

## Was Wegner Rejecting Mental Causality?

**Abstract:** Daniel Wegner's theory of apparent mental causation is often misread. His aim was not to question the causal effectiveness of conscious mental states like intentions. Rather, he attempted to show that our subjective sense of agency is not a completely reliable indicator of the actual causality of action, and needs to be replaced by more objective means of inquiry.

### 1. Introduction

Wegner's views on the nature of human action became influential both in psychology and in the philosophy of mind and of action. Wegner is usually read as defending the thesis that there is no mental causality: no conscious mental states are ever among the real causes of the corresponding actions.<sup>1</sup> Our conscious intentions and other mental states only *seem* to drive and direct our actions. Although conscious intentions often precede our actions, in principle they could be removed from the chain of events leading to the action execution, blocked, or bypassed, and the same result – the same overt action – would obtain.

My claim in this note is that this reading of Wegner is incorrect. I admit that Wegner sometimes speaks as if he were rejecting causal efficacy of human mental states (we will see instances of this kind of talk later). But these claims need to be understood in the context of his work on human action. This context reveals that his view of mental causality was different. He did not aim to dislodge the important commonsense notion that conscious mental states are – at least in some cases – among the causes of actions. He says this much

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<sup>1</sup> This reading is ubiquitous in the literature on Wegner. Recent examples include Mele (2009), Schlosser (2012), Lumer (2014), Mele (2014), Baumeister et al. (2018), Lavazza (2019), and Mele (2018).

at a number of places in his published writings. His negative argument was different. He claimed that our subjective sense of being the authors of our actions is not quite reliable.

I will defend my interpretation of Wegner's theory by first making clear what he meant by "conscious will" and what picture of human agency he was criticizing. Then, I will proceed to examine the claims that seemingly contradict my interpretation. I will show that understood in the broader context of his work, the problematic passages in his writings can be understood in a way that allows for mental causality. I will conclude by indicating what was Wegner's preferred way of investigating the reality of mental causality (of the lack of it).

## **2. Wegner on Conscious Will and Apparent Mental Causality**

At the core of Wegner's contribution to the theory of action is the distinction between *conscious will* and *empirical will* (Wegner, 2012, ch. 1). Conscious (or "phenomenal") will is the subjectively felt sense of being the author of an action. It is not a capacity or power to produce voluntary actions, as the title may misleadingly suggest. Rather, it is a kind of feeling with distinctive phenomenology. Actions accompanied by this "authorship emotion" feel "willed". Those that are not so accompanied do not feel like our own actions.<sup>2</sup> The empirical will, on the other hand, is the sum of causal mechanisms producing actions.

Wegner's writings on agency are primarily concerned with this subjective feeling of being in charge of one's actions. His main point wasn't that the conscious will does not causally contribute to action

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<sup>2</sup> In terms of the contemporary neuroscience of action, Wegner's conscious will is the "sense of agency". As Moore (2016, p. 1) defines it, the sense of agency is "the feeling of control over actions and their consequences". Wegner himself uses the term "sense of agency" in Wegner (2004, p. 654).

production. That much trivially follows from the fact that it is just an accompanying *feeling* that attaches to some of our actions. Rather, he aimed to demonstrate the epistemic unreliability of this feeling, and proposed a hypothetical explanation of how it arises in us.

Wegner's experimental work supports the unreliability claim by showing the various ways in which the feeling of conscious will is manipulable. In some circumstances, the feeling of authorship may mark an action as mine even if I didn't cause it to happen. Wegner calls such cases the *illusions of control*. In other circumstances, the converse may happen: I may not feel the action as being mine even though I causally brought it about. Wegner calls instances of this class *automatisms*. Together, both phenomena form "dissociations between exercise of agency and the phenomenology of agency".<sup>3</sup>

Illusions of control and automatisms demonstrate the double dissociation of the actual agency and of the subjective feelings of agency. The feeling of conscious will is not a completely reliable indicator of the real causality of action. But did Wegner want to say that our mental states such as intentions are always cut off from the action-producing causal chains - from the *empirical* will?

Most if not all interpreters believe he did. What is their argument? The experiments on the dissociations of the feelings of conscious will from the real agency alone cannot be sufficient. Such dissociations only manifest the manipulability of the agentic feelings but cannot constitute a proof that no conscious mental state ever contributes to action production. I believe it was Wegner's theory of "apparent mental causality" what persuaded the interpreters that Wegner aims to dislodge mental causality.

Wegner did not only demonstrate the manipulability of the sense of action authorship. He also proposed a speculative view as to how this feeling arises in us: the theory of apparent mental causality

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<sup>3</sup> See the account and examples of illusions of control and automatisms in Wegner (2000, chs. 1, 3 and 4).

