

Yes, We Have Conscious Will

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine Daniel M. Wegner's line of argument against the causal efficacy of conscious will, as presented in Wegner's book *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002). I argue that most of the evidence adduced in the book can be interpreted in ways that do not threaten the efficacy of conscious will. Also, I argue that Wegner's view of conscious will is not an empirical thesis, and that certain views of consciousness and the self are immune to Wegner's line of argument.

Introduction

In this paper I will assess Daniel M. Wegner's line of argument against the causal efficacy of conscious will, as presented in his book *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (hereafter cited as ICW).¹ In sections 1-4 of the paper I will examine the nature of Wegner's thesis about the illusory character of conscious will. While doing this I will explore some concepts and terms used in his argument. In sections 5-10 I will show that much of the evidence Wegner uses can be interpreted in ways that do not support his conclusions. Also, I will suggest that some of Wegner's interpretations of the evidence

beg important philosophical questions. In section 11 I will point out some views of self and of consciousness that appear to be immune to Wegner's argument against conscious will. Section 12 contains some concluding remarks.

In composing this reply to Wegner, I drew on the work of many other authors, including earlier critics of ICW. In some cases I have adopted these critics' arguments intact or nearly so. All of these debts are acknowledged in the text or in the endnotes.

1. Wegner's Determinism vs. Ordinary Causal Determinism

Before I begin, let me try to situate Wegner's thesis within the overall free will vs. determinism debate.

According to Wegner, conscious will is to be regarded as a feeling (ICW pp. 1-28, especially p. 3). As the title of his book suggests, Wegner argues that this feeling is an illusion. By this he means that "*the experience of consciously willing an action is not a direct indication that the conscious thought has caused the action*" (ICW, p. 2; italics in original). In other words, conscious will is only a feeling that makes it seem to us that we are consciously originating our actions. According to this view, the real sources of our actions are unconscious, and often have little to do with our conscious reasons for action (ICW, especially pp. 26-28).

Wegner's critique of conscious will is deterministic, but it goes beyond the physical determinism that philosophers traditionally view as a threat to free will. Many philosophers today are *compatibilists*: they hold that free will could exist even if the universe were governed by causal determinism. (For the record, I am a compatibilist.²) The paradigmatic image of the causal determination of our wills is, perhaps, Laplace's famous claim that a being with complete knowledge of the present state of the universe also could know the entire future (Laplace 1902, p. 4)³. Compatibilists typically hold that this kind of causal determination would not rule out our actions being free, on some

understanding of what it means to be free. But Wegner goes farther than Laplace. Wegner's critique does not merely imply that our conscious choices ultimately are determined by previous causes. Instead, it implies that we do not really make consciously willed choices, in any objective sense, at all. Many of us hold that determinism of the Laplacian sort is not a real threat to our status as conscious doers. This assessment does not carry over to Wegner's deterministic thesis. If Wegner is right, then we are not merely predictable conscious doers, as in Laplace's scenario. Instead, we are not conscious doers in any authentic sense at all. What is more, Wegner's view implies that we are not even clear-headed enough to recognize that fact.⁴ Thus, Wegner's determinism strikes at the heart of the concept of a person in a way that physical determinism alone does not.

Wegner speaks of his argument as a way of combining conscious will and determinism (ICW, pp. 2, 26). However, he argues elsewhere (pp. 318-325) that the problem of free will vs. determinism, at least in its traditional form, is misconceived. Wegner even dismisses the philosophical literature on this problem as "shocking in its inconclusiveness" (ICW, p. 26). I would say that Wegner has not managed to combine *real* conscious will with determinism (see section 2 below), and that the traditional problem of freedom vs. determinism remains as important as ever. In any case, Wegner's deterministic view goes beyond the usual parameters of the freedom-determinism debate by portraying human action, not only as constrained and predictable, but as (one might say) puppetlike. Saying that our conscious will is an *illusion* is different from merely saying that our conscious will is *predictable*. Wegner's determinism is not the only possible version of determinism. One does not need to believe Wegner's version to be a determinist.

2. Is "Illusion" the Right Word?

Next I will make a few remarks about Wegner's claim that conscious will is an illusion. I am not the first to wonder whether the word "illusion" really fits. Other authors,

including Wegner himself, have cast doubt upon the suitability of this word. According to Wegner, certain other words, including “construction,” would be as good as “illusion” to describe the nature of conscious will (ICW, p. 2 footnote).⁵ Other authors (for example Heyman (2004), Jack and Robbins (2004), Ainslie (2004)) have suggested, in various ways, that the concept of illusion does not fit well with Wegner’s evidence about conscious will. Here I will state my own view on this topic—a view that agrees with or overlaps that of several earlier authors.

Reread the quote from Wegner near the beginning of Section 1 in this paper. Think carefully about that statement. If the experience of conscious will does not tell us directly about the causation of our actions, then the experience of conscious will is not what we sometimes think it is. But is it an *illusion*?

Wegner admits that conscious will is more than just a mistake. He points out that the feeling of conscious will often accurately indicates mental cause and effect (ICW, pp. 15, 327), and that this feeling can help people become more effective in their actions (ICW, chapter 9). He even calls this feeling “the mind’s compass.” (ICW, p. 317) In reading these parts of the book, one gets the impression that conscious will is more like a half-accurate perception than like an illusion. The feeling of conscious will might not be direct awareness of a causal relationship. But does that really matter, if it is good enough *indirect* evidence? (See Ainslie (2004) for ideas relevant to this last point.)

The word “illusion,” as used in ICW, bears a heavy rhetorical and ideological load. Wegner has fully acknowledged this fact (ICW, p. 2 note; 2004b, p. 682). Perhaps the heaviest part of this load is a strong suggestion of unreality—a suggestion that goes beyond the mere claim that the feeling of conscious will is a fallible and indirect indicator of the truth. The claim that conscious will is *illusory* is a stronger expression of skepticism than is the alternative claim that conscious will is less powerful and important than we usually think it is.

