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Agency as a Two-Way Power: A Defence

Is the notion of a two-way power useful for the characterisation of the capacity we call agency and the nature of the control which that capacity embodies? Some (including myself) have thought so. But many find the notion of a two-way power mysterious, or even nonsensical; and in this paper I want to do something to try to allay the sense that the idea of a two-way power might ultimately be an incoherent one. In particular, I want to try to defend the use I make of the idea of a two-way power from a certain kind of very basic criticism that has been levelled at it – most recently and most perspicaciously by Kim Frost (2019). Frost claims that there is something troubling about the very idea of a two-way power and that indeed a fairly simple argument is available which suggests that (on certain, ostensibly rather plausible assumptions) there simply could not be such a thing.

The core of Frost's argument takes the form of a dilemma which anyone who wishes to suggest that some power or other is 'two-way' must face. In the first section of the paper, I shall outline Frost's conception of two-way powers and explain how the dilemma is supposed to arise. Then, in the second section, I shall locate the concept of a two-way power in the context provided by the account of agency in connection with which I am hoping to exploit it. This should make it clear what work I am hoping the concept might be made to do; for it is this work, after all, that will need to govern the lineaments of the notion that is required for the purpose. In the third section, I shall explain the conception of two-way power which I think falls out of my discussion and will argue that it is significantly different from Frost's, in a way that enables me to avoid Frost's dilemma. In section 4, I shall additionally argue that my conception of two-way powers raises an interesting question about the principle concerning the individuation of powers from which Frost's dilemma sets out – the principle which states that powers are to be individuated by what they are powers to do or undergo – a

principle which, I suggest, might need to be jettisoned, or at any rate, significantly amended. Then finally, in section 5, in case the accusation should at that point seem tempting that my conception of two-way powers is too idiosyncratic and unusual to be worthy of the name, I shall try to say something to defend the claim that, on the contrary, my conception of a two-way power is a useful, legitimate and historically very well-motivated one, which not only has its own place in the Aristotelian tradition, but also serves as a means of helping to crystallise an intuition which is very widely shared and which ought, in my view, to be utterly fundamental to the free will debate.

1. FROST'S DILEMMA FOR TWO-WAY POWERS

Frost sets out by characterising a two-way power as "a power that has two opposed kinds of exercise, where these exercises seem to manifest some kind of freedom" (2019:1). An example might be the power to stand up or to refrain from doing so at a given moment in time; the power connects with freedom because it is supposed to be in some sense 'up to the agent', at the time of action, in which way the power is exercised. The talk of 'ways' of exercise, however, is plainly rather vague and Frost presses the point home by noting that all powers have trivially different kinds of exercise; for example, I might cry on Monday, Tuesday, etc. – but that doesn't make my power to cry a seven-way power. In this context, he notes, it is important that talk of 'two ways' is supposed by the adherents of two-way powers to track a *deep* difference between kinds of power, not a trivial one. The context, that is, is supposed to be one in which there are two importantly different classes of powers, the one-way and the two-way, such that only agents, or free agents, or rational agents (for example) can possess the latter kind. So, however we end up explaining the distinction between one-way and two-way powers, it needs to be possible to see how the account makes it possible for this important feature of the distinction to be retained.

Frost then proceeds to develop what he takes to be a worrying dilemma for the proponent of two-way powers. Assuming that powers are to be individuated by what they are powers to do/undergo, then either there is a unified description of the manifestation-type which individuates the power, or there is not. If there is, then two-way powers are really one-way powers, once we get clear about the manifestation-type which reveals the unity. Just as crying on a Monday, crying on a Tuesday, etc. don't render crying a 'seven-way power', so, provided we can understand what unifies the relevant manifestations in the case of agency, we really have a one-way power. Refraining, for example, might be regarded as merely one *kind* of acting, albeit a special kind which need not involve any sort of positive intervention – in which case the power to act-or-refrain is really just the (one-way) power to act. That is the first horn of the dilemma. But if there is not such a unified manifestation-type, then we need to know why the two-way power does not simply dissolve into a mere combination of two separate, one-way powers. There is the power to cry and there is the power to refrain from crying (say) and we might regard them simply as separate, one-way powers. It might still be crucial to free agency in some way that agents have both of these two kinds of one-way power, of course; but we will not need recourse to any special metaphysical category of powers in order to say so. How can room be made, then, for any notion of a two-way power which makes any sense?

