercised the power, to produce this outcome or that, as under any given circumstances there would only ever be one way the power could be exercised. But it could still be up to the agent whether he exercised the power at all. In which case we would have something recognisable as a power of self-determination, but involving freedom only in relation to the power itself, as a freedom of exercise, and not freedom in relation to outcomes too.

## 5. Two scepticisms about freedom

Modern philosophical discussion of free will centres on a debate about causation between incompatibilists and compatibilists. This is a debate about the relation of freedom and causation—and specifically about the implications of causal determinism for the freedom to do otherwise. Is freedom as a power to do otherwise compatible with our being causally

determined to do what we actually do? Much modern scepticism about the very possibility of freedom is then based on the supposed conceptual truth of incompatibilism and centres on what I shall call the randomness problem. This is the worry, famously put by David Hume, that if incompatibilism were true—if freedom did require causal indeterminism—that really would leave us, not with genuine freedom, but with mere chance.

[...] liberty, by removing necessity, removes also causes, and is the very same thing with chance. (Hume 1978, 407)

And that threatened indistinguishability of freedom from chance drives the incompatibilist sceptic into concluding that freedom, as anything more than randomness or mere chance, must be impossible.

But now we see that there is another scepticism about freedom, and one that also involves causation and the freedom to do otherwise, though in quite a different way. This form of scepticism objects to the very idea of freedom as a power over alternatives, on the grounds that causation is the only possible form of power—and that such a power over alternatives would be too radically unlike causation. This second form of scepticism is even more threatening to everyday belief. Incompatibilism is not universally believed, even by ordinary people—witness the intractable nature of the debate about whether incompatibilism is indeed true, a debate that has long interested a public extending well beyond professional philosophy. Whereas our freedom's identity as a capacity to determine more than one outcome seems far more basic. It seems far more central to our ordinary understanding of what freedom is like in itself.

We have begun to examine how freedom as a power over alternatives might differ from ordinary causation. And it has emerged that freedom seems to differ from ordinary causation in a number of ways. First, there is multi-wayness—a single power that might under given circumstances operate in more than one way, to produce more than one outcome. Now it is true, as we have discussed, that at least in some cases ordinary causal power could take multi-way form. What distinguishes freedom from causation, is that multi-wayness seems to be characteristic of the very kind of power that freedom is—control of how we act. Then, and as a presupposition of any power to determine alternatives, freedom involves contingency of determination—a radically different way of determining outcomes from that



involved in causation. And then with multi-wayness comes, as equally essential to control, a freedom of specification. It is not mere chance and undetermined by anything how the power will operate. As control the operation of the power is determined by its possessor—the free agent.

The ideas of freedom that Hobbes attacks are not obviously incompatibilist in themselves. To say that a power involves contingency of determination, is not itself to say anything about the power's compatibility with causal determinism. All that contingency of determination expressly asserts, is that an agent might possess the power to determine an outcome in the circumstances—and yet still not exercise the power to produce that outcome. It is quite another question whether, compatibly with his possession of the power, the agent's exercising or failing to exercise it could itself be causally determined. And if contingency of determination is compatible with causal determinism, so too is multi-wayness. If it can be causally determined that I do not exercise a power then to determine one outcome, a power that I nevertheless possess, but instead exercise a power to determine another outcome, the power involved in relation to each outcome could perfectly well be one and the same. Is the power to produce one outcome distinct from the power to produce another? This question about the individuation of powers seems to have to do with their basis or constitution, not with their compatibility with causal determinism. And again the idea of a freedom of specification with respect to how control as a single multi-way power operates seems to add nothing to the case for an incompatibilist conception of freedom.

Hobbes's scepticism about freedom as a power over alternatives is the expression of a kind of philosophical naturalism. This is the naturalism that refuses to allow that human nature and its capacities involve powers and capacities that are *sui generis*—that are qualitatively different from powers and capacities found in wider nature. And freedom is being attacked by Hobbes precisely as such a *sui generis* power. His is an especially penetrating attack, and a reminder that even prior to any incompatibilist theory of it, freedom as we ordinarily understand it is already vastly unlike ordinary causation. We may reject our ordinary belief in freedom because of its supposed incompatibilist commitment. But we may also reject freedom just because the kind of power envisaged, whether or not consistent with causal

determinism, is too radically unlike any other power we are familiar with and, in particular, too unlike power in causal form. Hobbes's arguments serve to remind us of this radical dissimilarity.

