

Willusionism, epiphenomenalism, and the feeling of conscious will

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an important qualification

Today, I am only concerned with Dan Wegner's arguments for the claim that free will is an illusion. All I am saying is: These arguments don't work.

Don't try to discern from this my more general stance on the free will problem.

In particular, I am NOT saying there is free will, and I am NOT saying that the empirical sciences have nothing to contribute, positively or negatively, to the project of finding out whether or not we have free will.

willusionism

Our “manifest” image portrays us not as passive and puppetry victims of the forces of nature but as active agents that willingly and purposefully influence the course of things.

We take ourselves to be minded, encultured beings, autonomous, rational and self-conscious persons, free deliberators that are able to put their decisions into action, thereby subjecting themselves to social, cultural, moral and juridical practices of attributing responsibility, guilt and desert, blame and praise.

willusionism

Our “manifest” image is currently rivaled by an image dominated by the behavioral, cognitive, and neurosciences that are increasingly revealing the biological, neurological and psychological mechanisms that make us who we are.

In this “scientific” image, it is often said, there is no room for a self, for agency, for essentially private inner experiences, for rationality, and for free will, responsibility, guilt, or desert.

willusionism

As the “Astonishing Hypothesis” of the neuroscientist Francis Crick puts it:

‘You,’ your joys and sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules [...]: ‘You’re nothing but a pack of neurons’ (1994, p. 3)

And the Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner tells us:

The fact is, it seems to each of us that we have conscious will. It seems we have selves. It seems we have minds. It seems we are agents. It seems we cause what we do. [... I]t is sobering and ultimately accurate to call all this an illusion. (2002, pp. 341–342)

willusionism

The neuroscientist Read Montague maintains that
the idea of free will is not even in principle within reach of scientific
description ... (2008, p. R584)

The biologist Anthony Cashmore takes the belief in free will to be
Nothing less than a continuing belief in vitalism (2010, p. 4504)

mental causation

Mental causation: the capacity of mental states to make a difference to the causal nexus of the material world, most notably our behavior.

It just seems obvious that we do what we do BECAUSE we have the beliefs, desires, intentions, motives etc. we have: a headache makes us frown, the intention to make a bid at an auction causes us to raise our hand, and the desire to hear a loved one's voice makes us pick up the phone.

epiphenomenalism

What is notoriously unclear, however, is exactly how the mental can exert any genuine causal efficacy in an ultimately physical world governed by physical laws and forces only.

But if the mental cannot exert any genuine causal efficacy in the physical world, then EPIPHENOMENALISM—i.e., the claim that the mental is a causally otiose byproduct of physical processes that does not itself cause anything— is unavoidable.

epiphenomenalism and free will

Strikingly, the threat of epiphenomenalism is hardly ever mentioned in philosophical discussions of free will.

It does play a crucial role, however, in the scientific attack on free will, i.e., for willusionism, for the claim that the empirical sciences, most notably the neurosciences and (social) psychology, have shown that free will is an illusion.

epiphenomenalism and willusionism

Assuming that free will and epiphenomenalism are indeed incompatible, willusionism can be justified by the claim that the mental is an epiphenomenon just in case there is EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE that those mental states, events, processes, properties etc. without whose causal efficacy free will is impossible are indeed epiphenomenal.

What kind of empirical evidence could that be?

empirical evidence

- (1) Libet and Haynes on the temporal order of conscious intentions and brain processes
- (2) social psychology research on automatisms (unconscious influences on our behavior) and confabulations
- (3) a mechanistic worldview
- (4) Wegner's arguments to the extent that the feeling of consciously willing an action is not the (or a) cause of the action

the illusion of conscious will

Wegner argues that conscious will is an illusion because the subjective feeling of having consciously willed an action is no reliable indicator that the action has been caused by the corresponding conscious thoughts about the action:

conscious will is an illusion [...] in the sense that the experience of consciously willing an action is not a direct indication that the conscious thought has caused the action ... (2002, p. 2)

the illusion of conscious will

Prima facie, however, the claim that the subjective impression “that we consciously WILL our VOLUNTARY ACTIONS [...] is an illusion” (ibid., p. 1) is puzzling.