Frost himself ultimately believes that there is an answer to this question, for the shape of which we must turn to Aristotle's development of the notion of specifically rational powers. Aristotle's view, Frost argues, requires us to reject the problematic premise he calls 'Canonicalism' – the thesis that "all exercises of all powers are cases of doing what the power is properly specified as a power to do" (2019: 8); and that this is key to understanding how there could be such a thing as a two-way power. But for the purposes of this paper, I shall be more concerned with the shape of Frost's original challenge to the notion of a two-way

power, than with his positive suggestions as to how the challenge might be met, some aspects of which do not appeal to me for other reasons.[1] I want to try to argue that Frost's conception of two-way powers is indeed a conception of what they are which runs into difficulty. I shall try to argue, however, that there is a better conception available, which escapes Frost's awkward dilemma altogether.

1. TWO-WAY POWERS: THEIR POINT AND PURPOSE

In my (2012), I argued that agency requires the power to *settle* certain matters – the power to make the course of worldly events go one way at a given point in time (or perhaps just to *permit* it to go one way at that point in time), when it could (at that very time) have gone differently in some respect. For example, I can now bring it about, by standing up, that the course of worldly events now contains a complex series of bodily movements which go to constitute my standing up. But I can also (by not standing up in one or other of the many ways in which I can fail to do so) permit the course of events to go a different way, one which includes my continuing to sit, or proceeding to kneel, lie down, or whatever. Every point in an animal's waking life, I argued, is a point at which that animal settles, by means of the exercise (or non-exercise) of each of the myriad capacities which together constitute its executive agency, how things will be in respect of the particular portion of the world it is able to affect. If there is to be such a thing as agency at all, I argued, agents require this power to organize, order and direct their lives in such a way that they thereby settle at least some hitherto unsettled matters, when they act. It follows from this conception of what agency involves that actions cannot be merely the inevitable event-consequences of sets of antecedent causes. If they were, there would be nothing left for anyone to *do*, for there would be nothing left for anyone to settle at the time of action. Doings, as I put it, would then

become "a mere part of the maelstrom of mere happenings, and agents would disappear from the world". (Steward, 2012: 155).

It follows from this conception of agency, I went on to assert, that actions must be things whose occurrence is always non-necessary relative to the totality of their antecedents – things such that they might either occur *or not*, for all that has thus far been settled at the time at which they occur. They must, that is, be the exercises of what I called 'two-way powers' – that is to say, powers which an agent can either exercise or not at a given moment, even holding all prior conditions at that moment fixed. The settling of the question whether or not the power's exercise *does* occur is then something that is 'up to' the agent whose action it is, not necessarily in the sense that that agent consciously or deliberately decides or chooses whether or not to act (for many actions are not the product of conscious deliberation or decisions and choices), but rather in the weaker sense that the agent can, by acting in a certain way, make it the case that certain effects have occurred, or alternatively, by not acting in that way, make it the case that they have not. Matters of various kinds are hence settled by actions (though not only by actions, as I shall shortly explain).

Two-way powers are to be contrasted with mere one-way powers. The exercises of one-way powers, unlike the exercises of two-way powers, have sufficient (necessitating) conditions, as well as necessary ones. For example, water has the power to dissolve copper sulphate under certain conditions. But when those conditions are realised, water can't do anything but dissolve copper sulphate. There is no alternative. There are many who believe that all powers are fundamentally like this – and that agency is really (at bottom) no different. They think they can explain away our talk of alternatives to the actions we take, the intuition that we often could have done otherwise, and so on, without invoking anything so strange as a two-way power. Typically, they will allow that an agent may possess, at *t,* the power to φ at *t* and also possess, at *t,* the power *not* to φ at *t.* But for these (generally compatibilist)

philosophers, these will simply be two separate powers, each attributable in virtue of truths about such things as the agents' abilities and/or opportunities; or the availability of certain conditionals; or the absence of certain specific varieties of constraint. What they will tend not to admit, though, is that *holding all prior conditions fixed*, an agent has the power at a given moment to make the world proceed from that moment on in one direction or another. An action different from any that in fact occurs would have required, they will tend to think, the holding of *different* conditions (e.g. different psychology, different neurology, a different constellation of reasons, etc.) – or at any rate, it will require this if the alternative alleged to be available is to be conceivable as anything other than a random exploit which does not possess the requisite connection to the agent.[2]

