

Précis of *The illusion of conscious will*

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Abstract: The experience of conscious will is the feeling that we are doing things. This feeling occurs for many things we do, conveying to us again and again the sense that we consciously cause our actions. But the feeling may not be a true reading of what is happening in our minds, brains, and bodies as our actions are produced. The feeling of conscious will can be fooled. This happens in clinical disorders such as alien hand syndrome, dissociative identity disorder, and schizophrenic auditory hallucinations. And in people without disorders, phenomena such as hypnosis, automatic writing, Ouija board spelling, water dowsing, facilitated communication, speaking in tongues, spirit possession, and trance channeling also illustrate anomalies of will – cases when actions occur without will or will occurs without action. This book brings these cases together with research evidence from laboratories in psychology to explore a theory of *apparent mental causation*. According to this theory, when a thought appears in consciousness just prior to an action, is consistent with the action, and appears exclusive of salient alternative causes of the action, we experience conscious will and ascribe authorship to ourselves for the action. Experiences of conscious will thus arise from processes whereby the mind interprets itself – not from processes whereby mind creates action. Conscious will, in this view, is an indication that we *think* we have caused an action, not a revelation of the causal sequence by which the action was produced.

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1. The illusion (Ch. 1)

So, here you are, reading about conscious will. How could this have happened? One way to explain it would be to examine the causes of your behavior. A team of scientists could study your reported thoughts, emotions, and motives, your genetics and your history of learning, experience, and development, your social situation and culture, your memories and reaction times, your physiology and neuroanatomy, and lots of other things as well. If they somehow had access to all the information they could ever want, the assumption of psychology is that they could uncover the mechanisms that give rise to all your behavior, and so could certainly explain why you are reading these words at this moment. However, another way to explain the fact of your reading these lines is just to say that you decided to begin reading. You consciously willed what you are doing.

The ideas of conscious will and psychological mechanism have an oil and water relationship, having never been properly reconciled. One way to put them together is to say that the mechanistic approach is the explanation preferred for scientific purposes, but that the person's experience of conscious will is utterly convincing and important to the person – and so must be understood scientifically as well. The mechanisms underlying the experience of will are themselves a fundamental topic of scientific study.

1.1. Conscious will

Conscious will is usually understood in one of two ways. It is common to talk about conscious will as something that is experienced when we perform an action: Actions feel willed or not, and this feeling of voluntariness or doing a thing “on

purpose” is an indication of conscious will. It is also common, however, to speak of conscious will as a force of mind, a name for the causal link between our minds and our actions. One might assume that the *experience* of consciously willing an action and the *causation* of the action by the person's conscious mind are the same thing. As it turns out, however, they are entirely distinct, and the tendency to confuse them is the source of the illusion of conscious will. So, to begin, we will need to look into each in turn, first examining will as an experience and then considering will as a causal force.

1.1.1. The experience of conscious will. Will is a feeling. David Hume was sufficiently impressed by this idea that he proposed to define the will as “nothing but *the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind*” (Hume 1739/1888, p. 399, emphasis in origi-

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