Given that voluntary actions (in contrast to involuntary ones) are precisely the actions that are willed by an agent, it seems to be an analytical truth, not an illusion, that a voluntary action was willed. However, the qualification “conscious” is crucial: voluntary actions are willed, but not consciously willed.

apparent mental causation

According to Wegner's THEORY OF APPARENT MENTAL CAUSATION, we erroneously conclude that our actions are caused by the corresponding conscious intentions because we fail to see that the temporal succession of intentions and actions is not due to a direct causal connection, but to the fact that intentions and actions are the joint effects of unconscious neuronal factors:

The unique human convenience of conscious thoughts that preview our actions gives us the privilege of feeling we willfully cause what we do. In fact, however, unconscious and inscrutable mechanisms create both conscious thought about action and the action, and also produce the sense of will we experience by perceiving the thought as cause of the action. (ibid., p. 98)

Wegner's willusionism

Wegner's model of our sense of agency has earned him a growing reputation of being willusionism's "best-known proponent" (Vargas, 2013, p. 325fn8).

However, why should the claim that the feeling of having consciously willed an action is epiphenomenal entail that free will is an illusion?

While one can see why one would want to claim that decisions or actions can be free only if they have been appropriately caused by intentions, motives, values etc. or an act of the will, it is hard to see why someone would want to insist that free decisions or actions must be caused by THE FEELING OF HAVING CONSCIOUSLY WILLED THEM.

three questions

- (1) Is Wegner's willusionism supported by the empirical evidence he cites?
- (2) Assuming that Wegner's claim is supported by the empirical evidence he cites (or otherwise), does this entail that our will does not play a causal role for what we do?
- (3) Assuming that our will does not play a causal role for what we do, does this entail that free will is an illusion?

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apparent mental causation

Wegner's THEORY OF APPARENT MENTAL CAUSATION is based on the Humean idea that we cannot directly and infallibly perceive causal connections: causal judgments are inevitably interpretations and therefore fallible.

It may seem, for instance, as if measles cause fever, because everyone having the measles gets fever, but in reality their regular succession is an epiphenomenon of an underlying physiological process: the measles are caused by a viral infection that also causes a change in the thermoregulatory system that in turn leads to the fever.

apparent mental causation

Wegner thinks this is exactly what happens in the case of conscious intentions and the corresponding actions.

Right before we do something, we typically think about doing it, and an alternative cause is usually not in sight—hence, what else could have caused the action, if not the conscious thought?

apparent mental causation

By interpreting conscious thoughts or intentions as the causes of actions, we create THE FEELING OF CONSCIOUS WILL:

The theory of apparent mental causation [...] is this: people experience conscious will when they interpret their own thought as the cause of their action ... (2004, p. 654)

But this experience is an illusion in the sense that it is based on a non-veridical causal judgment: actions are not caused by the conscious thoughts preceding them, but by neurophysiological processes that at the same time ensure the “right” timing of the corresponding thoughts.

apparent mental causation

If the feeling of conscious will indeed arises because we erroneously take the thought about an action to cause this action, then the action and the corresponding feeling of conscious will should in principle be dissociable: without appropriate thoughts about actions we should not experience them as having been consciously willed, while we should experience actions for which we have corresponding thoughts as consciously willed even if we did not in fact perform them.

Wegner calls cases of the first kind “AUTOMATISMS” and cases of the second kind “ILLUSIONS OF CONTROL” (2002, p. 2).

automatisms

Automatisms include actions performed under hypnosis, actions by patients with alien hand syndrome and quite generally all actions that the agent herself does not experience as consciously willed, like table turning, dowsing, or ideomotor actions (ibid., ch. 4).

illusions of control

The most important evidence for the existence of illusions of control comes from studies in which subjects can apparently be brought to experience actions performed by others as having been consciously willed.

