

# The Will as a Rational Free Power

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## *Abstract*

Drawing on insights from Aristotle and Locke, I shall argue in this paper that the human will is a mental power of a very special kind, crucially involved in the genesis of our free actions. Like all powers, the will can be exercised or manifested on particular occasions. Its exercises are *volitions* or “acts” of will. Volitions are mental occurrences or events, with a distinctive type of intentional content: a volition or “willing” is always a volition *to do* such-and-such, where such-and-such is some *action-type*. For instance, it might be a volition to *open the door*, or to *raise one’s arm*. As a power, the will is distinctive, first of all, in being a *free* power: that is to say, its exercises are not *caused* by prior events, nor by other agents acting upon the agent whose will it is. It is also, crucially, a *two-way* power: a power to will *or not to will* to do such-and-such. This feature of the will is indispensable for its possession of a third crucial feature: it is a *rational* power — that is, a power which is, or at least can be, exercised by its possessor *in the light of reason*. According to this conception of the will, willing is *choosing* between alternative possible courses of action or inaction — and, typically, choosing *for a reason* of which the agent is aware. I contend that this is the only overall conception of the will that can be accommodated by our intuitive self-conception as rational free agents.

In section 1 of this paper, I shall set out the foregoing account of rational free agency in some detail, explaining both its terminology and its main principles. Then, in section 2, I shall more briefly outline the chief features of a rival account of intentional agency that is currently dominant — the standard “causal” theory of action, which ultimately owes its inspiration to the ideas of Hume. Finally, in section 3, I shall identify the decisive advantages that I believe my neo-Aristotelian account has over any neo-Humean account.