Agency, Powers, and Skills

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Forthcoming in Luca Ferrero, ed., The Routledge Handbook to the Philosophy of Agency

Powers of various sorts—capacities, abilities, and skills—play a large role in ordinary thought and conduct concerning human agency.[1] Their acquisition, maintenance, and development are at issue in many (e.g.) developmental, educational, and therapeutic contexts. Examples of the kind of power I will discuss include the abilities to walk, to speak a first (or second) language, to juggle, to play the piano, to sail, to ride a bicycle, to operate a lathe. (Some of these powers are more naturally described as abilities, some as skills; that distinction will be discussed below.) Call them *agential powers*. Characteristically, agential powers are not merely manifested, but exercised (contrast the power of the sun to melt a frozen puddle). And characteristically the exercises of agential powers are intentional actions. In ascribing such powers to agents, we typically talk about what those agents *can do*. The same power may be exercised on different occasions, and it persists between exercises. Agential powers can, however, be lost in various ways; most—arguably all—are acquired. So even when an agential power is not currently being exercised, it would appear to have some kind of reality, unlike mere possibility. An agential power would seem to be a 'positive explanatory factor in accounting for the performance of an agent' (Kenny 1975: 133), again unlike mere possibility: possibly *p* does not contribute to an explanation of its being the case that p, whereas an agent's ability to juggle contributes to an explanation of its being the case that she is juggling. This entry considers some of the most important questions concerning the nature and specification of agential powers, and their place in an account of human agency.

Agential powers and the explanation of action

Despite the seemingly great theoretical, practical, and metaphysical significance of agential powers, relatively little attention has been paid to them by recent work in the philosophy of agency.[2] This may be because much work on the nature of exercises of agency has focused on the *explanation* of action, specifically on explanations of action in terms of the agent's *reasons*. Asking *why* an agent acted as she did (e.g. why she crossed the street) is likely to uncover her intention, desire, or motive in so acting (e.g. to get to the café) and what she knew or believed about the world that connected what she did to that motivating state (e.g. that crossing the street was a way of getting to the café). But her ability to walk (if it was by walking that she crossed the street) is part of the background that this explanation assumes; the explanation doesn't make it salient. And when a reasons explanation of what someone did is used as the template for a metaphysical account of what it is for an event to be an action—as it is by the so-called *standard story of action*, according to which, in its simplest form, actions are bodily movements caused (in a way to be specified such as to exclude so-called 'deviant causation') by belief-desire pairs—the fact that in crossing the street the agent exercised her ability to walk

(and perhaps, if it was a busy street, a more specific traffic-negotiating ability or skill) is left by the wayside, seemingly irrelevant to the nature of actions and the form of explanation characteristics of them (Hornsby 2004; Small 2017a).[3]

However, agential powers come into view when we consider that which a reasons explanation aims to reconstruct: an agent's practical reasoning (or possible course thereof). The agent wants to get to the café, on the other side of the street. Her deliberation aims to deliver, minimally, a practicable answer to the question 'How am I to get there?'. Among other things, her conception of her agential powers plays a constraining role: she knows she cannot fly (etc.), but she knows she can walk, and that she can cross by walking. Many theories of intentional action (including the standard story, but also many views that oppose it) maintain that deliberation can come to an end successfully only when it yields something an agent can do 'just like that'—something for which the question 'How am I to do *that*?' doesn't arise. When an agent does something 'just like that'—without doing anything else as a means to doing it—she is said to have performed a (teleologically) *basic action*.[4] So one natural place at which agential powers might come into an account of intentional action is in an account of basic action. For instance, a causal theorist might hold that the belief in the belief-desire pair identifies an ultimate means, something the agent can do 'just like that', and the belief-desire pair causes a bodily movement by "activating" an agential power, such as the ability to walk (in something like the way in which striking a glass triggers its disposition to break); another agent could desire and believe the same things, but if she lacked the relevant agential power her belief-desire pair would not cause a bodily movement of the relevant type. Alternatively, a causal theorist who gives intentions an essential role might hold that the ultimate intention activates and guides the exercise of the relevant agential power (Clarke 2010).[5]

According to these conceptions of basic action, agential powers take over where practical thought and deliberation give out. But there is something paradoxical about this (Lavin 2013). In exercising an agential power, the agent is supposed to be acting intentionally; yet she can have no idea how she's doing what she's doing. One conclusion that might be drawn from this is that the agential powers whose exercises are basic actions cannot be 'alien' to practical reason; the powers must be 'intelligent powers' (see below) which are such that their exercises are known by their agents (Small 2019).