Wegner’s definition of “conscious will” raises other questions. Early in his book (ICW,

p. 3), Wegner claims that conscious will is a kind of feeling. As Hardcastle (2004) has pointed out, this seems incorrect, for the experience of a thing is not the thing experienced. This is an extremely important point. Consider this example (which is not Hardcastle's): One could say "I willed that I would get up from the chair, and I felt that I was willing it." This sentence might not occur in ordinary speech outside of discussions about will and willpower, but still it reflects the standard usage of the word "will." The feeling of conscious will is a *feeling* that one is willing something. Having this feeling is not the same as willing something. Wegner acknowledges this seeming discrepancy (ICW, p. 3), and uses a Humean argument to equate conscious will to the feeling of conscious will (ICW, pp. 3, 13-14).⁶ However, an abuse of language still is an abuse of language, even if the name of Hume can be invoked in its favor.

Other authors have raised objections in the same vein. Ainslie (2004) has questioned the identification of conscious will with what Wegner (ICW, p. 317) calls "the mind's compass." Jack and Robbins (2004) have pointed out the difference between will and the experience of will.

The distinction between conscious will as a feeling, and some other kind of will, is not foreign to ICW. Wegner introduces the notion of "empirical will" (ICW, p. 14), and claims that this is real and causally efficacious, and that the feeling of conscious will sometimes (but not always) reflects this empirical will (ICW, pp. 15, 327).

3. Confabulations or Historical Reconstructions?

Wegner suggests that the explanations we give for our actions often are confabulations—that is, fictional stories manufactured in the brain (ICW, pp. 171-184). We have to be very cautious about this claim, for the following reason.

First, a confabulation may not always be just a made-up story. It also can be a reconstruction of past events, based on indirect evidence. Suppose that I drink a glass of

water, and then tell a story about the origin of my action (“I thought it would benefit my health”). Suppose neuroscience shows that my conscious thought played no part in the immediate causation of the action, but appeared after the fact, in the wake of the action. Do these facts alone imply that my story is a mere fiction? They do not! For all we know, the confabulation might be a fairly accurate historical reconstruction of what happened in my brain. Perhaps my brain monitored my current behavior, together with past circumstances that predisposed me to behave that way (like my past health worries and my drinking of water in connection with these worries), and then fabricated a fairly good guess about what led up to my action. This indirect way of knowing why I did things is not infallible, but it may be good enough for many purposes. Dismissing it as mere “confabulation” seems rather silly. To call the story a “confabulation” instead of a “historical reconstruction” is to beg the question of the reliability of the story.

Human observers often reconstruct recent past events in their external surroundings in much this way. Often we do this intuitively and very quickly, without any apparent reasoning. (“I saw broken glass and tire marks in the street, so I knew there had been a car accident.” “I heard the cry of a baby from next door, so I knew the neighbors had finally had their baby.” “I saw ketchup on the ceiling, so I knew my nephew Boris was visiting again.”) Such impromptu explanations, based on memories or other traces of past events, often are remarkably accurate.⁷ These explanations are stories based partly on guesses—but we should not demean these stories by calling them “confabulations.” These stories are nothing less than historical reconstructions of an informal kind. Why couldn’t our brains do the same thing to explain our actions? Perhaps our brains are natural born amateur historians. (In view of their evolutionary history, wouldn’t they have to be?)

By making this point, I am not claiming that our pronouncements about the origins of our actions are infallible or “direct.” I am only pointing out that we cannot dismiss these pronouncements as mere confabulations. Perhaps these stories are after-the-fact reconstructions based on incomplete information. However, calling them “confabulations” serves no useful purpose—though this word may have a rhetorical

effect by creating a feeling of the uselessness of conscious will. (For most of us, it is easier to dismiss a “confabulation” than to dismiss a “historical reconstruction”!)

An adherent of ICW might reply that these reconstructions are too inaccurate to be trusted even provisionally. This reply is refuted by the fact that the reconstructions often are accurate, and that we often rely on them without bad results. Nevertheless, ICW is full of examples that seem to support the inaccuracy of our feelings of will. Later in this paper I will defuse many of these examples, by pointing out alternative interpretations that suggest the feeling is more accurate than one might think.

4. What Is an Action?

One pervasive and puzzling feature of Wegner’s line of argument is the conception of action that it seems to require. This conception is clearest in Wegner’s account of *automatisms*—behaviors that appear, from the outside, to be conscious, but that are not consciously willed by the person having the behavior.

An automatism is a series of movements that appears to be a conscious action, but is not accompanied by a feeling of conscious will. Evidently, Wegner regards automatisms as actions unaccompanied by the feeling of conscious will (ICW, pp. 9, 11). This conception of automatisms lends support to Wegner’s general thesis about the disconnection between action and the feeling of conscious will (see especially ICW, pp. 143-144).⁸ But there is another way to interpret automatisms: we can simply recognize that an unwilled sequence of movements *is not an action at all*. Philosophers have long recognized that an action-like movement of the human body need not be an action.⁹

The following ugly example illustrates this view. Suppose John has just become brain dead, and some form of artificial electrical stimulation of the peripheral nerves causes his arm to make the movements ordinarily called “reaching for a glass of water.” Suppose that these movements look very lifelike; the overall motion is not some jerky

approximation, but is the “real thing” from a purely mechanical standpoint. Would this be an action? According to the standard prephilosophical usage of the word “action,” this would *not* be an action. It would be a sequence of bodily movements, but calling it an action would be an abuse of language. Now roll back time to when John is alive and well. Suppose that he performs a very similar sequence of movements twice: once when wide awake and reaching for a glass of water, and once when deeply anesthetized and under electronic stimulation of the peripheral nerves. Suppose that these two sequences of bodily movements are mechanically identical for all practical purposes, and also are mechanically identical, for all practical purposes, to the movements we saw after John’s death. Are all of these sequences of movements *actions*? No, they are not. Only the movement made while John is awake is an action.