If a person comes to have a conscious thought about an action that occurs immediately afterwards and has no other apparent cause, then she should experience the action as having been consciously willed even if she herself didn't perform it.

I Spy

In Wegner's famous I Spy study, two subjects used a device with which they could jointly move a cursor across a computer screen that displayed about fifty different objects.

They were instructed to freely roam the cursor for about thirty seconds and then place it on an object of their (joint) choice within a period of ten seconds.

Both were wearing headphones over which they heard music for ten seconds after the initial thirty seconds, indicating that the cursor had now to be placed on an object. Both were also told that during the initial thirty seconds they would hear different words for distraction.

I Spy

Each time the cursor had been placed on an object, they had to rate, independently of each other, on a scale from 0 (“I allowed the stop to happen”) to 100 (“I intended to make the stop”) the degree to which they had intended the joint stop (Wegner & Wheatley, 1999, p. 488).

One of the subjects was a confederate who was instructed via headphones on some of the trials to place the cursor on a certain object (“forced stops”), but was supposed to let the subject decide where to place the cursor on all other trials (“free stops”).

For the forced stops, the subject heard the name of the target object via headphones either thirty, five or one second before (-30, -5, -1) or one second after (+1) the stop.

I Spy



I Spy

Wegner's account predicts that subjects should rate -5-stops and -1-stops as more intended than -30-stops or +1-stops, and this prediction was confirmed.

Moreover, although the subjects apparently had no influence whatsoever on the forced stops, the -5-stops and -1-stops were rated as even more intended than the free stops.

I Spy

Wegner's conclusion from the I Spy study (and similar studies) is that we can be brought to experience actions performed by others as consciously willed:

When participants were reminded of an item on the screen just 1 second or 5 seconds before they were forced to move the cursor to it, they reported having performed this movement intentionally ... (2002, p. 78)

illusions of control?

Wegner's much heralded studies are supposed to provide empirical evidence for the existence of illusions of control.

Since illusions of control, by demonstrating that the feeling of conscious will is separable from actual agency, support the theory of apparent mental causation that Wegner's epiphenomenalist argument against free will is based on, his empirical studies indirectly seem to warrant his willusionism.

But do they indeed show that we can be brought to experience the actions of others as consciously willed?

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I Spy: responses

It is entirely correct that the forced -5-stops and -1-stops in the I Spy study were rated closer to the “intended” end of the spectrum, while the -30-stops and the +1-stops were rated closer to the “allowed” and “not intended” end.

On a scale from 0 to 100, -30-stops received an average rating of 43, +1-stops of 47; for -5-stops, the average rating increased to 60, for -1-stops even to 62.

It is also entirely correct that these values of 60 and 62 lie above the average rating of 56 for the free stops.

I Spy: responses

First, it is at best misleading to say that subjects reported the forced stops AS CONSCIOUSLY WILLED or INTENDED, and that the I Spy study makes the subjects

feel they willfully performed an action ... (Wegner & Wheatley, 1999, p. 487)

The average rating was at best 62, which is admittedly closer to “I intended to make the stop” than to “I allowed the stop to happen”, but still a far cry from anything that warrants the claim that the subjects INTENDED the stop—had they experienced the stop as intended, had they felt “they willfully performed an action,” the rating would have been close to 100, not merely at 62.

I Spy: responses

Second, these numbers also put into perspective the prima facie surprising fact that forced -5-stops and -1-stops were on average rated as more intended than the free stops.

That actions performed by others are experienced as more intended than self-determined actions sounds much less spectacular once one realizes that the apparently self-determined free stops received only an average rating of 56, thus approximately right in between “I intended to make the stop” and “I allowed the stop to happen”.