On my view, though, according to which actions are settlings, it is indeed the case that an agent has the power, when she acts, to act differently on that very occasion, even holding fixed all prior conditions. Time is important to the specification of two-way powers, on this conception of what they are, because time-relative specifications make available a certain kind of argument for their existence. I can of course possess the general power to stand up and the general power to sit down – and I can certainly possess both these general powers at the same time. But what the defender of two-way powers is suggesting is that *as well* as these two general powers, an agent also possesses, at *t*, the time-specific power to stand up at *t* and also to sit down at *t* – even given conditions as they actually obtain at that moment. If each of these time-specific powers was such that its exercise was necessitated, once all necessary conditions for its exercise were met (i.e. if these time-specific powers were merely one-way powers) both powers – to stand and to sit - would have to be manifested together. But this is impossible. The only alternative, then, to the compatibilist strategems noted above, is the admission that the powers in question must be two-way powers – that is to say, that they must

be powers which an agent may either exercise or not, powers over the exercise of which necessity does not reign.

What sorts of things have two-way powers? – powers whose exercise might or might not occur, even holding fixed conditions as they are immediately prior to the time of action? In *A Metaphysics for Freedom*, I suggested that there was no reason to suppose that human agents are the only animals possessing such powers, arguing that we should expect that the capacity to settle things is an evolutionary endowment common to many forms of animal life. But I also argued that there might be certain *inanimate* entities possessed of two-way powers. Suppose, for example, that the currently widely-accepted idea that radioactive decay sometimes involves the entirely spontaneous emission of particles from radioactive material is correct. The emission of any given particle may sometimes be uncaused in the sense that, on at least some occasions (so far as scientists have been able to establish), there may be no explanation at all of why the emission occurs precisely when it does – its occurrence at that moment is simply a random and inexplicable brute fact. Then one might think that it was correct to say that portions of the relevant radioactive materials (e.g. portions of radium - or perhaps the radioactive atoms of which such material is constituted) had certain two-way powers – such as the power to emit or else not to emit a particle at a given time; and indeed this was what I *did* say in my (2012). I now think, though, that this was a mistake; and since the mistake is important to the case Frost makes against what he takes to be my conception of two-way powers, and indeed, important to the plausibility of the general idea that agency can be elucidated by means of two-way powers, I shall take a little time to explain why I now believe that we should not concede that any inanimate entities possess them.

Radium, of course, has the (general) power to emit radiation (that is what makes it a radioactive element); and it may also exercise that general power to emit radiation, at what is in fact a given time, *t*. But that same radium, I would want to insist, nevertheless does not

have the power, at *t*, to emit radiation at *t* - even if *t* is in fact (by chance) a time at which such an emission occurs. This is not, note, just because the radium is an inanimate entity rather than a true agent, and so makes no choice about the time at which the radiation is emitted. For I would want to say that the water in a bowl *can* have the power, at a given time *t,* to dissolve salt at that same time, *t* (or at least to begin dissolving it). If someone were to put salt into the bowl at that time, that is what would happen, in virtue of the water's power to dissolve salt. So the water does indeed have the power at time *t* to act at that very time; for we know we have only to bring it in contact with salt at *t* in order, as it were, for it to have the quasi-opportunity to dissolve it – an 'opportunity' it will certainly 'take', because of certain intrinsic features of the water. But nothing similar is true of the radium. We have no idea how to get the radium to emit a particle specifically *at t*; and by hypothesis, indeed, there is in fact no way to do so. Whether or not the radium will emit radiation *at t specifically* simply does not depend on the characteristic interaction between objects and circumstances in which circumstances can trigger manifestations of an object's powers (or so we are supposing, for argument's sake), and therefore does not depend either on any properties possessed by the radium specifically at that time. Rather, the emission is simply random and inexplicable. We have no particular reason, therefore, to believe that the fact that the emission has occurred *at that time* is anything to do with the radium, nor with any relationship the radium comes to bear to anything else at that time; which means that there is something very odd about thinking of the radium as something which is exercising a time-specific power (as opposed merely to participating passively in the randomly timed realisation of a possibility) when the emission occurs. And it is, if anything, even odder to think that if a radium atom does *not* in fact emit radiation at *t*, it must have had the power not to do so at that very moment. It seems that though one can move deductively from statements about actuality to *certain* statements about possibility – for example, one can infer from the fact that a radium atom did not in fact

emit an alpha particle at *t* that it must have been *possible* (at *t*) *that* it not emit an alpha particle at *t* (since that is in fact what happened), one cannot similarly move so straightforwardly from a claim of the form X φ-ed at *t* to a claim of the form X *had the power,* at *t*, to φ at *t*.[3] [4]