This example, by itself, does not push any claims about the feeling of conscious will. It simply points out that our prephilosophical notion of action does not cover just any sequence of movements that happens to look like an action. An action-like sequence of movements, by itself, does not necessarily count as an action. There are other conditions that must be met for movements to be actions. This is not merely a peculiarity of the prephilosophical notion of action. Philosophers of action also have recognized that bodily movements must meet specific conditions to qualify as actions.¹⁰

A skeptic might say that all this is irrelevant, and that a sequence of movements that looks like an action just *is* an action, period. But then the skeptic would be redefining the word “action” to such an extent that the word no longer corresponds to standard usage. This is just a fallacy of redefinition. When ordinary people worry about whether their actions are freely willed, the “actions” they are worrying about are not actions in the skeptic’s sense, but actions in the standard sense. The skeptic also would be begging a host of philosophical questions about the relationship between actions and physical movements. But that topic will have to wait until the next section of the paper.

Viewed in this light, Wegner’s use of “action” to encompass things like automatisms is just an abuse of language. One wonders how much this abuse of language influences the

rhetorical pull of Wegner's argument. If you count automatisms as actions from the outset, then how hard can it be to show that actions aren't much more than automatisms? But aside from this linguistic and rhetorical issue, there is a deeper conceptual issue at stake. This has to do with the ontology of actions, and more specifically, with the individuation of actions.

5. The Individuation of Actions

The line of argument in ICW makes much of the idea that our conscious thoughts sometimes do not cause the actions they purport to explain. Wegner cites examples in which people come up with reasons for their actions *after* they act—reasons that seemingly did not exist in their minds before they acted (ICW, pp. 149-151, 171-186). Let us temporarily grant, for the sake of argument, that many or all of the actions we believe are caused by our conscious thoughts are not actually caused by those thoughts, which only come later. Then consider the following typical scenario.

Suppose that I reach for a glass of water. A second or two after I do this, someone asks me why I reached for the glass. I reply that I was thirsty. However, I did not think about being thirsty when I was reaching for the glass; this behavior “just happened.” Afterwards, I think that I reached for the glass because I was thirsty.

This would seem to be a perfect case in support of Wegner's thesis. It looks as though my thought played no role in my action—and that I mistakenly believed it did play a role. But think again! Before we accept this easy interpretation, we should look more carefully at the concept of *action*.

Consider the water glass example of two paragraphs ago. Imagine a parallel scenario in which I perform the same bodily movements, but then have a different conscious thought: I think that I reached for the glass because water is good for my health. In this alternate scenario, I have performed an action. But is this action *the same action* as in the first

scenario? One feels intuitively that it is *not quite* the same action.

The problem of the individuation of actions is a recognized philosophical problem.¹¹ I will not try to review the literature on this topic, nor will I adopt any particular account of the individuation of actions.¹² Instead, I will show that the very existence of this problem raises serious doubts about some of Wegner's claims concerning human action.

Consider these three actions:

- (1) my drinking a glass of water when I am thirsty
- (2) my drinking a glass of water when I am not thirsty, but have long believed in the health benefits of drinking lots of water
- (3) my drinking a glass of water when I am not thirsty, but am about to go hiking in the desert

These three actions may involve sequences of bodily movements that are, for all intents and purposes, the same. However, these three sequences of movements “fit in” with my past, present, and future history in different ways. The first action is a satiation of thirst. It coheres with the biological fact that I am now slightly dehydrated. The second action is an act of hygiene. It coheres with my previous thoughts, worries, and doctor visits in a way that the first action does not. The third action is an act of preparation. It coheres with my projected future behavior: because I am about to go into the desert, the act of drinking the water is not a mere movement, but is a safety measure. Biologically, it is a strongly survival-positive act.

Are these three actions really just exact copies of each other? If I did (2) instead of (1), would I be doing the same action that I otherwise would have done? What if I did (3) instead of (2)?

I am not proposing answers to these last two questions. I am merely pointing out that the

answers are not immediately obvious.

Interestingly, the third action might be the action that it is, not only because of my beliefs about my future, but because of the way my future really will be. If I were merely under a delusion that I was about to go hiking in the desert, would drinking the water be the same action described in (3)? Philosophers have long considered that actions or events might be individuated by their effects¹³—and, of course, these effects are in the *future* of the action or event. Thus, we should not rule out offhand the possibility that future circumstances make present actions the actions that they are. (Needless to say, there is nothing truly mysterious about this, and there is no hint of reverse causation.)

By giving these examples, I am not trying to show conclusively that actions can be individuated by the circumstances mentioned in the examples. Also, I am not going to defend any particular account of individuation here. My point is that it is *not* blatantly obvious that actions are *not* individuated by such circumstances. We are not entitled to dismiss this possibility out of hand. The question “Which past, present, or future circumstances make an action what it is?” is a question that cannot be answered off the top of one’s head. Philosophical reasoning is required. Philosophers have devoted serious effort to this nontrivial question.

Actions might be individuated by circumstances besides the bodily movements involved in the actions. The situations that precede an action might play roles in the individuation of the action. The situations that *follow* an action also might play roles in the individuation of the action. This last point is especially cogent for the effects of an action.

What does all this have to do with Wegner’s arguments?

Let us go back to the first water glass example near the beginning of this section. When I pick up the glass, I do not yet have a conscious thought of my reason for reaching for the glass. Later I have such a thought. The thought comes later than the action, so seemingly

it can play no role in the making of the action. But does this really follow? We know that the thought played no role in *causing* the action. However, we have not ruled out the possibility that the thought plays a part in the *individuation* of the action. After all, an action's effects can help to individuate the action—or at least we cannot dismiss offhand the possibility that they do. Perhaps the thought about being thirsty helps to individuate the action in this way. Perhaps if the thought had not occurred, the movement would not have been the action that it is. Then it would be true to say that the conscious thought, though causally irrelevant to the *movement*, is necessary for the occurrence of the *action*. Without the conscious thought, the same movement would have occurred—but the movement would not have been *that* action. The movement would have occurred; the action, as it actually did occur, would not have occurred.

The upshot is that our actions may depend upon our thoughts, even if the thoughts do not cause the actions. Our conscious thoughts can play roles in our actions, not only by causing physical movements, but by helping to individuate the actions—by making an individual action what it is. In effect, conscious thoughts can transform bodily movements into actions. The relationship between an action and the thought explaining it might not be a causal relationship, with the thought causing the action. Instead, it might be a logical and conceptual relationship grounded in individuation.