I Spy: responses

Third, it is unclear how significant the average ratings are.

Of the 1479 stops only 204 (= 13,8%) were forced. Since there were four kinds of forced stops, the ratings of 60 and 62 for the -5-stops and the -1-stops are based (ideally) only on 51 trials, while the rating of 56 for free stops averages over $1479 - 204 = 1275$ trials. Even worse, since there were four kinds of forced stops and each subject had four forced stops, it is plausible to assume that each subject had each kind of forced stop exactly once. But that means that the rating for each of the four forced stops resulted (ideally; see below) from a single trial per subject!

I Spy: responses

Moreover, since the confederate sometimes didn't manage to place the cursor on the target object, not all 204 forced stops were considered in the final evaluation. For the four kinds of forced stops, only between 27 and 40 of the 51 trials were taken into account (and only for 8 of the 51 subjects all four forced stops were taken into account; *ibid.*, p. 489fn5).

The ratings of the four kinds of forced stops thus resulted, on average, from at best $147/4 = 36.75$ trials and were compared with the ratings for the free stops which were based on 1275 trials!

I Spy: responses

Fourth, given that the confederate was instructed to let the subjects decide where to place the cursor during the free stops, an average rating of 56 seems surprising and radically mistaken. However, it would be wrong to expect values closer to 100.

Wegner himself reports a range of cases where a person was asked to passively recognize the decisions of others without actively interfering, but despite her best intentions exercised a demonstrable unconscious influence (2002, ch. 6).

I Spy: responses

The confederate in the I Spy study is in a comparable situation: for the free stops to be really free, she has to let the subject move the cursor without interfering with the decision.

If Wegner is right in what he says about facilitated communication elsewhere, it is highly questionable whether the subjects chose all by themselves where to place the cursor in the free stops. Most likely, therefore, their self-assessment of 56 was not far from the truth.

I Spy: responses

Fifth, a rating of 62 for forced -1-stops seems astoundingly high only if one assumes that the “correct” value would have been 0 since only the confederate decided where to place the cursor.

It cannot be ruled out, however, that the subject decided independently of the confederate to stop on the target object as well.

I Spy: responses

While there were about fifty objects on the screen, the number of objects that were serious candidates for any particular stop was quite smaller. At the time the confederate tried to move the cursor on the target object, the music was already playing so that the subject knew that a stop was imminent. Since the target object had to be close enough to the cursor's current position that it could be reached while the music was still playing without any conspicuous manoeuvres that would have debunked the ploy by revealing that the confederate had its own agenda, only those objects were an option that could be reached within less than ten seconds on a natural path of the cursor, given the speed and the movement pattern so far.

I Spy: responses

Moreover, since the subjects were told to wait a short time after the onset of the music before making a stop (*ibid.*, p. 488), the number of options is further reduced to those that could be reached within the next, say, approximately eight seconds.

The fact that the forced stops occurred about midway through the ten seconds music period (*ibid.*) reduces that number even further to objects that could be reached in a natural way within the next approximately three seconds.

I Spy: responses

And finally, the likelihood that the subjects themselves decided to stop the cursor on the very object that the confederate was aiming at during the forced stops is increased even further by the fact that some subjects actively searched for the object whose name they had just heard (ibid., 489), which was thus brought to their focus of attention.

I Spy: responses

It is thus not at all unlikely that the subject accidentally chose the target object.

Especially given the small number of forced stops the effect on the correct average values will be enormous if only a few of them happened to be not forced, but actually willed.

I Spy: responses

All this calls into question the claim that the I Spy study shows that it is possible

to lead people to experience willful action when in fact they have done nothing ... (ibid., p. 487)

and similar standard interpretations: it provides no empirical evidence that the subjects “experience themselves as the author,” “believe that they have caused the movement,” or “believe they have performed an action which was in fact performed by another party”.

three questions

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other options

The mere fact that the widely discussed empirical support for Wegner's theory of apparent mental causation is wanting leaves open the possibility that this theory is plausible for other reasons—for instance because automatisms or confabulations in ordinary situations show that our subjective impression of having reliable and veridical access to our conscious motives as the causes of our actions is illusory.

