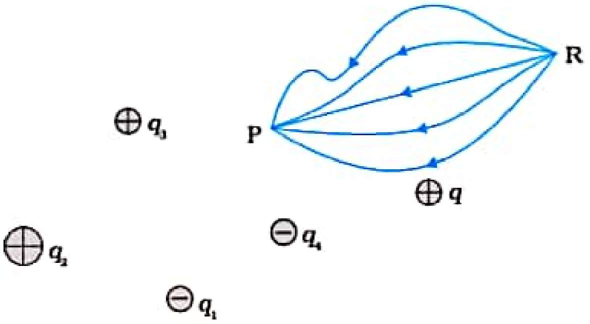

FIGURE 2.2 Work done on a test charge q by the electrostatic field due to any given charge configuration is independent of the path, and depends only on its initial and final positions.

In other words, the electrostatic potential (V) at any point in a region with electrostatic field is the work done in bringing a unit positive charge (without acceleration) from infinity to that point.

The qualifying remarks made earlier regarding potential energy also apply to the definition of potential. To obtain the work done per unit test charge, we should take an infinitesimal test charge δq, obtain the work done δW in bringing it from infinity to the point and determine the ratio $\delta W/\delta q$. Also, the external force at every point of the path is to be equal and opposite to the electrostatic force on the test charge at that point.

2.3 Potential due to a Point Charge

Consider a point charge Q at the origin (Fig. 2.3). For definiteness, take Q to be positive. We wish to determine the potential at any point P with position vector **r** from the origin. For that we must calculate the work done in bringing a unit positive test charge from infinity to the point P. For $Q > 0$, the work done against the repulsive force on the test charge is positive. Since work done is independent of the path, we choose a convenient path – along the radial direction from infinity to the point P.

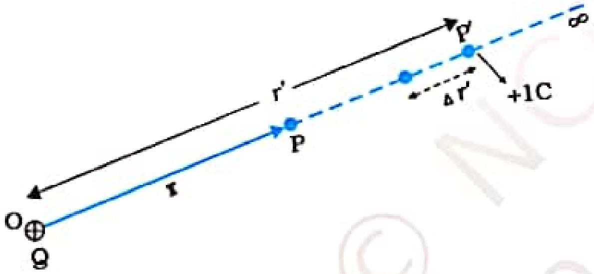

FIGURE 2.3 Work done in bringing a unit positive test charge from infinity to the point P, against the repulsive force of charge Q ($Q > 0$), is the potential at P due to the charge Q.

At some intermediate point P′ on the path, the electrostatic force on a unit positive charge is

$$\frac{Q \times 1}{4\pi\varepsilon_0 r'^2}\hat{\mathbf{r}}' \tag{2.5}$$

where $\hat{\mathbf{r}}'$ is the unit vector along OP′. Work done against this force from $\mathbf{r}'$ to $\mathbf{r}' + \Delta\mathbf{r}'$ is

$$\Delta W = -\frac{Q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0 r'^2}\Delta r' \tag{2.6}$$

The negative sign appears because for $\Delta r' < 0$, ΔW is positive. Total work done (W) by the external force is obtained by integrating Eq. (2.6) from $r' = \infty$ to $r' = r$,

$$W = -\int_{\infty}^{r}\frac{Q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0 r'^2}dr' = \left.\frac{Q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0 r'}\right|_{\infty}^{r} = \frac{Q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0 r} \tag{2.7}$$

This, by definition is the potential at P due to the charge Q

$$V(r) = \frac{Q}{4\pi\varepsilon_0 r} \tag{2.8}$$