Note that I when I said “transform bodily movements into actions,” I was not speaking of a fictitious or illusory transformation. An adherent of ICW might be able to live with that phrase if I added a disclaimer like this: “ ‘Transform bodily movements into actions’ really means ‘make the brain interpret bodily movements as actions.’” But I will not add such a disclaimer, for that is not what I meant. I was speaking of the *real* individuation of *real* actions. In the scenario I described, conscious thought does not only make the physical movement seem like an action—*it really makes the physical movement into an action*. The thought's occurrence insures that the movement belongs to a different ontological category, and hence is a different kind of item, which the movement would not be if the thought did not happen.

Needless to say, one cannot read the word “makes” naively here. The thought might not exert any causal influence on the physical movement, or on the action. But still, the conscious thought insures that the movement is an action. The thought “makes” the movement into an action in a logical and ontological sense of “makes.” It “makes” the movement into an action in roughly the same way that being human, adult, male and never-married at the same time makes one a bachelor.¹⁴

Again, I should stress that I am not defending any particular account of the individuation of actions. My suggestions about individuation by conscious thought might turn out to be correct, or might need revision. But the mere existence of open questions about individuation of actions casts serious doubt upon Wegner’s argument. If certain views of individuation turn out to be right, we might be correct in believing that our actions cannot occur without the conscious thoughts that seem to explain them. We might be correct even if the thoughts come after the actions. Perhaps if you did not have the thought, the bodily movement you made would not be the action that it is. *That* action would not have existed. In its place would be some other action—or perhaps only an automatism—involving the same sequence of bodily motions as *that* action.

This argument about the individuation of action gives us two separate ways to undermine Wegner’s thesis.

First, this argument suggests that the feeling of conscious will could be a good indicator of real doing, even if that feeling fails to trace the causal origins of actions. Suppose that the after-the-fact conscious thought, which seems to explain an action, really plays a role in the individuation of that action. If the presence of such a thought is what makes a mere movement into an action, then we are quite right in feeling that the thought “adds something” to the action, and even makes the action what it is. In this case, the feeling of conscious will is trustworthy. If you feel certain that your conscious reason for acting really explains your action, then your conscious thought is in fact responsible for that action’s existence. This is the case even if your conscious thoughts do not *cause* the actions they describe.

The second undermining argument is similar, except that the feeling of conscious will takes the place of a conscious thought. It could be the case that the feeling of conscious will itself helps to individuate the actions that it accompanies. If this is the case, then the feeling of conscious will might be a very good indicator of the presence of real action.

One can reach similar conclusions without considering the individuation of actions, by noting that the feeling of conscious will can be *logically necessary* for the action to occur as it does, without actually being the cause of the action. See Krueger (2004) for discussion of a possibility of this general sort. This is a third way to undermine Wegner's argument.

In this paper, I will not try to show conclusively that any of the above three undermining arguments is right. I am only pointing out that if any of them were right, Wegner's argument for the illusoriness of conscious will would be in trouble. The existence of this open question about individuation leaves an opening for accounts of individuation that undermine Wegner's argument. This further implies that Wegner's argument depends implicitly upon ignoring the possibility that certain accounts of individuation are true. However, the truth of these accounts is a philosophical problem, not a scientific one. Thus, Wegner's treatment of action actually depends on a strong nonempirical philosophical commitment. *A fortiori*, Wegner's argument for the illusoriness of conscious will is not entirely a scientific argument.

The existence of open questions about individuation of actions also casts doubt upon the the concept of unwilled action. Once we have admitted that the circumstances surrounding a sequence of movements can individuate an action, we have opened the door to the possibility that a movement physically resembling an action might not be an action at all. As I stated earlier, Wegner's treatment of automatism as actions involves an abuse of language. The study of individuation of actions shows that the difficulty is not merely linguistic. We cannot freely assume that so-called unwilled actions really are actions—for there may be action-like sequence of movements that are not actions. If

such a sequence takes place under appropriate circumstances (like automatism, hypnosis, or artificial brain stimulation, all of which are discussed in ICW¹⁵), then it might not be an action at all. If there were no genuine unwilled actions, Wegner's view of the separation of action and conscious will would be considerably less plausible.

6. Individuation of Actions and Hypnotic Suggestion

Wegner uses cases of hypnotic suggestion as evidence for the separation between action and the feeling of conscious will. In these cases, the subject of hypnosis performs actions suggested by the hypnotist—yet the subject feels that the actions are his own, and even comes up with reasons why he did them. In one case cited by Wegner, the subject was told to shelve a book that was lying on a table, then later claimed that she did it because the book on the table looked “untidy” (ICW, p. 149). My earlier argument about the individuation of actions suggests a different way to interpret these cases. (As I will point out later, this interpretation has something of a precedent in Ainslie (2004).)

First, note that hypnotic suggestion never is the sole cause of the hypnotic subject's action. Past states of the subject's neural apparatus also causally influence the action. The suggestion can cause nothing without the help of this apparatus, which is laden with capacities and dispositions. The hypnotic suggestion is only one of many causal influences on the final action. The action still originates within the subject.¹⁶ (Those of us who think about these hypnotic suggestion cases may tend to underrate the role of other influences besides the suggestion. These other causes are at least as important, and presumably are more important than the single brief input of a suggestion.)

Next, note that non-hypnotic circumstances could lead the subject to perform the same bodily movements that occurred after hypnosis. Without hypnosis, the subject could have moved the book for many reasons—including the stated reason involving untidiness. There are many sets of possible circumstances that could have led the *unhypnotized* subject to perform the same bodily movements for the same reason that the

hypnotized subject gave. For example, if there was a disorderly pile of toys next to the book, the subject might have been more strongly inclined to move the book for tidiness' sake. If the subject had just been to a library, then the subject might have been thinking of neatly shelved books before looking at the table, and might have reacted more vigorously to an out-of-place book—and moved it for tidiness' sake. And so forth. Even in cases involving bizarre actions (like the one discussed in ICW, p. 150), one can make up a story about *reasons*—a story which, if true, would make the subject's bodily movements well-motivated. One can think up enough possible combinations of thoughts, emotions, mischievous impulses, and so forth to show that a wide variety of posthypnotic behaviors could occur under the right non-hypnotic circumstances.