(AMC for short). According to the theory, the feeling of agency arises as a result of an inferential process. The feeling is dependent on three conditions: (1) the action followed our conscious thought (*the condition of priority*), (2) there was a match in content between the thought and the action (*the condition of consistency*), and (3) we are not aware of any competing cause (or causes) of the action (*the condition of exclusivity*; Wegner and Wheatley, 1999). Whenever all the three conditions obtain, we make an inference that we are the causal source of the action, and the feeling of agency appears.

### 3. Interpreting the AMC Theory

So far, the AMC theory is just a theory about how a certain distinctive feeling arises in us when we act, or seemingly act. However, Wegner and Wheatley summarized the AMC theory with a figure that, I believe, is directly responsible for much of the interpretive confusion:

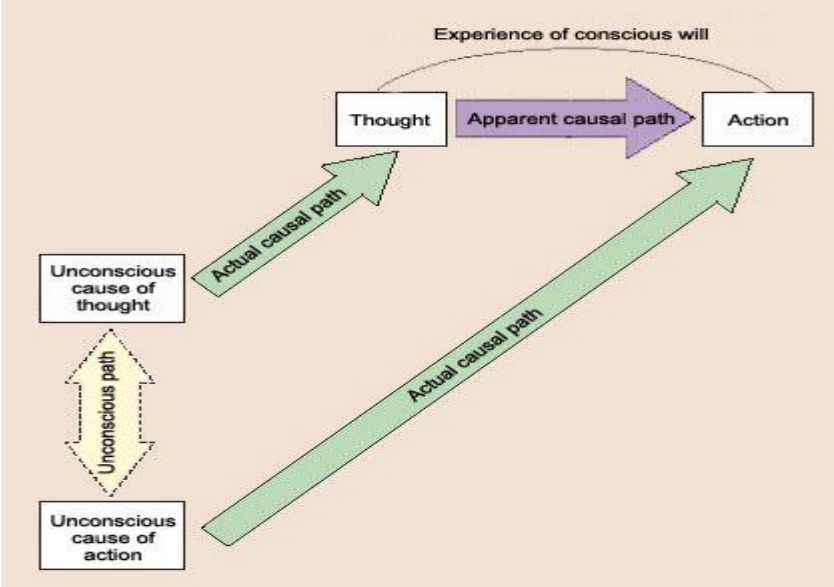


Fig. 1. Reprinted from Wegner (2003)

The problem with this picture is that it seems to put forward a *general* theory of action production. In particular, the theory seems to exclude

all conscious mental states from action production. In the AMC schema, Wegner seems to have left the circumscribed theory of how agentic feelings arise, and entered the metaphysical debate about mental causation. However, I think that this interpretation of his motives should be resisted.

I suggest that we must interpret Wegner's picture of AMC in the broader context of his writings on action. This broader context makes it clear that Wegner believed conscious mental states may be causally contributing towards actions. To begin with, this is how Wegner characterizes the empirical will, the collection of causally sufficient mechanisms of action:

*"Each of our actions is really the culmination of an intricate set of physical and mental processes, including psychological mechanisms that correspond to the traditional concept of will, in that they involve linkages between our thoughts and our actions."* (Wegner, 2002, p. 27; both emphases added).

Earlier in the same book, empirical will is said to involve causal relations between "people's thoughts, beliefs, intentions, plans, or other conscious psychological states and their subsequent actions" (Wegner, 2002, p. 15). Would anyone not familiar with the AMC theory come to conclusion that Wegner is rejecting mental causality upon reading these words? I doubt it. Wegner seems to accept not just the bare possibility, but also the reality of mental causation.

Other passages in his writings tell the same story. In his 2003 article *The mind's best trick* he reproduces the AMC schema from his earlier writings, but immediately adds the proviso: "Does all this mean that conscious thought does not cause action? It does not mean this at all" (Wegner, 2003, p. 68). As if Wegner was aware of the danger that people will read his theory as a defense of the epiphenomenality of conscious mental states, he hastens to fend this reading off. In his 2005 paper

Who is the controller of controlled processes? we read the following words to the same effect:

“Questions of whether thought actually does cause action, for example, have been left in peace, and the issue of the role of consciousness in the causation of action has been ignored as well. This is because the focus [...] is the experience of conscious will, not the operation of the will” (Wegner, 2005, p. 32).

Finally, in replies to the critics of his book *The Illusion of the Conscious Will*, he seems genuinely puzzled why people think he was proposing a general theory of the causal relations between conscious thought and action (Wegner, 2004, p. 683).

Not all interpreters missed these important passages. For instance, Lumer (2014, p. 111f.) draws attention to some of them.<sup>4</sup> But because he believes that Wegner was really denying mental causation, he is perplexed by what looks to him as *ad hoc* retractions. In my view, the quoted passages do express Wegner’s true views on mental causality. The challenge is therefore to show that the AMC picture does not contradict the possibility of real mental causality.

