



# Agency, authorship, and illusion

Eddy Nahmias

*Georgia State University, Department of Philosophy, Atlanta, GA 30302–4089, USA*

Received 30 April 2005

Available online 22 September 2005

---

## Abstract

Daniel Wegner argues that conscious will is an illusion. I examine the adequacy of his theory of apparent mental causation and whether, if accurate, it suggests that our experience of agency and authorship should be considered illusory. I examine various interpretations of this claim and raise problems for each interpretation. I also distinguish between the experiences of agency and authorship.

© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Agency; Action; Free will; Phenomenology; Wegner

---

## 1. Introduction

Daniel Wegner suggests that our experience of consciously willing our actions is an illusion.<sup>1</sup> This claim has important implications for our sense of ourselves as agents and as authors of our actions. At a minimum, it suggests that things are not as they seem regarding that aspect of the world most important to us, ourselves. It might, for instance, imply that we are not free and morally responsible in the way we think we are. As Wegner puts it, “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

---

*E-mail address:* [enahmias@gsu.edu](mailto:enahmias@gsu.edu).

<sup>1</sup> See Wegner (2005, 2004), Wegner, Sparrow, and Winerman (2004), Wegner and Wheatley (1999), and especially Wegner (2002).

we are agents. It seems we cause what we do. . . It is sobering and ultimately accurate to call all this an illusion” (2002, pp. 341–342).

But to determine if these claims are accurate requires, first, some analysis of what the experience of willing an action is, as well as its relation to the experiences of agency and authorship, and second, some analysis of what it means to say that an experience is illusory. Each of these tasks is monumental, so I will have to be somewhat sketchy. After examining Wegner’s ‘theory of apparent mental causation,’ I will argue that this theory gives us no reason to conclude that our relevant experiences of agency and authorship are illusory. More specifically, I will argue that: (1) having illusory experiences is not the same as having mistaken theories, (2) it would take a different sort of evidence than Wegner presents to show our experience of agency is illusory, and (3) the experience of *agency* or of willing an action is importantly different than the experience of *authorship* (or being the source of one’s actions), so that in whatever sense the former *may* be shown to be mistaken, the latter need not be. Though my discussion will focus on Wegner’s views, they may be applicable to other views that have a similar structure.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The theory of apparent mental causation

Daniel Wegner’s experiments are ingenious and the unusual phenomena he describes in his work raise important questions about the psychology of agency, including the sorely neglected topic of the phenomenology of agency. In general, Wegner focuses on two types of situations that suggest there are notable exceptions to the ostensible rule that our voluntary actions are caused by our conscious intentions to perform them. First, there are situations in which people perform an action that looks voluntary but they do not experience themselves, or their own thoughts, to be the cause of the action. Examples include automatisms, alien hand syndrome, facilitated communication, and schizophrenia’s alien control. Conversely, there are situations in which people experience relevant thoughts about performing an action but the action is *not* in fact caused by those thoughts. Wegner has developed experiments that induce in his subjects an enhanced sense of agency and authorship for actions they do not in fact bring about (or even perform) simply because they are prompted to have a conscious thought that corresponds with an observed action and that occurs just prior to it.

For instance, in the ‘helping hands’ experiment, subjects look in a mirror at the movements of a confederate’s arms which are placed under the subjects’ arms to look like their own. When subjects hear a command for a certain type of arm movement (e.g., ‘make the OK sign’) that occurs just prior to their seeing the arm of the confederate making that movement, the subjects report an increased sense of controlling or willing the action compared to those cases when the command subjects hear does *not* match the movement they see in the mirror (or that comes well before the movement). That is, some sense of agency or authorship can be induced for actions the subjects clearly did not perform.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Bargh (2005) and Prinz (2003), who writes, “There appears to be no support for the folk psychology notion that the act follows the will, in the sense that physical action is caused by mental events that precede them” (p. 26).

<sup>3</sup> See Wegner et al. (2004). See also the ‘I-Spy’ experiment in Wegner and Wheatley (1999).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات