Why conscious free will both is and isn't an illusion

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Abstract: Wegner's analysis of the illusion of conscious will is close to my own account of how conscious experiences relate to brain processes. But our analyses differ somewhat on how conscious will is *not* an illusion. Wegner argues that once conscious will arises it enters causally into subsequent mental processing. I argue that while his causal story is accurate, it remains a first-person story. Conscious free will is not an illusion in the sense that this first-person story is compatible with and complementary to a third-person account of voluntary processing in the mind/brain.

Dan Wegner has written a fine, insightful book that has genuinely useful things to say about how the experience of free will is constructed from unconscious processing and about the role of experienced free will in the authorship of action. Significantly (for me) there is a close convergence between his views, developed over decades of empirical work, and my own conclusions about how conscious experiences relate in general to preconscious and unconscious processing, developed over a similar period (Velmans 1991a; 1991b; 1993; 1996; 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2003a) and, in particular, with my own analysis of "preconscious free will" (Velmans 2003b). Theoretical convergence provides a form of triangulation, particularly when it arises from independent attempts to make sense of different bodies of data. Consequently, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Wegner 2002) should not be lightly dismissed. It is, nevertheless, an affront to *common sense.* So it is equally important to outline the ways in which free will is *not* an illusion.

In what senses is conscious free will an illusion? First, it is an illusion in the sense that the causal role of *any* conscious experience in a "conscious mental process" can be said to be an illusion. In Velmans (1991a) I have suggested that a mental process might "be conscious" (a) in the sense that one is conscious *of* it, (b) in the sense that it *results* in a conscious experience, and (c) in the sense that conscious experience plays a *causal role* in that process. As Wegner shows, experienced will is a *representation* of what is going on in the mind/brain, making the mental processes represented by experienced will "conscious" in the sense that we are conscious *of* them (sense [a]). Preconscious decision making processes can also be said to become conscious once they *result* in a conscious free will experience (sense [b]). Wegner, however, gives many reasons to doubt that the experience of will actually governs the choices and decisions required for voluntary control (sense [c]), and I have given many additional reasons to doubt that conscious experiences govern the mental processes to which they most obviously relate in Velmans (1991a; 2000; 2002b; 2003b). In sum, an experience of will can arise from voluntary processes and represent them without governing them. We nevertheless feel that our conscious will determines our decisions and actions. That is the illusion.

Being *representations* of preconscious and unconscious mental processes, conscious experiences can also, occasionally, be *mis*representations, and Wegner provides various examples of misattributed volition (where people believe themselves to have willed an act that was determined by external forces or believe external forces to have determined acts that are actually carried out by themselves). That is a second sense in which experienced free will can be in illusion.

Such illusions of free will suggest that it may be causally epiphenomenal, which has threatening consequences for our moral and legal judgments, let alone our visions of our own agency. Consequently, Wegner is concerned, as I am, to discern any *other* sense in which experienced will is not an illusion. According to him, "conscious will" is a feeling that informs us whether we, rather than an external agency, are the authors of acts, and helps us keep tally of what we are doing and what we have done (p. 328). This in turn helps establish a sense of who we are and gives us a sense of responsibility that leads to morality. I entirely agree, but only because this is a true story told from a *first-person perspective,* which does not, unfortunately, escape epiphenomenalism. Why not? Our conscious sense of "who we are," of "authorship," and of "responsibility" are as much experiences as are experiences of free will. And preconscious and unconscious processes determine our sense of self, authorship, and feeling of responsibility as much as they do our feeling of will. If from the perspective of brain science, experienced will is epiphenomenal, then from the perspective of brain science the same can be said of these other experiences. If one is to escape epiphenomenalism one has to do so another way.

As far as I can tell, a satisfactory account needs to make sense of how conscious experiences relate to their neural causes and correlates, and to the processes that they represent; it also needs to explain how first- and third-person accounts can be compatible, complementary, and mutually irreducible within a dual-aspect theory of mind (see Velmans 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b). Given *BBS* commentary space constraints, what follows is only a hint.

Note first that conscious experiences can be representations not just of our own minds, but also of our bodies and the surrounding physical world. In everyday life we behave as "naïve realists." We habitually take the events that we experience to *be* the events that are actually taking place. Although sciences such as physics, biology, and psychology might represent the same events in very different ways, this approximation usually serves us well. When playing billiards, for example, it is safe to assume that the balls are smooth, spherical, coloured, and cause each other to move by mechanical impact. One only has to judge the precise angle at which the white ball hits the red ball to pocket the red. A quantum mechanical description of the microstructure of the balls or of the forces they exert on each other will not improve one's game. In the same way, Wegner's story about how our experienced will feeds into our experienced sense of agency, self, and responsibility can serve us well, in spite of the fact that it is not a brain story.

Why so? And in what sense is "conscious free will" *not* an illusion? In the sense that voluntary processes are not an illusion. Human decision-making processes are both sophisticated and flexible. Although conscious representations *of* those processes can be inaccurate, they can also be accurate, and evolution has ensured that mental representations (conscious or not) are more often right than wrong. When we feel we are free to choose or refuse an act, within the constraints of biology and social circumstances imposed on us, we usually *are* free to choose or refuse (having calculated the odds in the light of inner needs and goals, likely consequences, and so on). When this occurs, experienced free will is an *accurate* (albeit rough and ready) representation of what is going on in our own minds, and in this sense, it is *not* an illusion. Although our conscious experiences as such may not be responsible for our acts, we are more than our conscious experiences. So *we* remain responsible, where "we" includes our preconscious and unconscious mental processes as well as our experienced will.

The short- and long-term consequences of believing an illusion

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Abstract: The experience of free will has causal consequences, albeit not immediate ones. Although Wegner recognizes this, his model failed to incorporate this causal link. Is this experience central to "what makes us human"? A broad acceptance of Wegner's claim that free will is illusory has significant societal and religious consequences, therefore the threshold of evidence needs to be correspondingly high.

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