



Book Review

We Don't Know What We're Doing

By

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A review of *The Illusion of Conscious Will* by Daniel M. Wegner. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.

Conscious will plays a special role in Western moral thinking. Although we may blame each other for negligence and other sins of omission, acts stemming from conscious decisions are considered to be paradigmatically subject to moral evaluation. In his latest book, Harvard psychologist Daniel M. Wegner tries to undermine the very notion that what we experience as conscious will has any real control over our behavior.

Wegner's approach is stalwartly empirical. Some reviewers have celebrated him for snatching the issue of conscious will from the hands of benighted philosophers, and for bringing the cool light of experimental research to bear on issues that have traditionally been the subject of futile speculation. Actually, Wegner's relationship to the philosophical tradition is more complicated. On the one hand, he is fully aware that his ideas hearken back to the thought of the great 18th century Scottish philosopher, David Hume. On the other hand, as I will argue below, Wegner does not fully develop the ethical consequences of his theory.

How, then, does Wegner explain our appar-

ent experience of conscious will, and what evidence does he bring to support his explanation? First of all, he makes a tacit strategic decision that makes life much easier for his rather mechanistic approach to psychology. Wegner simply avoids facing the notorious "hard problem" of cognitive studies, i.e., the question of how our material bodies give rise to the seemingly spooky and immaterial phenomena of consciousness itself. Instead of wondering how we manage to *experience* conscious will, he takes that experience as a given and asks what its place is within the human mental economy.

Wegner suggests that our experience of conscious will has no direct causal affect on the world; we do not consciously *will* things to happen at all (including movements of our own bodies.). Our experience of *willing* is rather something like an emotion whose job is simply to mark particular actions, usually after the fact, as having been caused by *us*. The self-attribution of actions signalled by this experience is based on an unconscious process of evaluation, which follows a number of reasonable, but hardly infallible, rules. For instance,

the *Priority Principle* stipulates that, “Causal events precede their effects, usually in a timely manner” (pg. 70). If I think of raising my hand a short time before it actually rises up, I will unconsciously infer, in accordance with this principle, that my thoughts had caused my hand to move. I will experience the conclusion of this inference as a feeling of having consciously willed my hand to move.

It is not terribly difficult to create in people the feeling that they have willed events that were not actually under their control, and *vice-versa*. In this connection, Wegner explores, at length, a remarkably varied and exotic assortment of psychological phenomena. While usually being open about his methodological qualms (“How can people tell they’re not conscious of something?”, pg. 108), he usually interprets these fascinating oddities as illustrating different types of errors in the attribution of control. For instance: humans may cause actions, and in the case of automatic writing, even compose entire literary works, but lack the feeling of having willed those actions. Wegner counts automatic writing, Ouija board consultations and the use of dowsing sticks as all demonstrating people’s failure to correctly identify themselves as the causal source of some action. Spirit possession and dissociative identity disorder (“multiple personality”) involve more complicated errors, in which a person attributes the source of their own actions to non-existent “virtual agents.” Clever experiments can also induce subjects to feel they had willed actions that were in fact controlled by other people. Patients may invent whole lines of thought to explain their “motivations” for actions that were caused by a neurosurgeon’s direct stimulation of their brains. Wegner mobilizes all of these examples to demonstrate that the experience of conscious will is a quite fallible indicator of genuine causal agency.

While this element of his discussion is enlightening and no doubt offers some theoretical advances, it is not of earth-shattering significance for human self-understanding. We

don’t really need hundreds of pages to be reminded that, like every other department of human judgment, human attributions of agency can sometimes be incorrect. Wegner’s more radical thesis declares that conscious will has no direct causal efficacy. He tells us that we should not be surprised that the experience of conscious will does not correlate perfectly with actual personal agency, because it has no direct causal bearing upon our actions to begin with! If automatic writers and victims of spirit possession manage to perform all kinds of sophisticated activities that appear to take place without the help of conscious will - why assume that conscious will has an important role to play in more ordinary circumstances? Wegner is especially impressed by Kornhuber and Deecke’s celebrated neurological experiments, which he understands as demonstrating that the changes in brain electrical activity that lead to spontaneous finger movement begin well before any experience of a conscious decision to move the finger. From this he concludes that conscious will, even when it precedes action, merely signals that a brain process that will eventually result in action is *already* under way. At this crucial juncture, Wegner seems to have wandered onto thin ice. His already controversial interpretation of an experiment involving random and meaningless finger-wiggling can hardly be generalized to cover more interesting cases (e.g., pulling a trigger) without further explanation.

In his closing chapter, Wegner meditates upon the possible philosophical consequences of his theory. He lives easily with the knowledge that, “the illusions piled atop apparent mental causation are the building blocks of human psychology and social life” (pg. 342). Given Wegner’s quite narrow notion of “conscious will”, I share his complacency. After all, he is not talking about the causal role of the *conscious deliberations* that precede action, but merely about that ephemeral experience of “willing” itself. How many times do we actually catch ourselves “consciously willing” our

activities? When a traffic policeman stops me for driving over the speed-limit, nothing could be of less interest to him than whether I can recall the precise moment in which I consciously executed my decision to drive 90 kilometers per hour on an urban street. If I were to explain that my recklessness was simply a matter of unconscious habit, he would quite reasonably berate me for having allowed myself to acquire such a reckless habit.

The Illusion of Conscious Will does have an important practical message for ethics, but its author seems to have missed it. Although “conscious will” winds up being rather disconnected from the causal processes that drive human action, Wegner still admits that it does make sense to talk about people doing things and even being responsible for their acts. He calls this genuine human contribution to the goings-on of the world “empirical will”. His thesis may be summarized as stating that “conscious will” neither controls nor infallibly reflects “empirical will”. The problem is that for Wegner, this situation is an unchanging truth of human nature. At most, we can become Zen

Buddhists and renounce the “pretense of control” altogether (pg. 333).

In fact, Wegner’s book invites us to undertake a different path of self-development. In the light of his theory, we may educate our experience of “conscious will” to better reflect “empirical will.” Having read the book, we will no longer be duped by Ouija board readings or by “facilitated communication” with profoundly autistic children (another phenomenon debunked by Wegner). Our experience of conscious will becomes more savvy, our internal deliberations may take into account, and largely correct for, the systematic errors of judgement that Wegner has brought to light. As always, it is precisely by coming to recognize the mind’s irrational elements that we can begin to overcome them.

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