On the revised view that I should now like to espouse, then, portions of radioactive material (or atoms thereof) do not possess two-way powers, despite having the general capacity to settle certain matters. It is only in the animate world that we find such powers attributed. One view, of course, might be that though we do indeed appear to find this, this is a feature merely of our conceptual scheme, and that there are reasons to think that metaphysical reality cannot in fact be so constituted by these two different sorts of powers. But though I concede that arguments might perhaps be found for thinking that this must be so, there is, I think, interest in exploring the question whether reality might not in fact be, in this respect, just as we conceptualise it to be. Life, after all brings much that is new to the world. Why might not one of the things that it brings be a new kind of power, not possessed by any inanimate entity? That, at any rate, is the idea I am interested in exploring, and having thus delineated roughly the place occupied by the notion of a two-way power in the set of views I should like to defend, I want now to turn to Frost's dilemma, in order to try to explain why I continue to believe that the concept of a two-way power can survive it.

3. RESPONDING TO FROST'S DILEMMA

Here is Frost's dilemma, stated in his own words:

"Suppose, as most do, that powers are at least partly individuated by what they are powers to do. Either there is a single, unified description of the manifestation-type of a supposedly two-way power, or there is not. If so, the power is really a one-way power, where the one way is

captured by the unified description. If not, the power is, at best, a combination of one-way powers: one for each relevant unified description of a distinct manifestation type. Either way, we cannot distinguish free agents from everything else by appeal to two-way powers, because there is no sufficiently deep sense in which two-way powers are distinct from one-way powers or their combinations." (Frost, 2019, 2)

How is someone who wants to exploit it the notion of a two-way power to meet this challenge?

Suppose agency is a power and that it is individuated, as Frost suggests (at least partly) by what it is a power to do. Presumably, agency is the power to act – and it is manifested *in acting* – and moreover, only in acting. In particular, the power of agency is not manifested when someone *does not* act. Perhaps we may want for certain purposes to count certain instances of refrainment *as* actions (e.g., to modify slightly an example of Alvarez's (2013: 104), my refraining from greeting you in the street can (arguably) constitute the action of my snubbing you) – but that concession, even if we make it, seems to leave in place the idea that agency is the power to act, and that therefore it has a single manifestation-type, *acting*, (which can, as it were, include at least some cases of refrainment). So let us take Frost's first horn and see where it leads us.

How does Frost justify the idea that if there is a single, unified manifestation type for a given power, that power must be 'one-way'? Frost takes it that the enumeration of 'ways' refers to 'ways of manifesting the power' – and hence that there must be two (importantly and fundamentally different) ways of manifesting a two-way power. But perhaps this is the root of the problem. Couldn't the enumeration of 'ways' refer, rather, to 'ways things might proceed', given an object possessing the relevant kind of power and also situated in conditions suitable for its exercise? That the power is 'two-way' would then mean that exercise of the power and also its non-exercise are both possible in the conditions that exist at

the relevant time. This interpretation would leave in place the idea that an exercise of agency only occurs when someone actually acts – and still has room to accommodate the thought (if we think it needs accommodating) that some refrainings *are* actings and so *count* as exercises of agency. It would thus permit us to concede, for example, that the powers of singing, running, eating, etc. are manifested only in the activities of singing, running and eating respectively – and not normally also in not doing any of these things. But when given an opportunity to sing, a possessor of the power may either sing or not sing. Given an opportunity to run, she may either run or not run. And so on. The power of agency is 'two-way' not because it can be manifested in non-action, but because it may be manifested *or not*, even given that all conditions for its exercise are in place.