Theorists of basic action disagree about *what* can be done 'just like that'. According to some (e.g. Hornsby 1980), tying one's shoelaces and riding a bicycle might be basic actions, suggesting that agential powers to do such things figure as fundamental 'positive explanatory factors' in agents' performances. However, others (e.g. Danto 1963) think these would not be basic actions because they are (supposedly) done *by means of* making certain bodily movements; this suggests that such powers as the ability to tie one's shoelaces and the skill of

riding a bicycle do not ultimately contribute to the explanation of agents' performances, and that the only agential powers that are genuine positive explanatory factors are an agent's powers of bodily movement. (Note that this dispute is not typically framed in terms of the nature and explanatory significance of agential powers, but rather in terms of the nature of basic action and the specificity of practical thought.)

However, agential powers seem to have explanatory significance beyond that which theories of basic action accord them. First, there are many skills and abilities whose exercises involve deliberating about how to do things, notably when skills comprise sub-skills, and the agent might achieve her end in exercising her skill in different ways, using different combinations of exercises of its sub-skills. (Consider carpentry.) Secondly, agential powers—and skills, in particular—frequently include perceptual dispositions: becoming a skilled tennis player involves not only (e.g.) developing the ability to hit a top-spin cross-court forehand, but also becoming disposed to recognize opportunities for doing so. Indeed, in the case of many skills, an agent's expertise is manifested primarily in what she sees and in how she determines what to do, the doing itself being something that an unskilled agent could often do with little difficulty. (Consider chess.) These aspects of agential powers raise important questions for philosophers of agency. What, if anything, is distinctive about the practical reasoning of the bearer of a skill? Can the deliberative, perceptual, and practical aspects of agential powers, and their explanatory significance, be understood independently, or must a satisfactory account treat them together?

The specification of agential powers

In virtue of possessing agential powers, it may be said of an agent that she *can* do certain things, or that she *is able to* do them. But the converse is not the case: that someone cannot (or is not able to) φ does not entail that she lacks the *ability* to φ (or skill of φ-ing, etc.). She may lack the *authority* (in the right context, a registrar can effect a marriage by saying certain words and signing certain documents; someone lacking the authority cannot, even if she has the abilities to say and do the relevant things). An agent may lack the *opportunity* to φ (I cannot cook an omelette without any eggs). And sometimes an agent cannot φ because, even though she has the ability to φ, her exercise of it is impeded (and not by removing the opportunity to φ): a sprained wrist or stage fright might prevent a skilled pianist with ready access to a piano from playing.[6]

Some philosophers who discuss abilities distinguish between 'general' and 'specific' abilities (e.g. Mele 2003). I am said to retain my 'general ability' to cook an omelette in the absence of eggs, but to lack the 'specific ability' to cook an omelette because I cannot cook one 'right now'. As Maier (2015: 123) puts it, when an agent has a specific ability to do something, 'there is, as it were, nothing between her and the deed'. But as this distinction is usually understood, the

ascription of a specific ability to φ is simply the ascription of both the ('general') ability to φ and the opportunity to φ; if this is so, the term 'specific ability' is something of a misnomer, for it does not refer to a kind of ability at all.[7]

There is, however, a real question about the specification of agential powers. It is common for philosophers to talk about 'the power (capacity, ability) to φ', or 'the skill of φ-ing'. But what does the variable 'φ' range over in such expressions—what are its legitimate substitution instances? Clearly not particular actions (for they are the paradigm *exercises* of agential powers, and the same power may be exercised on different occasions in different actions), but rather something general: act-types, perhaps.[8] But what are act-types? According to one influential view (Davidson 1967; Hornsby 1980), *what is done* on an occasion is an act-type, and the *doing of it* on an occasion is a token action—or, as I'll say, an action. A sentence reporting an action (someone's doing of something on an occasion—a dated, unrepeatable particular) thereby specifies *what* that person did (something they might have done before or do again, something someone else might do or have done). Thus, 'Jones buttered the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight' reports a particular action, but what Jones is thereby said to have done—namely, *butter the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight*—is something he might do every night, and that Smith might do too. An action sentence typically entails further action sentences (e.g. 'Jones buttered something in the bathroom', 'Jones buttered some toast in a bathroom', 'Jones buttered the toast with a knife') each of which specifies a thing done, something that might be done again by the agent or someone else.