In the hypnotic cases in question, the subject makes certain movements and then claims to have a reason for those movements. Under suitable nonhypnotic circumstances, the subject would have made those same movements for that same reason—but in that case, we would classify the reason as a plausible reason. This implies that the subject has the capability of doing those very movements for that very reason. Before being hypnotized, the subject already had capabilities for doing many different sequences of movements for various reasons. I am speaking here of “good” reasons—that is, reasons that would seem sensible and that would seem to us to justify the bodily motions. Many different “motion-reason pairs” of this sort lie within the capability of the subject.

In ICW's favored interpretation of hypnotic suggestion cases like this (ICW, pp. 149-151), the subject makes the movements for no reason (but with a cause), and then invents a bogus reason. However, there is an alternative interpretation: one could suppose that the process of suggestion does not just cause a movement, but causes the subject to *do an action for a reason*. When the subject does the action, the stated reason really is the reason for the action—but the subject has been caused *to do the action for that reason*. The process of suggestion does not only cause a bodily movement; it also brings a reason to light. It brings a possible “motion-reason pair” into actuality. One could say that the suggestion activates one of the subject's preexisting capabilities for performing a motion for a reason, and causes the subject to exercise that capacity.

An adherent of ICW might object to all this as follows: the subject could not have been doing the action for the stated reason, because the subject was not thinking of the reason before the action occurred. My earlier discussion of the individuation of actions should put this objection to rest. A bodily movement may become an action because of the contents of a thought that happens later in time. Perhaps this is what happens in the hypnotic suggestion cases.

In cases like these, one can view hypnotic suggestion as a process in which the hypnotist causes the subject to perform a series of movements, and also causes the subject to discover one of the possible good reasons for that movement. Perhaps the hypnotist causes this discovery indirectly (by causing the movements first) and even inadvertently—but nevertheless, the subject does manage to find a reason as a result of the suggestion. This reason is sufficient to justify the subject's movements. Because of the way actions are individuated, the reason is a genuine reason for those movements. One cannot say that the reason was entirely made up on the spur of the moment, because the reason had real precedents in the subject's preexisting capabilities to perform actions for reasons.

According to this interpretation, hypnotic suggestion does not represent a failure of conscious will as much as a *disturbance of mental focus*. The hypnotist did not simply control the subject like a marionette. Instead, the hypnotist caused the subject to focus on an already existing possibility for action—a possibility that the subject otherwise might not have noticed. The hypnotist is not a puppetmaster as much as a *magician*—one who misdirects the attention of a relatively passive subject. A magician usually directs one's attention to an external object or event, causing one to overlook the mechanism of the trick. The hypnotist directs one's attention (or perhaps deeper levels of neural processing) to a possible action, causing one to overlook other possible actions and their reasons.

This interpretation of hypnotic suggestion does not imply that the hypnotic subject is

morally responsible for the suggested action. One can argue that the hypnotic subject is in a state of diminished moral responsibility, even though the action is a genuine action and is done for a reason. Perhaps one could argue that the subject is not morally responsible for the action because the subject was directed away from other possible courses of action and did not have a fair chance to choose among them. One could say that hypnotic suggestion sharply reduces a person's ability to choose, but does not eliminate the person's ability to act. (The subject still can choose the details of how to carry out the suggested action.)

This interpretation upends Wegner's use of hypnotic cases as examples of an inaccurate feeling of conscious will. If a feeling of conscious will occurs in these cases,¹⁷ then according to this interpretation, that feeling is accurate. The suggested action is a genuine action. Perhaps it is best to describe these cases as cases of *conscious* will with severely limited *freedom* of will.

Ainslie (2004), commenting on Wegner's work (2004a), pointed out that magnetic brain stimulation can "predispose directly to one alternative" among possible behaviors of the subject (Ainslie, 2004, p. 660). This suggestion about brain stimulation seems quite close to what I just said about hypnosis, though of course hypnosis and brain stimulation are quite different in their mechanics.

7. Split Brain Cases

Wegner points to split brain cases as examples of confabulation (ICW, pp. 181-184). In the most interesting of these cases, the right brain receives a stimulus and initiates behavior; then the left brain (which in most people controls speech) originates an utterance about the reason for the behavior. Sometimes this reason seems to have nothing to do with the original stimulus. In one example (ICW, pp. 182-184), which I summarize fairly closely here, the subject viewed pictures in an experimental setup that insured that each hemisphere received different pictures. Then the subject observed other

pictures in the normal way, and selected pictures pertinent to the pictures in the first set. The right hemisphere was shown a snow scene. Later, the hand controlled by the right hemisphere pointed out a picture of a shovel. The left hemisphere was shown a chicken claw; then the hand controlled by the left hemisphere pointed out a chicken. So far, so good. The trouble is that the subject later claimed to have selected the shovel because of its pertinence to the *chicken claw*, not to the snow scene. The subject is quoted as saying "...you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed" (ICW, p. 184). This reason, standing alone, sounds sensible enough. The problem is that the hand which pointed out the shovel was not controlled by the left hemisphere—so the left hemisphere's stated reason for pointing out the shovel seemingly could not have been the true reason for that choice.

After reading this example, it is easy to feel that the explanation originating from the left hemisphere must be bogus, on the grounds that the left hemisphere did not cause the action. Indeed, Wegner takes examples like these to be examples of confabulation (ICW, p. 181). It is not hard to see how this supports Wegner's view that conscious will is illusory.