In my view, this conception of two-way powers has considerable advantages over its rival. For one thing, it enables us to respond to Frost's comment that "there's nothing especially deep, metaphysically speaking, about the number two" (2019: 3). If we stick with a conception of two-way powers according to which they are 'two-way' in virtue of having two *ways of manifestation*, this is indeed a difficult observation to accommodate, for it is simply not obvious how we are to respond to the problem of the apparent arbitrariness of possible divisions into 'ways' – why on earth should it be true for any power that there are just *two* such ways in which it might be exercised, and what is the relevant non-arbitrary principle of enumerating 'ways'? But on the current conception of two-way powers, it is obvious what is so special about the number two. What is special about it is that the number two is connected with negation. If I can ø and also not ø, then that is two things I can do – exercise my agentive power, and also not do so. When I don't exercise a given agentive power – e.g. the power to sing - that is not, of course, itself an exercise of the power to sing. Nevertheless, the possibility of this non-exercise is key to what makes an actual exercise of the power to sing

attributable to me as its source. It is only because I need not sing, even when I have the ability and the opportunity to do so, that the singing is a true action of mine.

It seems certain that Frost is influenced in his assumption that a two-way power must have two ways of being exercised by the Aristotelian tradition. In *Metaphysics* Θ, Aristotle distinguishes between 'rational' and non-rational' powers and says of the rational that "each of those [potentialities] which are accompanied by reason is alike capable of contrary effects" (*Metaphysics* Θ 1046b5). These are contrasted with non-rational powers which produce only one effect "e.g. the hot is capable only of heating, but the medical art can produce both disease and health" (1046b7-8). On the Aristotelian account, then, it certainly does look as though the rational powers are distinctive in having two kinds of manifestation – for example, one can employ the medical art both to heal and to harm – which is in line with Frost's assumption. However, it is not entirely obvious what the justification is for this view of rational powers. Aristotle claims that the reason why rational powers may have two distinct effects is that "the same rational formula explains a thing and its privation" (1046b8-9). Perhaps this idea is acceptable in relation to medicine where a (fairly) clear *telos* exists – in this case, we can perhaps accept what Frost says:

> "The healer knows how to produce health, but such knowledge consists in grasp of a *logos* or rational account, and so is by implication knowledge of the privation of health, and so also can be employed to that contrary end. Knowing the steps towards health implies knowing the steps away from health too; one just reverses relevant orders of reasoning." (Frost: 8)

But I would question whether other rational powers and areas of knowledge are so easily handled. How is the account to be generalised so that it turns into an account of rational powers *in general* vs non–rational powers in general? Can it be applied, for example, to

theoretical powers, such as knowledge of chemistry; French; mathematics? It is not easy to see what the relevant notion of 'privation' towards which a deployment of the power might be directed would be in such cases. I can of course employ my knowledge of chemistry, French or mathematics to do bad things as well as good (just as I can employ my medical knowledge to harm as well as heal); but it seems doubtful to me that a sensible characterisation of the notion of a two-way power could really be constructed on this kind of foundation. I do not want to insist that no such attempt could be successful – but I do not see Aristotle's suggestion as a promising starting point for theorising about different kinds of powers in a world less confident than his that everything is for the sake of something.

Frost believes that (what he takes to be) the Aristotelian conception of two-way powers can avoid the dilemma he poses, provided a principle he calls 'Canonicalism' is denied. Canonicalism is the thesis, recall, that "all exercises of all powers are cases of doing what the power is properly specified as a power to do" (Frost, 2019:8). In the next section, I want to agree with Frost that Canonicalism is problematic – but not so much because it is false, as Frost thinks, but rather because it is utterly unclear how to individuate the 'doings' which are supposed, according to Canonicalism, to individuate powers.