There are good reasons to deny that any act-type is, in principle, a legitimate substitution instance for 'φ' in 'the power to φ', 'the skill of φ-ing', etc. In acting as he is reported to have done, did Jones exercise the power to butter the (*that*? or *some*?) toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight? Did he also exercise the power to butter toast with a knife and the power to butter toast at midnight? It is implausible to maintain that Jones possessed, let alone exercised, a distinct power corresponding to each of the (perhaps indefinitely) many act-types he instantiated. The ability to use a knife for spreading is something Jones acquired, probably as a child, over some more-or-less determinate period of time. But when did he acquire the ability to butter toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight? If he 'counts' as possessing that ability *in virtue of* his performance, how could that ability have been a 'positive explanatory factor' in the performance? Wouldn't he have needed the ability before acting? Moreover, nothing further by way of ability (as opposed to opportunity and motivation, etc.) is needed to explain Jones's buttering of the toast in the bathroom with a knife at midnight than his ability to use a knife for spreading; and this ability is sufficient also to explain[9] Jones's spreading jam on a croissant at breakfast and clotted cream on a scone at tea. Typically, then, the proper specification of an agential power will be more coarse-grained than the specification of what

was done on an occasion of its exercise. If this were not so, it would be impossible for finite agents to be in a position to perform actions of infinitely many types (Small 2017a).

Skills vs. Abilities?

Skills are connected with knowledge, whereas there seem to be agential powers (call them 'mere abilities') that are not. Certainly not every agential power would be *called* a skill (e.g. the ability to wiggle one's ears, the ability to do fifty push-ups). The word 'skill' (and its cognates) has an honorific use, which may be withheld due to a contextually-salient lack of complexity in the relevant activity or (relative) lack of competence on the part of the agent. Further, not every case of one agent's being a *more able* φ-er than another would be aptly characterized in terms of her being *more skilled* (the difference might be one merely of e.g. speed or strength).[10]

How is intelligence (cognition, knowledge) related to agential power in skill? Two main strategies present themselves, though variations of each are possible. According to the first, skill is a hybrid, comprising mere ability plus cognitive states suited to guide its exercise (see e.g. the 'intellectualist legend' criticized by Ryle 1949: ch.2; and for a more sophisticated contemporary expression, Stanley and Krakauer 2013).[11] According to the second, a skill is an agential power of a specifically intelligent *form* (see e.g. Ryle 1949: ch.2; Small 2019).[12] On the first view, a skill comprises one or more agential power (mere ability) and something that is not an agential power (cognitive states, which are typically, though not necessarily, construed as propositional attitudes); the cognitive states are intelligent, whereas the mere abilities are not: a skill counts as intelligent in virtue of the cognitive states it comprises. On the second, skills are intrinsically intelligent agential powers: a skill is both a distinctively practical form of knowledge and a distinctively intelligent form of causal power. The second view may seem to imply that mere abilities and skills are kinds of agential powers that are disjoint—skills the intelligent agential powers, mere abilities the unintelligent ones (Annas 2011). But it is consistent with it to construe mere abilities as privative cases of skill, where there is perhaps very little to learn (Small forthcoming-a).

Are agential powers…

…dispositions?

Many philosophers think that agential powers are dispositions. Like abilities, dispositions are modal properties, and may be ascribed using 'can'.[13] Perhaps agential powers are dispositions, possessed by an agent, the manifestations of which are intentional actions. Dispositions are usually individuated by both their stimuli and their manifestations: e.g. X is fragile iff X is disposed to break if struck; X is soluble iff X is disposed to dissolve when placed in water; etc.[14] If agential powers are dispositions, what are their stimuli and manifestations?

According to one approach (e.g. Vihvelin 2013), to have the ability to φ is to be disposed to φ intentionally when one tries (or intends) to φ; one exercises one's ability to φ when one φ-s intentionally as the upshot of trying (or intending) to φ. This proposal faces problems. Though I have suggested that the exercises of agential powers are *characteristically* intentional actions, the present proposal would seem to exclude altogether the possibility of nonintentional (including unintentional) exercises of agential powers; and this may seem too strong (Vetter 2019). Moreover, according to some, not every case of φ-ing intentionally requires the agent to try to φ; and according to others, when an agent φ-s intentionally her trying to φ is not distinct from her φ-ing (see e.g. Hornsby 2010). Finally, the so-called 'Simple View' that intentionally φ-ing requires an intention to φ is rejected by many (e.g. Bratman 1987); and even when an agent who is φ-ing intentionally *does* intend to φ, if her intention is construed as 'stimulating' the agential powers involved in her φ-ing, it seems the picture is not of her *exercising* her powers, but merely of her powers being *manifested*—the agent 'disappears' from the execution of her intention (Hornsby 2004).