There is another interpretation that does not lend support to Wegner's view. To find this interpretation, we must recognize that the two sides of a split brain are not as separate as we usually think. The right and left hemispheres of a split brain patient do interact; they are causally connected in various ways (see Marks (1980), pp. 17-19, 26-28). The severance of the corpus callosum does not stop all interaction, or all causal connections, between the hemispheres; it only closes off the main channel. There are ongoing interactions between the hemispheres, which occur even when the corpus callosum is severed (see Marks (1980), pp. 17-19, 26-28). Some sort of physical interaction is inevitable as long as the two hemispheres sit side by side in the same living body, bathed in the same fluids, interacting with the same organs. Therefore, not all the neural events causally influencing the action (the choice of the shovel) were in the right hemisphere. The left hemisphere interacted with the right hemisphere during the period when the action was developing. Hence there was a *single physical process*, involving both

hemispheres, that led up to the act of pointing to the shovel. The fact that the left hemisphere was involved only in a marginal way does not change this fact. After all, a loosely connected physical process still is a physical process.

The right hemisphere's unstated reason for the choice (you need a shovel to deal with the snow) was a good fit to the observed behavior. That reason alone would be enough to justify the behavior. But the left hemisphere's stated reason, alone, *also* could fully justify the behavior. Thus, either of these reasons can justify the action originated by the *single* overall brain process. Instead of saying that the right hemisphere had the real reason and the left hemisphere had a fake reason, why not just say that *both* hemispheres had sensible reasons for the action—an action caused by a single physical process involving *both* hemispheres?

On this view, the action occurs, not for one reason, but for two. There is nothing mysterious about an action having multiple reasons. All of us sometimes act for multiple reasons. ("I'm going to eat the yogurt because I'm hungry, and also because it's good for my health.") The split brain case differs from these standard cases in two respects: the subject can talk only about one of the reasons, and one hemisphere does almost all the work of initiating behavior.

Applying our earlier remarks on the individuation of actions, we find that the left hemisphere plays a role in individuating the action of choosing the shovel. Even if the left hemisphere did not make up the reason until after the right hemisphere acted, the left hemisphere's reason still could play a role in making the action into *that* action and not some other. The marginality of the left hemisphere's role in causing the movement does not change this. There is no rule against a single action being caused by events that influence each other only weakly.

According to this view, the feeling of conscious will is not an illusion in this split brain case and others like it. The left hemisphere did participate in the causal origination of the action (albeit marginally), and the left hemisphere helped to make the action what it

finally was.

8. Illusion of Control, or Simple Mistake?

Wegner presents cases of the “illusion of control,”¹⁸ in which we feel we are consciously willing something that we do not in fact control (ICW, pp. 9-11). In one of Wegner’s examples (ICW, pp. 9-10), a person feels he is controlling items on the screen of a computer game when actually the joystick is not affecting the screen at all. Wegner claims this is an instance in which the feeling of conscious will exists without real doing (ICW, p. 9).

O’Connor (2005, p. 224) has shown clearly why Wegner’s interpretation of these cases is wrong. According to O’Connor’s alternative interpretation, cases like the joystick case do not involve false feelings of doing; instead, they involve mistakes about how far the effects of one’s actions extend. (Jiggling the joystick is what you are doing. Your feeling of conscious will is correct. However, your belief that things on the screen are affected by your action is mistaken.) O’Connor also argues (2005, p. 224) that one of Wegner’s examples involves only belief change, not a real illusion of control. These alternative interpretations weaken Wegner’s case by eliminating so-called illusions of control as plausible instances of false conscious will.

Another alternative, a slight variation on O’Connor’s idea, would be to say that you can be mistaken about which physical events are *parts* of your action. (Your action at the computer includes your jiggling the joystick, but you only think it includes the movements of items on the screen.) This interpretation is plausible because the spatiotemporal extent of an action can sometimes be hard to determine.¹⁹ This kind of error may be what happens in cases of the movement of phantom limbs, as described in ICW (pp. 40-44). (See Ainslie (2004) for an analysis of phantom limb movements consistent with this view.)

This mistake about parts of actions also may account for what happens when subjects seemingly take other people's movements to be their own doing (as in ICW, pp. 41). Perhaps we could describe these cases as follows: a person performs a real *mental* action, and then mistakenly thinks that a non-mental bodily movement (someone else's) was part of the action. (Wegner recognizes that mental actions are legitimate actions (ICW, p. 44).) Alternatively, we might invoke O'Connor's interpretation in its original form, and say that the person mistakenly believes the bodily movement was an effect of the mental action. Either of these interpretations undermines the claim that there was an illusion of doing. Instead, there were only mistakes about the details.

9. A Note on the *I Spy* Experiment

Another case akin to the "illusion of control" cases is the "*I Spy*" experiment described in ICW (pp. 74-78). (The original reference is Wegner and Wheatley (1999).) This experiment involved a situation in which two persons (a real subject and a confederate of the experimenter) acted together to move one object (a sort of computer mouse). The subject had to report, on a 0-to-100 scale, how much influence his or her own actions had on the resulting events. This experiment showed (among other things) that the subjects could not always tell when they, and not the confederate, were stopping the movement of the mouse. This seemingly showed that a person's feeling of conscious action can be inaccurate. However, there is a simpler interpretation. By consenting to the experiment, the subject already has, in effect, agreed to be a coauthor of a set of physical movements—at least to the extent of helping to move the mouse. Thus, in a sense, the subject is a co-originator of the movements, even when the immediate cause of some of the movements is the activity of another person. On this interpretation, the subject is not mistaken about whether he or she is acting, but is only misestimating the extent of his or her contribution to the action, while performing an action jointly with another person. This is another variant of the misestimation of the extent of one's actions—a phenomenon that I discussed in the previous section.

10. Action Projection, or Two Other Simple Mistakes?

Wegner points to cases of “action projection” as examples of failures to recognize that we are doing something (ICW, chap. 6). In some of the cases he cites (such as the famous “Clever Hans” case), a person influences another organism through unconscious bodily movements, and attributes the resulting action to the other organism. (In the Clever Hans case, the other organism was a horse.) According to Wegner, “the sense of authorship” is disrupted in these cases (ICW, p. 187). However, we can easily find an alternative interpretation of these cases. Earlier I raised the possibility that an action that is not consciously willed is not really an action at all. If that is the case, then the person doing the influencing is *not* performing an action, and has no authorship to lose. Instead, that person is simply undergoing *movements*, not doing an action—and the movements cause the other organism to perform actions (or perhaps just movements). There is no real misattribution of actions.