4. THE INDIVIDATION OF POWERS

Frost begins the development of his dilemma from the claim that powers are at least partly individuated by what they are powers to do, noting in passing that this is accepted by most of those who write on powers. However, this is a much more complex and controversial principle than it might seem at first. For it raises the prior question how we are to individuate the things which powers are powers to do – and whether we can rely on mere words to do the job. Take, for example, the power to cure a certain disease – say, malaria. A doctor may

possess this power and so may a drug. But is the power attributed the same in each case? Does the drug possess the same power as the doctor? Though we use the same word, 'cure', surely it is possible that we implicitly attribute different powers here – the power, on the part of the doctor, to cure by ministering to the patient, knowing what to advise, knowing what medicine to prescribe, etc. is different from the power, possessed by the drug, to cure by interacting, say, with a certain infective parasite. It might be said that there is a 'determinable' power, the power to cure, which is to be specified in terms of the end attained (in this case) – and that both drug and doctor share this power, while exercising distinct determinate versions of it. I agree that we might say this. But there is, I would suggest, at least as much plausibility in the idea that there are simply two distinct powers to cure – the sort which is exemplified in true actions (which are two-way) and the sort which is not. The same goes for many other powers which may be ascribed both to animate and to inanimate entities. I can kill a cow, and so can bovine spongiform encephalitis; I can eat a piece of paper and so can my printer; I can dam a stream and so can a fallen log. Are the same powers exercised by the animate agents and inanimate objects in these cases? Surely there is at least some reason for hesitation?

Might it be said that once we say this, we open ourselves up to a mad proliferation of powers? – that, for example, two drugs might cure malaria in different ways, and that we would then have to grant them distinct powers to cure? I would certainly be averse to saying this – if two drugs can cure malaria, then they share a power; and if two doctors can, they share one too. But I think it is trickier to retain this idea of shared powers where we cross the divide between one-way and two-way powers because of the way in which these different kinds of power-ascriptions interact with such things as modal verbs.

This issue about how power-ascriptions interact with modal verbs like 'can/could' can be seen to arise in connection with Frankfurt-cases. Take Jones, who kills Smith of his own

free will, by, let us say, bludgeoning him to death with an axe. Had Jones not done so, though, Black who is observing his every move, would have intervened to ensure by way of neurological intervention that Jones does so anyway. We are invited to agree by proponents of Frankfurt cases that Jones could not have avoided killing Smith (and hence to embrace the large conclusion that moral responsibility does not require the power to do otherwise). But here, the power to kill which is ascribed to Jones when we assert that he killed Smith of his own free will is arguably not the same as the power to kill that is implicitly ascribed him when we assert that he could not have avoided killing Smith. When we ascribe the original power, we ascribe a two-way power, the kind implicit in our idea of voluntary agency – a power that Jones had it in his power to exercise or not to exercise. We could call it the power to kill_{A}, to indicate that it is the power to kill *by acting*, by exercising a two-way power. But when we assert that Jones could not have done other than kill Smith, we do not mean that he could not have done other than exercise his two-way power to kill_{A} him. We mean merely that he did not possess the power to avoid being the cause of Smith's death – any more than, say, the axe that he wielded possessed that power. Just as the axe would have been a mere instrument of Black's will had he chosen to bludgeon Smith to death himself, so Jones would have become a mere instrument of Black's will in the situation in which Black had made his neurological intervention – and the power to kill Smith that Jones continues to possess under those conditions is a good deal more like the power to kill that might be ascribed to an axe than it is like the power to kill_{A}. We could call this the power to kill_{OW} (one-way). And not making the distinction between one-way and two-way powers here leads, I would want to argue, to false results. Jones *could* have done other than kill_{A} Smith and that is all we need to know to know that he is a potentially fit candidate for moral responsibility. That he could not have avoided being implicated in another kind of 'doing' which we can also refer to with the verb 'kill' is irrelevant.

I do not want here to insist on any particular account of power-individuation. I only want to suggest that the idea that powers are to be individuated by what they are powers to do is much more complicated than it might seem, because the individuation of 'doings' is much more complicated than it might seem, given that both animate and non-animate 'doers' can ostensibly 'do' the same thing. That we use the same word does not imply that we are using the same concept; and in particular, we need to pay more attention to the question of how this principle of power-individuation is to be safely applied across the one-way/two-way power divide. It might be that we should adopt a principle of power-individuation which allows us to separate the one-way from the two-way entirely; or perhaps it would be preferable to accept that the very same power can be possessed in a 'one-way' or a 'two-way' mode. I do not wish to choose between these different options (and indeed perhaps there are other possibilities that I have not thought of). But I do want to insist that the principle of power-individuation which is, as Frost suggests, now quite standard in the literature needs a long, hard look, in view of the fact that it is only as clear as is the individuation of kinds of doing. And that is, as we have seen, not very clear at all.