According to another approach (e.g. Sosa 2015), to have the ability to φ is to be disposed to φ *well* or *successfully* when one φ-s. It is true that explicit ascriptions of abilities and (in particular) skills—i.e. ascriptions in which 'ability' or 'skill' figure, as opposed merely to e.g. 'can'—often connote that the agent is *good*, and perhaps better than many or even most, at φ-ing. But what is it for A to be better at φ-ing than B? There does not seem to be a single answer: for instance, in some cases, it is for A's attempts to φ to more often result in φ-ings than B's; in others, it is for A to be able to φ in a more difficult range of circumstances than B; in others, it is for A's φ-ings to be better instances of φ-ing than B's (Small 2017a). Further, there are some kinds of action (those predicated using 'success verbs') such that, if they are engaged in at all, they are engaged in successfully; yet (as Vetter 2019 argues) the present view seems to imply that, where 'to ψ' is a success verb, every agent has the ability to ψ, because every agent is such that, were she to ψ, she would ψ successfully. But this is absurd, because surely some agents do in fact lack agential powers that are specified using success verbs.

…two-way powers?

The above proposals both assume that agential powers differ from other dispositions only by having a special kind of bearer, stimulus, and/or manifestation (an agent, intention, attempt, intentional action, successful intentional action): the formal character of the relation between disposition and manifestation is the same in an agential power as it is in (e.g.) fragility.[15] However, some have proposed that agential powers are powers of a distinctive form: they are 'two-way' powers, whereas non-agential powers are 'one-way' powers. Whereas a one-way power has one kind of exercise (fragility is manifested in *breaking*), a two-way power can be exercised in two ways.

What are the two-ways in which an agential power can be exercised? According to some (e.g. Kenny 1975; Alvarez 2013), a two-way power to φ may be exercised in φ-ing and in refraining from φ-ing.[16] But though an agent could properly be said to have refrained from φ-ing only if she *possessed* the power to φ, it does not follow that her so refraining was an *exercise* of that power; it is natural to think she precisely refrained *from exercising it*. In fact, it seems that talk of a 'two-way' power is a distraction here: what is crucial to this conception of agential powers is that, unlike in the case of non-agential powers, 'when the conditions for the exercise of the power obtain, the power need not be manifested' (Alvarez 2013: 102). Rather, it is up to the agent whether or not to exercise her agential power when she has the opportunity to do so—this is something she determines through her choice. This proposal may seem similar to the view that to have an agential power to φ is to be disposed to φ when one so intends. But they are very different: that view treats the agent's intention as among the conditions necessary for the exercise of the power (the totality of conditions necessary for the disposition's manifestation are sufficient for its manifestation), whereas this proposal insists that the conditions necessary for the power's exercise are not sufficient for its exercise, and thus that the agent's choice or intention is no such condition or circumstance (see Kern 2017: 163ff).

On an alternative conception, deriving from Aristotle (Metaphysics Θ.2), the two ways in which a two-way power may be exercised are in φ-ing and 'contra-φ-ing' (Makin 2006: 44): the doctor can exercise her medical skill either in healing the patient or in harming ('contra-healing') him, and it is up to her not only *whether*, but also *how*, to exercise her power.[17] What explains the possibility of contra-φ-ing (and thus the 'two-wayedness' of two-way powers), on this view, is that two-way powers are partly constituted by *knowledge* of how to φ, which implies knowledge of what *not* to do in φ-ing—the knowledge exercised in contra-φ-ing. Skills are therefore plausible candidates to be two-way powers in this sense; whether mere abilities are two-way powers will depend on one's conception of the skill/ability distinction (see above).

Conclusion

There is greater sympathy for powers in contemporary philosophy today than there was in the second half of the 20th century, when many of the analytic tradition's most influential contributions to the philosophy of agency were written. Clarke is surely correct: 'Abilities are fundamental to agency; we don't have a decent comprehension of agency without an understanding of them' (2015: 893). But there remains much work to do in order to understand agential powers, abilities, and skills. One key issue, not discussed here, is the significance of agential powers to the theories of free will and moral responsibility, which are often concerned with the question of whether someone who φ-d *could have done*, or *had the ability to do*, otherwise. I hope to have brought out in this entry that the significance of agential powers for the philosophy of agency extends beyond these concerns, by focusing on the possibility that agential powers play a fundamental role in our understanding of the nature of

intentional action. I have sought to draw attention to a number of important questions that remain unresolved: Is the role of agential powers in a satisfying philosophical account of the nature of intentional action restricted to cases of so-called 'basic actions'? What constraints would recognizing a fundamental role for agential powers in such an account impose on our conceptions of intentional action and of basic action in particular? How coarse or narrow should our canonical specifications of agential powers be, and why? Are skills modes of practical intelligence insofar as the combine abilities with knowledge, or is their intelligence a matter of the specific kind of abilities that they are? What, precisely, is the difference between a practical ability and a practical skill? How do agential powers differ from natural powers, or dispositions: do they differ only in their stimuli and manifestations, or (also?) in their form?