The preceding argument does not apply to all cases of “action projection,” but only to the ones associated with what Wegner calls “*The Inaction Fiction*” (ICW, p. 218; italics in original)—namely, the erroneous belief that one is not doing anything to influence the other subject. In other case of “action projection,” the person knows he is doing something to, or with, the other subject (ICW, pp. 218-220). These other cases involve mistakes about the causes, effects, or extent of one’s actions, or mistakes about other subjects’ actions—but not mistakes about whether one is “doing.” The mistakes in these cases are much like the errors involved in the “illusions of control” that I discussed earlier; one misjudges the effects or extent of one’s actions. Interpreted this way, these cases of so-called “action projection” do not pose a threat to the belief that one really is doing something.

11. A Larger and Divided Self

The ultimate challenge to Wegner's thesis comes from the possibility that the conscious self may be larger than it seems. By this I mean the following: (1) Much of what we consider unconscious processing might actually be conscious in some sense. (2) Many supposed instances of divided consciousness might not amount to real divisions of the conscious subject. I will explore these two possibilities in turn.

Block has suggested that contents in "the Freudian unconscious" might actually be conscious, provided we understand this consciousness as "phenomenal consciousness" and not as "access consciousness" (Block 1996, p. 457). According to Block's suggestion, such a content might be "experienced" (Block 1996, p. 457), even if the subject cannot know about this experience in the customary way. Elsewhere I have concurred with Block's view; I have suggested that much of what psychology traditionally calls "the unconscious" actually is conscious in the sense that it is associated with a way things seem (Sharlow 2001, pp. 230-234).²⁰ Perhaps some of the mental or neural processes that we regard as unconscious really are conscious. Perhaps these processes even give rise to full-blown phenomenal experiences, but the subject cannot know about these experiences. Presumably this would be a special case of a known phenomenon: failure of metacognition.²¹ (It also might be a special case of what Wegner calls "deep activation" (ICW, pp. 163-164).)

We also must face the possibility that so-called divisions in consciousness are not as divisive as they seem. Split brain cases provide the most dramatic examples of supposed disunity of consciousness—yet one can argue that this disunity is only intermittent and does not affect the unity of the mind itself (Marks, 1980). One even can argue that a split brain patient has a single consciousness at all times—a consciousness that has all of the conscious phenomenology associated with either hemisphere, but which (in a certain sense) does not have all of that phenomenology *together*. I explored this possibility in Sharlow (2001, chaps. 11-12). Using a notion of "subject" that equates a subject to a

single persisting consciousness (pp. 89-111, 215), I suggested that things can seem one way to a subject, and also seem another way to the subject, without it ever seeming to the subject that things are both ways at once. In other words, it seems to the subject's single consciousness that P, and it seems to the same consciousness that Q, but it never seems to that consciousness that P & Q. (This last sentence is very close to Marks' characterization of a *non-unified* consciousness (1980, pp. 13, 17, 39). On my account it is compatible with the unity of consciousness.) I suggested that division of this kind might occur in split brain cases (Sharlow 2001, pp. 266-267), and also in less dramatic cases of disunity, such as repression and compartmentation of belief (pp. 235-242). Further, I argued that none of these apparent disunities can pose any real threat to the unity of the conscious subject (pp. 242-244).²² In those writings, I did not explore the physical basis of the phenomena of self-division or of inaccessible consciousness. I simply tried to codify their structure using ideas from modal logic. One can describe these cases in more cognitive terms as failures of metacognition.

These conceptions of divided and inaccessible consciousness are of interest in connection with Wegner's argument. Indeed, these ideas completely undermine Wegner's strategy for tracing our actions to unconscious causes. They open up the possibility that the so-called unconscious causes actually are conscious after all. Perhaps the neural events leading up to action, such as the precursor events found in the Libet experiments (Libet 1985), actually are *conscious* events. This last idea has precedents in the work of Holton (2004) and Velmans (2003, 2004), which I will examine and compare below. (There also are other precedents, which I will mention in the notes, but the suggestions by Holton and Velmans seem closest to what I have in mind here.) According to this idea, the precursor events are conscious, but we do not know that we contain them. If this idea were true, it would destroy the view that so-called consciously willed actions really are nonconscious at their cores. The neural processes immediately preceding our actions could be genuinely conscious, and perhaps even accompanied by the phenomenal feel typical of conscious doing. This could be the case even if we do not know of any conscious thought or feeling until later.

Holton (2004) has made a similar suggestion in a review of ICW. More specifically, he suggested that the precursor events might be genuinely mental events of which the subject is not aware until later (2004, pp. 220-221). Holton (2004, pp. 219-221) showed that this possibility weakens Wegner's thesis about conscious will. Holton made this suggestion in the context of higher-order thought models of consciousness, but he pointed out that these models are not necessary for his idea. In my estimation, Holton's argument is an important objection to ICW. Another precedent comes from Velmans, who has argued that the events immediately leading up to conscious actions can be genuine parts of the self (2003, 2004), and in some instances are conscious in certain senses of the word "conscious" (2004). (The 2004 article by Velmans was a response to Wegner (2004a).) I will mention several other precedents in an endnote.²³ What I am suggesting is, perhaps, not quite the same as Velmans' idea. I am suggesting that the precursor events are phenomenally conscious throughout their course, while Velmans suggested that they can be conscious in the sense of being accessible to consciousness at some time. But Velmans has found an important objection to Wegner's argument. Velmans suggests that the self encompasses some unconscious events as well as conscious events, and that the unconscious beginnings of actions in us can be truly our own doing (2003, 2004). I would agree, and I would go further. If Block's suggestion about the unconscious is correct, then perhaps the precursors of action are not only truly ours, but also truly parts of our conscious lives. Perhaps the so-called "confabulated" reasons for some of our actions are simply conscious reasons, indirectly known. And (for all we know) perhaps the feeling of conscious will plays a part in the phenomenal feel of the precursor events—making that feeling one of the wellsprings of action after all. This possibility does not strictly follow from the ideas of Block, Holton, or Velmans, but it is a possibility nonetheless.