Moreover, even if the studies criticized fail to provide evidence for the theory of apparent mental causation, they may still in other ways support willusionism.

I Spy and free will

Does the I Spy study provide empirical evidence for the claim that free will is an illusion? Is it in any sense a “free-will experiment” (Klemm, 2010, p. 47)?

Apart from its potential support for the theory of apparent mental causation, it is hard to see how it could possibly have any bearing on the debate between willusionists and their opponents.

I Spy and free will

If Wegner's studies at least showed that subjects can experience actions performed by others as consciously willed, i.e., that the feeling of agency can arise in cases where there is no real agency and subjects can be lured into thinking they have willingly done something when in fact they have not done anything, then one could at least try to argue that the fact that we can be mistaken about our agency in some simple cases is evidence that there is more than a passing chance that we are routinely mistaken in more complex cases as well.

I Spy and free will

This argument wouldn't be terribly convincing: the mere fact that some actions are erroneously experienced as having been consciously willed not only doesn't entail that this experience is always non-veridical, it also doesn't tell us anything about whether those actions that have been consciously willed are free or not.

But given that Wegner's studies (at best) show that subjects sometimes overestimate their own contribution to an apparently joint decision, not that they experience agency in the absence of agency, this inductive argument doesn't even get off the ground.

I Spy and free will

Moreover, the whole point of Wegner's studies is precisely that the subjects don't do anything—what is done is done by the confederate only, the subjects are merely said to experience a non-veridical sense of agency.

But research on what happens when someone does nothing but only believes she is doing something does not tell us anything about whether someone who actually does something is acting freely or not.

apparent mental causation

As said above, Wegner's theory of apparent mental causation, according to which the feeling of agency is merely an epiphenomenon of the action's neurophysiological causes, may be plausible even if his empirical studies fail to support it.

Hence, is there at least an argument against free will based on the theory of apparent mental causation, i.e., is free will an illusion because the feeling of conscious will is an epiphenomenon? Again, the answer is "No."

apparent mental causation

Since the experience of a thing is not to be conflated with the thing experienced, the will and the feeling of will are obviously different issues (see, e.g., Hardcastle, 2004): the feeling of conscious will is a feeling that one is willing something, and having this feeling is no less the same as willing something as the perception of an elephant is an elephant.

To show that the feeling that one is willing something is an epiphenomenon is therefore one thing, to claim that willing something is an epiphenomenon something quite different.

phenomenal and empirical will

Wegner's theory of apparent mental causation renders only the feeling of conscious will, i.e., what he calls the "phenomenal will", epiphenomenal, not mental states per se.

Wegner's claim is that an action is not caused by the feeling of having consciously willed it, but he explicitly admits that he does not address the question whether actions are caused by mental states, or by the "intricate set of physical and mental processes" (2002, p. 27) that makes up the "empirical will".

empirical will

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. (2005, p. 32)

Indeed, Wegner himself explicitly acknowledges that unconscious mental processes can be causally efficacious:

The experience of conscious will arises when we infer that our conscious intention has caused our voluntary action, **ALTHOUGH BOTH INTENTION AND ACTION ARE THEMSELVES CAUSED BY MENTAL PROCESSES** that do not feel willed ... (2002, p. 63)

empirical will

Moreover, according to his own conception of empirical will, even conscious thoughts can be causally efficacious, given that there is supposed to be a

causality of the person's conscious thoughts as established by a scientific covariation with the person's behavior ... (ibid., p. 14)

empirical will

And even with regard to the feeling of conscious will, Wegner doesn't seem to be sure whether it is supposed to be an epiphenomenon tout court or just causally irrelevant with regard to our actions.

