

Daniel Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. xi + 405.

Anyone who retains the Cartesian faith that we know what we are doing should read this book. Wegner assembles a huge amount of evidence to show our widespread ignorance of when and how we are acting. Our failures are of two kinds. First there are cases in which we are acting but do not realize that we are. Examples include ouija board manipulation and other varieties of Victorian spiritualism; facilitated communication; water divination; and hypnotism, to which Wegner devotes a long chapter that would serve as an excellent introduction to the topic.

Second come cases in which we are not acting, but think that we are. Wegner describes an experiment of his own (the 'I-Spy' study) in which subjects are induced to believe that they have selected a figure on a computer screen (when they haven't) by the expedient of getting them to think about that figure a few seconds before. Perhaps such cases are unusual; more common are cases in which we are indeed acting, but in which we think that our actions are achieving far more than they in fact are. We habitually overestimate the effect that we have on objects and people around us. Indeed there is good evidence from many studies that it is a sign of mental health to overestimate one's control over the world.

If this weren't bad enough, it also appears that, even if we do accurately understand our actions at the time, we are very likely to likely to forget or confabulate later. We habitually misremember our earlier desires, beliefs and intentions in order to throw our actions into a better light; or, in so far as they were inchoate to begin with, we sharpen them in retrospect into defensible bundles.

All this is very unsettling, and Wegner provides an excellent and highly readable guide through huge tracts of the social psychology literature. The forty page bibliography is an excellent resource. But Wegner is after bigger fish. The book proclaims in its title that conscious will is an illusion, not just that it is frequently misleading. What he means by this is not that there is no such thing as an experience of consciously willing an action; much of the book consists of an exploration of the nature of such experience. Rather he concerned to argue that we radically misconstrue what that nature is.

How do we misconstrue it? One kind of error is discussed in the last chapter where Wegner argues that acts of will cannot be seen as the uncaused causes of action. This is familiar ground. Perhaps Wegner is right to say that most people think of free will and determinism as incompatible; but he is surely wrong to attribute that view to 'most philosophers' (p. 318). In analytic philosophy departments, compatibilism is the norm.

Far more remarkable is Wegner's contention that we are in error when we think of acts of will as causally efficacious at all. This is a claim that is developed and defended through much of the book. The idea is that conscious acts of will are *never* the direct causes of our actions, even when the conscious willing is the willing to do exactly the action that follows. Instead, both conscious willing and action are the effects of a common

unconscious cause. Wegner sometimes describes this as the thesis that the will is epiphenomenal; but that it is misleading since on his account acts of will can have causal consequences. The central point is rather that they never *directly* cause actions, but can do so only indirectly, via other effects on the agent. He compares them to a compass. The compass doesn't directly steer the ship. Instead it indicates the direction that the ship is taking, and may thus indirectly affect its direction via its effects on the pilot.

What are the arguments for this striking claim? There are two. The first is a version of the argument from illusion: since our conscious willings so often go astray, it is plausible that they are generated by "separate systems" from those that generate actions. As Wegner puts it, "conscious will is not inherent in action" (p. 11): willings are not an intrinsic part of the process by which somebody acts, but are, at best, extrinsic accompaniments to that process. The second argument invokes quite a different set of considerations. Central are the celebrated results from Libet and others that seem to show that conscious willings come too late to be the cause of action. I take these two arguments in turn.

The argument from illusion has had a rough time in recent years from writers such as Snowdon and McDowell. However, we do not need recourse to their rather contentious arguments in order to raise a worry for Wegner. Wegner seems to identify our awareness of our conscious thoughts with the conscious thoughts themselves; and that is not obviously right. The point is clearly seen if we adopt a higher-order thought account of consciousness. According to such an account, a thought T is conscious iff it is accompanied by a higher-order thought to the effect that the agent is having the thought that T. But note that it is the original, first-order thought T that is conscious in virtue of the higher-order thought 'I am having the thought that T'; it is not the higher-order thought that is thereby rendered conscious. In order for the higher-order thought to be conscious the agent would need to have a thought about that thought at a still higher level, and so on.

Now let us consider Wegner's data in the light of this account. When an agent forms a conscious willing this consists in a willing, together with a higher-order thought to the effect that this willing has been formed. The experimental work that Wegner cites shows that such higher-order thoughts will frequently be wrong; and this in turn suggests the higher-order thought approach is right to distinguish the willings themselves from thoughts about those willings. But does this experimental work show that the agent's conscious willings are not the true causes of the action? No. Of course the higher-order thoughts are not the causes of the action. But the higher-order thoughts are not the conscious willings. The conscious willings are the things that the higher-order thoughts are about; and we have no reason for denying that *they* are the causes of the action. In effect what this approach shows is that conscious willings might indeed contain an element that is extrinsic to the causal process, and hence part of a "separate system". But this element is the element that makes the willing conscious, rather than being the willing itself.

Despite its popularity, I myself have misgivings about the higher-order thought account of consciousness (couldn't we have unconscious higher-order states?). Nevertheless, the

general response to Wegner that it makes so clear will surely be available in other frameworks. The evidence that Wegner cites forces us to distinguish between mental states and awareness of those states. Once this distinction is made, we will always have the possibility of insisting that the conscious state should be identified with the state that the awareness is of, and not with the awareness itself.

Can this response be extended to the Wegner's other argument? As we have seen, this makes use of the neuro-physiological findings of Benjamin Libet and others. Prior to any voluntary motor act there is a distinctive pattern of activity in the brain: a 'Readiness Potential'. Libet asked subjects to signal the moment that they consciously willed to perform an action. He found that the readiness potential precedes the moment at which agents are able to make this signal by around half a second. He concluded that the conscious willing comes after the readiness potential, and so cannot be the initiator of the action. Here again we need to ask whether he really showed this, or whether he showed merely that the readiness potential precedes the agent's *awareness* of their willing. On a higher-order thought account, he seems to have shown only the latter. It would not be surprising if the higher-order thought that makes the willing conscious follows the willing itself; all the more so if the higher-order thought is in some sense a perception of the willing. Conscious acts of willing need not be conscious right from the start. (The application of this idea to Libet's findings has been developed very effectively by Thomas Bittner; see 'Consciousness and the Act of Will' *Philosophical Studies* 81, (1996) 331–41.) Perhaps there are still surprising consequences of this view; after all, if this right the willing cannot have been made in virtue of the agent's consciousness of it. Nonetheless, we are not forced into such a radical conclusion as that embraced by Wegner.

Of course all hypotheses here are hostage to future empirical work. In the meanwhile Wegner has provided us with a highly informative and stimulating study, one that provides an excellent guide to much of the empirical evidence so far. It should be widely read by philosophers, not just by those working in action theory and philosophy of mind, but by those working in moral psychology and ethics as well.