Is Mental Life Possible Without the Will?
A Review of Daniel M. Wegner's *The Illusion of Conscious Will*

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ABSTRACT: Though we share an irresistible introspection that we possess a will governing our behavior and not controlled by outside forces or previous states, empirical research shows that such a will does not exist. Rather, actions are triggered unconsciously, and a memory-related part of the brain produces a narrative to explain the behavior after the fact.

This is a terrifying book. It demolishes the idea of free will that has dominated Western thought for 3000 years, not with just another philosopher's opinions but with dispassionate research, some of it from the author's own laboratory, combined with evidence from a surprising variety of scientific and non-scientific sources. This is evidence that cannot be denied.

The demolition of free will violates the very core of our existence as autonomous human beings, capable of planning, foresight, and responsible action. Who or what are we without the power to choose, to refuse, to accept, to deny, to sacrifice and struggle? "Nothing seems to us to belong so closely to our personality, to be so completely our property as our will" (W. Wundt, quoted in Jaensch, 1920). According to Wegner, willed acts and feelings are illusions, and always have been; they are stories that one part of our brain makes up after another part has acted.

In an abstract sense, the idea of free will has been untenable for a long time. In Western thought it is bound up with the medieval theological concept of the immortal soul, that part of us that goes to heaven or hell when we die. It is non-physical, escaping the limitations of behavior as well as the inevitability of death and decay. The demise of the soul is bound up with Cartesian dualism, which made it clear that the non-physical and the physical could not interact. A physical entity, after all, must by definition obey the laws of physics, being affected only by other physical influences. Since the soul is non-physical, it could not affect our physical behavior, including our communications of feelings, thoughts and memories. Descartes exploited this idea to make behavior part of the natural world, isolated from the purview of the church and its inquisitors. Until now the impossibility of the soul, and with it the impossibility of free will, have been hidden behind a haze of uncertainty about the ultimate causes of behavior. Like the exact moment of losing consciousness in falling asleep, they seemed forever just out of reach.

Modern neurophysiology, though, leaves no room for the soul. A neurophysiologist can change our perceptions, our opinions, our motivations and memories by removing or stimulating tiny but well-defined fragments of the brain, or by administering small amounts of a hormone or neurotransmitter to the right place. What seemed a font of life is now part logical engine, part chemical soup, and all vulnerable to outside physical influences. Specific neurological deficits can make us feel that our family members are impostors, that a leg does not belong to us, that others are plotting against us, even that we are ourselves dead, all deeply personal feelings yet driven by ordinary interactions of neurons. Certain drugs or stimulation of parts of the temporal lobe can even elicit religious experiences.

Physical penetration into the depths of the self on this scale allows no free will -- neurons are affected only by other neurons, not by will or effort. The only remaining alternatives are a deterministic mechanism or an element of randomness. Determinism obviously would rule out free will. But the workings of the axons, dendrites and synapses are only determined to a first approximation. Unfortunately the indeterminacy of random errors does not help, for free will is defined as goal-directed, not random. In the neurophysiological context, randomness and chaos offer an escape from predetermination, but fall short of restoring free will.

Until recently considerations of free will have been the purview of a branch of modern philosophy, the philosophy of mind. Wegner makes short work of the philosophers, for without empirical progress there is nothing more to go on than yet another speculation or introspection. The introspection of free will, though irresistably powerful, is not science. And science is just a systematic way of looking closely at the world and at ourselves.

If free will is no longer tenable, what is the alternative? Wegner's thesis is that behavior is always driven by unconscious processes, motivations that organize behaviors without the intervention of a will. Once the behaviors happen, a part of the brain connected with organizing memory has the job of making sense of the behavior, fitting it into a consistent behavioral story about ourselves. The brain uses the story in turn to organize further unconsciously triggered behaviors.

This idea is testable, and test it Wegner does, with a variety of ingenious experiments designed to investigate how the process works. The duality of memory and action can be seen in split-brain patients, when the non-linguistic hemisphere initiates an act while the linguistic hemisphere justifies it. When sensory information that informs action is segregated in the two hemispheres, the justifying process becomes obvious.

In normal subjects, actions can be triggered without a sense of willing them, and conversely an act can be intended but not executed. Wegner's subjects can be convinced that they are willing an act when they are not, while under other conditions they perform behaviors without a sense of willed control. By separating the action and the story, Wegner shows with double dissociation that they are distinct processes. After these strictly empirical considerations, Wegner considers a number of behaviors and traditions that had previously been written off as bizarre, kooky, irrational. The ouija board, popular in Victorian parlors, had a pointer that mysteriously indicated letters of a message when supported by a group of believers. According to Wegner, the participants were unconsciously moving the board without ascribing the actions to themselves. Other psychic phenomena yield to similar explanations, supporting in Wegner's interpretation the separation of will and action.

If free will is an illusion, what of all the virtues that it supports? Here the going gets even tougher. The scientific argument for a lack of free will, and the argument is logically overwhelming, is easy to state but hard to accept. A consistent illusion, however, defines reality for us just as surely as reality itself does. The illusion that our eyes provide a detailed, sharp and full-color image of the world, for example, is physiologically unsupported, yet the consistency of the illusion gives us the confidence to operate in a visual world that we barely apprehend. Similarly, the feeling of will helps us to organize our behaviors and to interpret the behaviors of others. In the end, the illusion of will is itself a story we tell ourselves to justify our behaviors and experiences.

References

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