While he sometimes explicitly talks about an “epiphenomenon,” at other places he admits that the feeling of conscious will can be causally efficacious—just not with regard to our actions:

the experience of conscious will ... need not be a mere epiphenomenon. Rather than a ghost in the machine, the experience of will is a feeling that helps us to appreciate and remember our authorship of the things our minds and bodies do ... (ibid., ix; see also ibid., 325)

epiphenomenalism and empirical will

Concessions like these make Wegner an epiphenomenalist of a very limited kind at best.

Moreover, they unmask his elaborate plea for the illusion of the feeling of conscious will as more or less irrelevant: it may be that decisions or actions can be free only if they have been caused, in the right way, by appropriate intentions, beliefs, motives, values etc., or by an act of will, but why should anyone accept that decisions and actions can be free only if they have been caused by the feeling of having consciously willed them?

the feeling of conscious will

Of course, we usually believe that we have consciously willed our voluntary actions, and maybe we usually even experience them as having been consciously willed.

But without further argument it is just not credible that we believe or feel that they have been caused by the feeling of having consciously willed them.

the feeling of conscious will

Wegner's phenomenology of will becomes even stranger when we are said to "feel that we cause ourselves to behave" (ibid., p. 2) and agents are said "to cause themselves to behave" (ibid., 21).

Agency may be accompanied by the feeling of being the one who acts, but actions are performed by agents, not caused. By acting, we can cause something, but to say that we cause our actions or cause ourselves to behave is at best misleading. Agents don't cause what they do, they do it.

the empirical will

Finally, even if Wegner's phenomenological analysis according to which we believe or feel that our actions are caused by the feeling of having consciously willed them were correct, all that would follow would be that our phenomenology of agency is non-veridical.

Questions of free will, however, would be left untouched, given that what makes us free is not that our actions are caused by the feeling of conscious will, but (at most) that our intentions, desires, motives etc. are efficacious in our decisions and actions in the right way, and Wegner has, as seen above, nothing to say about the causal role of the latter.

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interim results

Epiphenomenalism plays a pivotal role in the scientific attack on free will, and in particular Wegner is typically portrayed as having defended the view that free will is an illusion because one can show by means of experimentally induced illusions of control that the feeling of having consciously willed an action cannot cause the action, but is only an epiphenomenon of underlying neurophysiological causes. However:

interim results

- (1) There is no convincing empirical evidence from the neurosciences or psychology that the mental states without whose causal efficacy free will is impossible are epiphenomenal.
- (2) Wegner's studies do not induce any illusions of control in the relevant sense and fail to provide empirical evidence for his theory of apparent mental causation.

interim results

- (3) Apart from their alleged connection with the theory of apparent mental causation, Wegner's studies have nothing to do with the debate about free will.

- (4) The theory of apparent mental causation may be plausible for independent reasons, but given that there is no reason to suppose that free decisions and actions must be caused by the feeling of having consciously willed them, it does not show that free will is an illusion.

interim results

(5) Although it may be that free decisions and actions must be caused by an act of will, as opposed to the feeling of will, Wegner's limited epiphenomenalism doesn't cover mental states as such, in particular not what he calls the "empirical will".

There is thus no empirical evidence whatsoever for any kind of epiphenomenalism that would warrant the claim that free will is an illusion, and thus no argument for willusionism based on epiphenomenalism.

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mental causation and free will

Must our decisions and actions be caused by appropriate mental states in order for there to be free will in any philosophically, morally, juridically etc. relevant sense?