5. TWO-WAY POWERS AND THE ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION

I want to finish by answering an objection which I anticipate Frost would make to the view of two-way powers I have outlined here. Frost, I think, would insist that even if the concept of two-way power I have delineated is a legitimate one, it ought not really to be called a concept of *two-way power*. At one point in his paper, indeed, Frost considers making the concession that "Steward (2013) can use the term "two-way power" her way if she likes, so long as she makes clear that it is misleading and dispensable in favour of active power" but insists that this would "risk misrepresenting the history" (2019: 6). And the relevant history, of course, in Frost's view is (what he takes to be) the Aristotelian one, which drives his own understanding

of a two-way power as a power that has two distinct 'ways' of being manifested. The recommendation seems to be that even if the concept I have tried to elucidate has a place in philosophical discussions, it should be given a different name – and perhaps, particularly, that it should be called 'active power', a Reidian notion (see Reid, 1788/1969), with which I concede my concept has some affinities.

But I would want to suggest that the conception of two-way power which I have outlined is arguably *also* there, alongside the distinction between rational and non-rational powers, which Frost treats, in Aristotle's discussion. Here is Aristotle a little later on in *Metaphysics* Θ:

" …. as regards potentialities of the latter kind [i.e. those non-rational potentialities which are present both in the living and in the lifeless], when the agent and the patient meet in the way appropriate to the potentiality in question, the one must act and the other be acted on, but with the former kind [i.e. those potentialities which are present only in the living], this is not necessary. For the non-rational potentialities are all productive of one effect each, but the rational produce contrary effects, so that they would produce contrary effects at the same time; but this is impossible. That which decides, then, must be something else; I mean by this, desire or choice. For whichever of two things the animal desires decisively, it will do, when it is in the circumstances appropriate to the potentiality in question and meets the passive object" (1048a5-13).

A number of things are interesting about this passage. One is that although Aristotle may appear here to be contrasting one-way powers of the sort I have described above, such as water's power to dissolve common salt, say, with potentialities he calls 'rational' (and which are thus exemplified, one might think, precisely by such things as the doctor's power to

harm/heal, which he has just discussed), it is noteworthy that 'that which decides' in the cases of the rational powers can be *desire*, as well as choice (a capacity Aristotle standardly permits to some non-human animals – and indeed he even mentions 'appetite' a little further on in the same passage); and moreover that it is 'the animal' (and not only the human being) who does whatever it desires decisively. There is at least some evidence, then, that Aristotle is considering here a distinction between one-way powers, on the one hand, and another interesting set of powers *which he takes to be manifested more widely than merely in the human case,* cases in which what he calls 'desire' is operative.

In the context of discussions of compatibilism and incompatibilism, it is going to be hugely important, of course, how exactly we are to conceive of desire, an extremely complicated question about which there is more to say than can be sensibly discussed here. The claim that "whichever of two things the animal desires decisively it will do" may make it sound as though Aristotle conceives of desire merely as a further necessary condition which, once added to the other conditions which are required for the exercise of an agent's capacity for action, necessitates the action's occurrence. This may indeed be Aristotle's intention, but that would leave it somewhat obscure why desire in the agent is not to be treated just as one more condition which needs to be present before the exercise of the power occurs – why Aristotle seems to think it is *distinctive*, and that indeed the need, or lack of need, to advert to its presence in explaining the realisation of a potentiality warrants making an important distinction within the class of potentialities. Frost himself is very aware of the requirement to understand how Aristotle thinks desire figures in the explanation of action if we are to understand his account of two-way powers. It is going to be important, he notes, that desire plays 'a distinctive explanatory role' for Aristotle where it does not merely reduce to a condition of exercise. I agree. But I question whether Frost's account of desire's distinctive explanatory role, which exploits features specific to "powers that consist in grasp of a rational

account" (grasp, for example, of the steps to health) can do justice to the passage above. I don't want to deny in the least that there are indeed features specific to certain powers that consist in grasp of a rational account; nor that Aristotle is very interested in them. But I also think he is clearly very interested in the difference between the powers of the inanimate and the powers of the *animate* (including the non-rational animate) – and that the passage above suggests that the distinctive role of desire can be present also in cases in which a non-human animal decides what to do, and in which the appreciation of a *logos* is therefore lacking. If that is right, then that might undermine the claim of Frost's account to be elucidatory of quite how Aristotle sees the distinctive explanatory role of desire *in general.*