Hobbes's scepticism raises a second issue too. How far are all the problems for freedom that are supposedly raised by incompatibilism really, on closer examination, incompatibilist in origin? Or do some arise as genuine problems, to the extent that they are genuine, from something else: from freedom's identity as a non-causal form of power—a power to determine that operates quite differently from ordinary causation?

Take the randomness problem—the threat that the operation of freedom is left indistinguishable from chance, so that to remove prior necessity is to leave the final outcome to a degree random or dependent on mere chance. Certainly with ordinary causes, if it is not determined in advance what effect a given cause will produce, the outcome must indeed depend, to a degree, on simple chance. If causation is the only power in play, take away prior necessity and you certainly are left with mere chance—chance and nothing else. So to the extent that a cause is merely probabilistic, what effect it will produce depends to a degree on mere chance. But to suppose that in all cases the alternative to necessity is mere chance is to assume that there can be no such power as freedom as we ordinarily understand it—a power involving contingency of determination. For even if the outcome is not already causally predetermined—so that it is initially chancy how the agent will act—freedom, as ordinarily understood, may prevent the final outcome from depending on simple chance. Freedom allows the outcome still to be determined—by the agent. It is arguable, then, that the real target of Hume's scepticism is not freedom conceived in incompatibilist terms, but freedom in a form that involves contingency of determination.

Where freedom is concerned, there are two forms of scepticism. There is scepticism from the supposed conceptual truth of incompatibilism. But there is also scepticism from freedom's basic identity as a power over alternatives distinct from ordinary causation. The second scepticism denies the very possibility of such a power, not because of any incompatibilist theory of it, but because as ordinarily understood, as a power over alternatives, freedom is too radically unlike the causation found in wider nature. It is this second form of scepticism that may prove the most serious. Indeed, it

looks as though, as in Hume's case, some of the first kind of scepticism might really depend on the second. Freedom is indistinguishable from chance only if there can be no such thing as a power that is distinct from ordinary causation—a power to determine alternatives that can operate even in cases where the final outcome is undetermined causally.

## 6. Conclusion

Our idea of an ordinary cause allows for only two possibilities. Either the cause is powerful enough to determine the outcome it produces—in which case the cause's operation to produce that outcome is fixed by the very nature of its power. The cause has punch—but as a cog within a mechanism has punch. Its presence with the power to operate under given circumstances guarantees its operation when those circumstances arise. Or else, as with a probabilistic cause, the operation of the cause is not fixed but open. The presence of the cause with the power to produce a given outcome does not guarantee that outcome. But then the cause's power is partial. The cause influences what happens, but its operation does not determine the outcome, which remains dependent on mere chance. So either an ordinary cause is powerful, but like a cog within a mechanism, or its operation is reduced to a chance-involving form of weakness.

By contrast freedom, as we ordinarily understand it, is a power that, thanks to contingency of determination, combines the two features, punch and openness, which in ordinary causation always oppose each other. Freedom is a power whose nature never mechanically dictates its exercise. But by contrast to probabilistic causation, this openness does not diminish the power at all. Even if it were initially chancy whether or how the power would operate, the operation of the power can still remove any dependence of the outcome on chance. The operation of the power can still determine without merely influencing.

That we conceive of freedom as involving contingency of determination does not of itself commit us to incompatibilism. Compatibilism remains a possible view. But contingency of determination does explain why incompatibilism remains an intelligible option too—why, on our ordinary understanding of freedom, incompatibilism does not immediately reduce freedom

to nothing more than chance. The intractable conflict in ordinary belief between compatibilist and incompatibilist views of freedom reveals and depends on something often missed today—our underlying conception of freedom as a non-causal form of power.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This argument is developed further in my (2017).