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[1] Not every manifestation or exercise of a power possessed by a human agent is a case of agency (e.g. the capacities to understand French, to tolerate spicy food, to fall asleep on buses). But such powers are not at issue here. Nor are the agential powers of non-human agents.

[2] An important exception is the central role given to 'embodied coping skills' by the 'analytic phenomenological' tradition of Hubert Dreyfus and his followers, which lack of space precludes me from discussing. Note that Dreyfus (2001) claims that exercises of such skills are, as such, not intentional actions.

[3] Certain dissatisfactions with the standard story encourage some to introduce not only a wider range of mental states but also various kinds of *mental* powers into their accounts of what must happen causally upstream of a bodily movement for it to qualify as an action—e.g. willpower, or capacities for instrumental rationality and self-governance. Though such capacities play an integral role in our lives as agents, they are not agential powers in the sense at issue here, for their exercises are not themselves (characteristically) intentional actions.

[4] More precisely, given certain views about the individuation of action, the description of her action under which it is true to say that she ___-ed 'just like that' is the *basic description* of her action.

[5] Can an intention to perform a basic action can guide the performance, if (by definition) it contains no information about *how* the action is to be performed (Small 2019)?
[6] Though one might say that the agent cannot (or isn't able to) exercise her ability to φ, this should not suggest that she has lost the ability to exercise her ability to φ, an ability she will regain when she is no longer impeded in exercising her ability to φ.
[7] The same concern applies to the view that a third 'kind' of ability should be distinguished, to be ascribed to an agent who, though possessing the ability and opportunity to φ, cannot φ because of some physical or psychological impediment to the exercise of her ability (e.g. the 'narrow ability' of Vihvelin 2013). However, see Maier (2015) for an attempt to explain general ability in terms of specific ability; for criticism, Clarke (2015: 894).
[8] Though note that there is not always a direct route from an ascription of skill (e.g. 'is a skilled carpenter', 'is a skilled doctor') to any act-types.
[9] More precisely, to contribute what agential powers contribute to the explanation of action.
[10] Suppose Amy can do 50 push-ups whereas Ben can do only 30. If the remarks about the specification of agential powers in the previous section are correct, we should say, not that Amy has an ability Ben lacks (the ability to do 50 push-ups), but rather that she possesses the ability they each have (to do push-ups) to a greater degree.
[11] Stanley and Williamson (2017) contend that skills are dispositions to form (or activate) knowledge suitable to guide action—and thus, presumably, to guide the exercise of mere abilities (see Riley 2017 for criticism). As some such knowledge is, arguably, ability-entailing, the possession of a skill entails the possession of relevant mere abilities, and their proposal can be viewed as an idiosyncratic version of the hybrid view.
[12] Much recent discussion of the issue focuses on whether what skilled agents know (as such) can be exhaustively represented as propositional knowledge (see the entry on agency and know-how); for discussions that focus on the role of skill in the explanation of action, see Fridland (2013; 2014) and Small (2017b; 2019). Phenomenologists such as Dreyfus can be read as adopting the second strategy distinguished in the text, though the views of Dreyfus (e.g. 2001) are importantly different from those of e.g. Ryle (1949); see Small 2017b for discussion.
[13] However, some dispositions (such as character traits) are not capacities, but rather tendencies; they are more aptly ascribed using a *habitual* expression ('does φ', 'φ-s').
[14] Though Vetter (2015) maintains that dispositions are individuated solely by their manifestation-types.
[15] The same goes for the dispositional conception of skill proposed by Stanley and Williamson (2017; see n. 11 above), though the distinctive manifestation there is not any kind of action but rather the forming/activation of knowledge apt to guide action.
[16] Indeed, Alvarez contends that 'there is human agency whenever there is the exercise of … a *two-way* causal power' (2013: 102); but because certain 'not-doings' are supposedly among the exercises of two-way powers, this means that not every case of human *agency* is a case of intentional *action*.
[17] For contrasting conceptions of Aristotle's conception of two-way powers, see e.g. Beere (2009); Kern (2017: ch. VI); Frost (forthcoming); Small (forthcoming-b).