There is no denying that the AMC picture is unfortunate. It does seem to exclude conscious mental states from action causality. Still, we need to keep in mind that Wegner was consistently proposing the AMC theory as the explanation of how the agentive feelings arise, not of the empirical will. It cannot be stressed enough that Wegner never meant to propose a general theory of action production, let alone a theory that would exclude all conscious states from the mechanisms of the empirical will. The AMC theory is a theory about how the causality of action *appears* to a subject. It is literally a theory of *apparent* mental causality. Apparent mental causation, for Wegner, is an inferential process, as we have seen. It depends on the fulfillment of

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<sup>4</sup> See also Schlosser (2012, p. 139), and Walter (2014, p. 2222, fn. 8).

the three conditions of priority, consistency and exclusivity. The fact and mechanisms of apparent mental causality in no way put the causal efficacy of mental states in doubt. On the contrary, apparent mental causation is “fundamentally separate from the mechanistic process of *real mental causation*” (Wegner, 2002, p. 97; emphasis added). This would be an extremely odd way of arguing if Wegner did not believe that there is at least a possibility of real mental causality.

#### **4. From Apparent Mental Causality to Real Mental Causality**

To repeat, Wegner focuses on the subjective feeling of the conscious will, and tries to show that it is not a completely reliable indicator of real action causality. Because of this epistemic unreliability of the conscious will, Wegner suggests, we must use other means to determine whether and how conscious mental states contribute to action causality.<sup>5</sup> He writes:

“If the feeling of conscious will is not authentic, can thought still cause action? Of course it can. The idea that the experience of conscious will is a poor indicator of a causal relation between mind and action is not the same as saying that mind does not have a causal relationship to action. It could, and in fact we all should be fairly certain that it does” (Wegner, 2004, p. 683).

Wegner’s positive proposal is that we use the standard scientific procedures of psychology to determine the actual contribution of

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<sup>5</sup> Note, though, that Wegner does not claim that the feeling of conscious will is *always* illusory; only that it sometimes is. Often, the feelings of agency are veridical, tracking the actions that we do in fact cause (Wegner, 2002, p. 97; Wegner, 2004, pp. 10 and 35). That is, the feelings can be veridical even if they are not appropriately causally hooked up with the systems actually producing actions.

conscious intentions to action. That is, we need to determine “the causality of the person’s conscious thoughts as established by a scientific analysis of their covariation with the person’s behaviour” (Wegner, 2002, p. 14). The way to do it is to treat conscious intentions and other conscious mental states related to action as variables. We test the subject in situations where these states are present and when they are absent. If the absence of the mental state causes a significant difference in the quality of the subject’s performance, we can conclude that the state causally contributed to the subject’s actions.

This view is provocative in that it refuses to take folk-psychological attributions of action causality at face value. But it is in no way a denial of the possibility of real mental causality. On the contrary, the scientific procedure may allow us to establish the reality of mental causation in a very strong, objective sense. A neurophysiological study of Zschorlich and Köhling (2013) provides an example of how this can be done in practice. Zschorlich and Köhling used Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation to test the causal role of conscious intention in wrist movements. The intention was operationalized as a conscious effort to produce a specific movement. Their results speak in favour of a strong causal role of proximal conscious intentions in behavior.<sup>6</sup>

This is not to deny that the causal role of conscious proximal intentions in action is probably quite limited. The subjective accessibility of conscious intentions may seduce us to believe that conscious mental states produce actions *directly*. The picture is that we consciously intend to do something, and the action follows automatically, without the need of the intervening neural mechanisms. Wegner would deny this simple picture of real mental causality. We do not “internally perceive” how our mental states cause our actions.

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<sup>6</sup> Wegner (2004, 36) mentions a couple of earlier scientific attempts to prove the causal effectiveness of conscious intentions.



Mental causality can be real in the sense that mental states can sometimes become a part of the causal nexus of action producing forces. But this causal nexus is a massively complicated business involving a plethora of neural mechanisms. Most of this complex machinery operates below the radar of consciousness. Conscious intentions, decisions etc. are at best only a small part of this vast machinery.

## **5. Conclusion**

Wegner is often thought to present a great obstacle to the defences of mental causality. If my reading of Wegner is correct, these worries are misplaced: he was not questioning the reality of mental causality. His writings explore the subjective feeling of agency, not the underlying causality of human action. My overall impression is that Wegner would not be surprised in the least if it turned out, thanks to science, that our mental states are often causally effective.

The advantage of my reading is that it allows one to interpret Wegner as a consistent thinker. The opposite, common reading of Wegner as the denier of mental causality paints a picture of Wegner as a theorist who rejected all mental causality, but every now and then irrationally remarked that he was not denying mental causation at all. I believe an interpretation that allows the author to be reasonably consistent is preferable to the interpretation that makes her or him deeply irrational.

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