The most important reason for thinking that the causal efficacy of mental states is necessary for free will (and thus epiphenomenalism an argument against free will) is that apparently there has to be an INTELLIGIBLE CONNECTION between our free decisions and actions on the one hand and the mental states that lead to them on the other.

mental causation and free will

This idea is based on the insight that decisions and actions that are entirely independent of any preceding mental states would appear random and would not be attributable to us as agents. As John Locke famously put it:

If to break loose from the conduct of reason, and to want that restraint of examination and judgment which keeps us from choosing or doing the worse, be liberty, true liberty, madmen and fools are the only freemen ...
(1689/1996, p. 107)

mental causation and free will

Prima facie, Locke's "conduct of reason" seems to require that mental states are causally efficacious: if decisions and actions are not caused by mental states, then they cannot be traced to our intentions, beliefs, motives, interests, values etc., and thus fail to be intelligible and attributable, calling in question our first-person certainty that we are the free and responsible authors of our own deeds.

mental causation and free will

However, the intelligible connection between what we do and our intentions, beliefs, motives, interests, values etc. required for the “conduct of reason” need not be based on a causal connection between these mental states and our decisions and actions.

If we hold a delinquent responsible for what she has done, then our attribution of freedom and responsibility is based on the consideration that she wouldn't have done what she did had she not decided to do it, that she would have decided otherwise had she realized that she would ruin her life etc.

mental causation and free will

Yet, that she wouldn't have done what she did had she not decided to do it does not entail that she did it BECAUSE she decided to do it, and that she would have decided otherwise had she realized that she would ruin her life does not require that she did not decide otherwise BECAUSE she did not realize that she would ruin her life.

mental causation and free will

Locke's "conduct of reason" requires stable COUNTERFACTUAL DEPENDENCIES between our intentions, beliefs, motives, interests, values etc. on the one hand and our decisions and actions on the other. But these counterfactual dependencies need not be grounded in corresponding causal connections. If decisions and actions are—along the lines of Wegner's theory of apparent mental causation—caused by neurophysiological states which in turn realize or cause the corresponding mental states, then it is entirely correct to say that the delinquent would not have done what she did had she not decided to do it, and that she would have decided otherwise had she realized that she would ruin her life.

mental causation and free will

Willusionists are likely to object that attributing all the causal efficacy to neurophysiological causes would in the final analysis mean that the delinquent was not “really” responsible and not “really” free, because it wasn’t her—her conscious “I” or “Self”—that did whatever was done, but her neurons or her brain (see Kepecs, 2011).

This opposition between us and our brain, however, goes directly against the kind of mechanism characteristic of our modern, scientific image of man and the world we are inhabiting.

mental causation and free will

To oppose us to our brains is not only to commit a category mistake by ascribing characteristics of an organism to its parts, it also resurrects a kind of dualism which (many) philosophers have in fact long overcome.

Within a naturalistic framework, there can be no opposition between us and our brains, and decisions and actions can be our decisions and our actions even though they are realized or brought about by our brains.

mental causation and free will

Hence, even if it turned out that there are compelling philosophical reasons for thinking that mental states are neither reducible to the causally efficacious neurophysiological states nor capable of exerting their own, irreducible causal influence, this would not necessarily expose free will as an illusion.

As long as mental states systematically depend upon the neurophysiological causes of our decisions and actions, whatever is necessary for free will might be the case, even if the mental itself is an epiphenomenon.

three questions

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- (2) Assuming that Wegner's claim is supported by the empirical evidence he cites (or otherwise), does this entail that our will does not play a causal role for what we do?
- (3) Assuming that our will does not play a causal role for what we do, does this entail that free will is an illusion?

three questions

- (1) Is Wegner's willusionism supported by the empirical evidence he cites? **No.**
- (2) Assuming that Wegner's claim is supported by the empirical evidence he cites (or otherwise), does this entail that our will does not play a causal role for what we do? **No.**
- (3) Assuming that our will does not play a causal role for what we do, does this entail that free will is an illusion? **At least not obviously.**

thank you!

Walter, S. (2015). Willusionism, epiphenomenalism, and the feeling of conscious will. *Synthese*, DOI [10.1007/s11229-013-0393-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-013-0393-y).

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