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24.120 Moral Psychology
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XVIII Free Will VI: Empirical Work

WEGNER

Why does Wegner think that conscious will is an illusion? The basic idea is that conscious will is *epiphenomenal*: that is, conscious will is caused by the same process that causes action; but does not itself cause action. An analogy that Wegner gives is with a ship's compass (Ch. 9). (Actually this is a rather confusing analogy, since the ship's compass isn't truly epiphenomenal; it is rather that its effect on the direction of the ship is not direct; it seems that Wegner might think that the same holds for the effect of conscious will.)

What are the arguments for this? There are two:

- (i) We are habitually mistaken about the relation between our willings and our action; we think that we have not willed an action when we have (ouija boards; facilitated communication; hypnotism; water divination); we think that we have willed an action when we have not (the I-spy game; or, less radically, where we overestimate our effectiveness).
- (ii) There is neurological evidence, from Libet and others, that our actions start before our willings.

Leaving (ii) aside for now, what is the argument from (i)? Doesn't this evidence just go to show that we are fallible about our wills? How do we move from that to the idea that the experience of willing is epiphenomenal? The idea seems to be similar to the famous argument from illusion championed by various empiricists. They held that, since our perceptions could be illusory, we could not have direct perception of an object, for the experience is the same in cases of illusion as in cases of veridical perception. So there must be an idea or impression that stands between us and the thing perceived; it is this that we are directly aware of. (This gives rise to the famous doctrine of the 'veil of appearance': we cannot perceive reality directly, but are always trapped behind the veil.) Similarly for Wegner the claim seems to be that, since we are often wrong about our actions, the conscious willing cannot be what causes the action even in cases in which we are right, since the willing is the same in both cases. (Here the claim is not that we lack direct acquaintance with our conscious wills, but rather that our conscious wills cannot be the direct causes of action.)

ARGUMENTS FROM ILLUSION

- PI: In cases of illusion and of veridical perception, the subject has the same (kind of) experience.
 - P2: In cases of illusion the experience is not an experience of an external object.
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- C: In cases of veridical perception the experience is not an experience of an external object.

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willing is the same in both cases. (Here the claim is not that we lack direct acquaintance with our conscious wills, but rather that our conscious wills cannot be the direct causes of action.)

More precisely:

- PI: In cases of illusory and of veridical willing, the subject has the same (kind of) experience of willing.
 - P2: In cases of illusion the experience is not the cause of the action.
-
- C: In cases of veridical willing the experience is not the cause of the action.

RESPONSES

One response is to deny PI: to say that perceptions and illusions have nothing in common. Yet this seems implausible here. Isn't it obvious that they have something in common: they are realized by the same kind of neuro-physiological states. The proponent of the approach will thus have to deny that mental states supervene on neuro-physiological states. It is unlikely that Wegner would be convinced by such a move. So is there an alternative approach that we can take? There is. Wegner seems to be contending that willings are not an intrinsic part of the process by which somebody acts, but are, at best, extrinsic accompaniments to that process. As he puts it, "conscious will is not inherent in action" (p. II of this book). One way to go is to concede that the consciousness of the willing is not intrinsic to the process of action; but to deny that it follows that the willing itself is not intrinsic to the action. This approach concedes the conclusion of the argument: the *experience* of willing is not the cause of the action, but rejects the idea that the willing itself is not the cause of the action.

The point is clearly seen if we adopt a higher-order thought account of consciousness. According to such an account, a thought T is conscious iff it is accompanied by a higher-order thought to the effect that the agent is having the thought that T. But note that it is the original, first-order thought T that is conscious in virtue of the higher-order thought 'I am having the thought that T'; it is not the higher-order thought that is thereby rendered conscious. In order for the higher-order thought to be conscious the agent would need to have a thought about that thought at a still higher level, and so on.

Now let us consider Wegner's data in the light of this account. When an agent forms a conscious willing this consists in a willing, together with a higher-order thought to the effect that this willing has been formed. The experimental work that Wegner cites shows that such higher-order thoughts will frequently be wrong; and this in turn suggests the higher-order thought approach is right to distinguish the willings themselves from thoughts about those willings. But does this experimental work show that the agent's conscious willings are not the true causes of the action? No. Of course the higher-order thoughts are not the causes of the action. But the higher-order thoughts are not the conscious willings. The conscious willings are the things that the higher-order thoughts are about; and we have no reason for denying that *they* are the causes of the action. In effect what this approach shows is that conscious willings might indeed contain an element that is extrinsic to the causal process, and hence part of a "separate system". But this element is the element that makes the willing conscious, rather than being the willing itself.

LIBET

Can the same response be made to the argument derived from Libet? Libet argues that the Readiness Potential precedes the conscious choice, and hence concludes that the conscious choice is not the originator of the action. But is it the conscious choice that follows the RP, or the consciousness of the choice that does so? If the consciousness of the choice results from a *perception* of the choice, then wouldn't we expect the consciousness to follow the choice? There is, though, something disturbing about this approach, for it means that the intention isn't conscious at the time that it is made.

An alternative approach (developed by Mele in the paper on the webpage) questions whether the RP should be identified with the formation of an intention at all. Why not think that it should be understood as something like an urge, which the agent can accept or reject? It is this acceptance or rejection that should be identified as the formation of the intention. Libet himself holds that we can veto a choice before it results in action; perhaps this should not be described as a veto, but as the choice itself.