This view of the "unconscious" precursor events also has consequences for our attitudes toward human creativity. Wegner points to creative inspiration as an example of action without conscious will (ICW, p. 81-84). According to the view I am presenting here, one's creative inspirations may well be products of conscious processes that are genuinely one's own, but that lie outside what one normally regards as the self. If this is

true, then one's creative productions are truly one's own, even when they arrive by way of a "Eureka!" experience that seems involuntary. They simply come from a place outside of one's *everyday* consciousness.

12. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have tried to undermine Wegner's argument in two ways. First, I have shown that it is possible to understand most of Wegner's evidence in ways that do not support his view that conscious will is an illusion. Second, I have pointed out that certain views of the self make Wegner's evidence nearly irrelevant to the question of the efficacy of conscious will. In most of my arguments I have not proposed positive accounts of anything. I have simply pointed out that certain possible accounts of things would render Wegner's argument unpersuasive. But that is enough to defuse Wegner's argument.

One lesson we can learn from this study is that the argument about conscious will in ICW is not entirely empirical. That argument depends crucially upon philosophical assumptions—or, more precisely, upon leaving out certain philosophical issues. If we pay closer attention to these issues, we find that Wegner's argument has crucial weak spots.

Neither science nor logic forces us to accept Wegner's pessimistic view of conscious will as presented in ICW. That view is neither an empirical hypothesis nor the conclusion of a persuasive philosophical argument. Instead, it is a curious philosophical position haunted by many unanswered questions. In particular, Wegner's book does not give us convincing grounds to believe that science has debunked the efficacy of conscious will.

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Notes

¹ In using the abbreviation ICW, I follow Wegner (2004b), who uses the same abbreviation (albeit in italics) to refer to his own book. Many of the points made in that book also are made in an article, Wegner (2004a), which is a condensation of ICW. In these cases of duplication, I cited the book itself.

² This does not imply that I am a determinist. I do not think we know enough about physics to make a final decision on determinism. I am a compatibilist because I do not think determinism, *if true*, would rule out free will.

³ Wegner quotes Laplace on this in ICW (p. 1, footnote).

⁴ I think this is quite clear from ICW, especially pp. 26-28 and chapter 5.

⁵ See also Wegner (2004b), p. 682, where Wegner takes seriously the issue of the appropriateness of the word “illusion” and discusses the nature of the illusion he had in mind.

⁶ Wegner later defended the identification of conscious will as a feeling, in Wegner (2004b), pp. 681-682. I do not think this defense adds anything important to what is in ICW.

⁷ Velmans (2003, p. 44) has pointed out the “reasonably accurate” character of most conscious perceptions. Velmans’ remark, which is right, was made in the context of a discussion of will.

⁸ Note also that in ICW, a “voluntary action” is characterized as “something a person can do when asked” (p. 32). This characterization leaves open the possibility of non-consciously-willed voluntary action, if one reads “something a person can do” to mean a sequence of movements a person can undergo.

⁹ See, for example, Davis (1970), pp. 520 and 524, for mention of the idea that a movement must meet certain criteria to count as an action.

¹⁰ Davis (1970, pp. 520, 524) mentions the idea that a movement must meet certain criteria to count as an action.

¹¹ For some interesting papers on this topic, see Davis (1970), Richards (1976), and Mackie (1997).

¹² Wegner cites some of the relevant literature in ICW (pp. 19, 159). Indeed, he has used the idea of “multiple identifications or descriptions” of action (p. 159)—a topic closely related to individuation—in his work on “*action identification theory*” (p. 159; italics in original). This work is described briefly in ICW (pp. 160-161). However, ICW does not trace the *full* impact of issues of individuation on Wegner’s view of conscious will. If Wegner had done this in ICW, he would have had to soften his dismissive view of conscious will. In the present paper I will try to show why.

¹³ For some discussion of this idea, see Richards (1976), p. 193.

¹⁴ Of course, this analogy cannot be pushed too far, because the statement about bachelors depends more obviously upon the meanings of words than does the statement about actions.

¹⁵ These three classes of phenomena are discussed in various places in ICW, most notably chapter 4 for automatism, chapter 8 for hypnosis, and pp. 45-49 for stimulation of the brain.

¹⁶ Velmans (2003, p. 60) notes that the “unconscious and preconscious mind/brain” are within the self. See also Velmans (2004).

¹⁷ The feeling does not always occur; see ICW, pp. 286-287, and Kihlstrom (2004).

¹⁸ Wegner credits Ellen Langer for this terminology (ICW, p. 9).

¹⁹ To see what I mean by this, see Mackie (1997), pp. 46 and 50. Interestingly, Wegner comes very close to confronting this difficulty in its general form. He mentions (ICW, p. 18) that some actions “seem to be nested within” others. Later he points out, correctly,

that “even holding perfectly still can be a variety of acts” (ICW, p. 157).

²⁰ In a related vein, Velmans (2003, pp. 42-44) has suggested that some so-called unconscious processes may be conscious in certain senses. (These senses do not appear to coincide with what either Block or I had in mind.)

²¹ On metacognition generally, see Schooler (2002).

²² Presumably this same view of disunified consciousness can be applied to multiple personality disorder (discussed in ICW, pp. 255-263). Perhaps it also can be applied to other examples of what Wegner calls “Virtual Agency” (ICW, p. 221) in which an imagined or believed-in agent, like a spirit, seems to take possession of a person (ICW, chap. 7).

²³ Jack and Robbins (2004), commenting on Wegner (2004a), suggested that intentions can be conscious without being metaconscious, and pointed out that this fact hurts Wegner’s argument. Ainslie (2004), also commenting on Wegner (2004a), suggested that some of the phenomena Wegner describes involve “a split of consciousness” (p. 660). MacKay (1985) suggested that the precursor events in the Libet experiments are deeply rooted in the processes that underlie consciousness. Wood (1985), in a commentary on Libet’s work, pointed up the fact that a conscious system may have unconscious parts (p. 558). Van Gulick (1985), also commenting on Libet’s work, differentiated two senses of “conscious mental state” (p. 555), and suggested that the precursor states in Libet’s work might be conscious in the sense that they are objects of awareness, with the awareness coming after a time delay.