What might we say about the distinctive role of desire, if we denied ourselves the sorts of resources likely to be available only in the case of the exercise of specifically human powers? One possibility, I would suggest, is this. The capacity for desire is a capacity which already presupposes the possession of two-way powers and its invocation is effectively equivalent to the assertion that the exercise of that power on a given occasion was indeed voluntary. It is not a condition which must be, as it were, separately satisfied if the action is to occur in the same way as, for example, perhaps the temperature has to be above a certain level if a particular chemical reaction is to occur. The action's occurring rather just *is* the satisfaction of the desire condition – it is what makes it right to say that the agent desired to ø.

In *The Possibility of Altruism*, Nagel notes that "[t]he claim that a desire underlies every act is true… only in the sense that *whatever* may be the motivation for someone's intentional pursuit of a goal, it becomes, *ipso facto*, appropriate to ascribe to him a desire for that goal" (p.29). Nagel is here attempting to argue *against* what appears to be the Aristotelian view that desire is always required for action, and the related idea that we always do what we most 'want'; but we could exploit the point in a different way to *defend* the Aristotelian position – we could say that desire *is* always present, in a sense, when action is

voluntary, but it is not to be thought of as exactly a 'requirement' of voluntariness, that is, as a separate, phenomenally or materially real state of the world which must be in place before action can ever occur. If it were, we would be saddled with the difficulty of seeing why is was not just one more condition, an individually necessary part of the jointly sufficient set of conditions which then makes it the case that an action happens. Rather, the point is that desire is always co-attributable with voluntary agency; action that is desired is indeed (in this sense of 'desire') the *same thing* as voluntary agency, and the fact that an agent has acted in a certain way is (in a certain sense) the same fact as the fact that the agent wanted to do it more than any available alternative. It is not clear that Aristotle ever said or thought this (indeed, I rather think he did not). It seems somewhat more likely to me that he is, in various places, wrestling with what he sees clearly is the distinctive role played by desire, and the relatedly distinctive nature of the two-way powers which are exemplified in action, while being unsure quite how to characterise them. But this gives us a way, perhaps, of understanding how desire can be prevented from turning into one more necessary condition of the exercise of agentive potential without having to bring onto the stage a whole plethora of special points which have application only in the case of the exercise of specifically rational powers.

6. CONCLUSION

I have argued, then, *contra* Frost, that we can make good sense of the notion of a two-way power without having to draw on resources which are available only in the case of rational agents. The key is to think of the two 'ways' not as fundamentally different ways in which the (single) power might be manifested, but rather as ways things might proceed, given a situation in which an agent with a relevant two-way power is confronted with the opportunity to exercise it. Though Aristotle is clearly interested in powers which he takes to have two kinds of manifestation (such as the medical art), I claim that he is *also* interested in the

difference between powers which *must* be exercised when the conditions appropriate to their exercise are present (one-way powers) and those which leave open two ways in which the agent might proceed: to act or not to act. Perhaps the scholarly tradition has associated the term 'two-way power' more often with the former of these than with the latter. But Aristotle is interested in *both*; and for my money, it is the latter rather than the former which holds the promise of carving nature at a certain very important joint.

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[1] Foremost amongst them is my belief that the realm of agency which I wish to characterize partly by way of the notion of a two-way power extends more widely than does the realm of rationality – and in particular, that the activities of many fairly lowly creatures which we might demur from accounting rational ought nevertheless to be accounted exercises of two-way powers.

[2] I cannot here answer this particular kind of worry about my version of libertarianism, but I have attempted to respond to it in considerable detail in my (2012).

[3] There is a good deal more to say about this matter; but reasons of space unfortunately preclude further discussion.

[4] This does not mean, interestingly, that portions of radioactive material cannot settle things. When they spontaneously emit particles, I would maintain that they indeed do so – matters are settled by these undetermined exercises of the *general* powers which can legitimately be assigned them. Matters are also settled when they do not emit radiation in circumstances in which they could have done so. Hitherto unsettled matters certainly get settled when these events which could have occurred do not, but they are not settled by the exercise of two-way powers on the part of the portions of radioactive material.