

# Was Wegner rejecting mental causality?

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## Abstract

Daniel Wegner's theory of apparent mental causation is often misread. His aim was not to question the causal effectiveness of conscious mental states, such as intentions. Rather, he attempted to show that our subjective sense of agency is not a completely reliable indicator of the causality of action and needs to be replaced by more objective means of inquiry.

## Keywords

action, conscious intention, conscious will, mental causality, Daniel Wegner

Wegner's views on the nature of human action have become influential in psychology, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of action. Wegner is usually read as defending the thesis that there is no mental causality: no conscious mental states are ever among the real causes of the corresponding actions. Our conscious intentions and other mental states only *seem* to drive and direct our actions. Although conscious intentions often precede our actions, in principle they could be removed from the chain of events leading to the action, blocked, or bypassed, and the same result—the same overt action—would obtain.

This reading of Wegner is frequent. To give some examples, Alfred Mele (2009) claims that for Wegner, “intentions are not among the causes of corresponding actions” (p. 1). He repeats the claim in a later publication: “Wegner . . . maintains that conscious intentions and decisions are never among the causes of corresponding actions (Mele, 2018, p. 1). According to Markus E. Schlosser (2012), it has often been argued that empirical evidence “undermines our common-sense assumptions concerning the efficacy of conscious intentions. One of the most influential advocates of this challenge has been Daniel Wegner” (p. 135). Christoph Lumer (2014) believes that Wegner “presents an impressive subset of examples which seem to show that there are actions, even lots of them, without underlying intention—which, of course, contradicts the idea that actions

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are caused by intentions” (p. 107; the argument of Lumer’s paper is that Wegner tries to undermine the classical “intentionalist–causalist theory of actions,” i.e., the idea that conscious intentions cause actions). Andrea Lavazza (2019) attributes to Wegner the thesis of epiphenomenalism according to which “seemingly causally relevant conscious processes, such as intention formation or decisions, do not play any active causal role in the production of the correspondent action” (p. 5). The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on mental causation makes the same attribution of epiphenomenalism and contends that Wegner’s account of the mechanisms of agency “could have ancillary implications for the physical efficacy of mental states generally” (Robb & Heil, 2019).

I suggest that this reading of Wegner is incorrect. I admit that Wegner sometimes speaks as if he were rejecting the causal efficacy of human mental states; we will see instances of this kind of talk later. However, these claims need to be understood in the context of his work on human action. This context reveals that his view of mental causality was different. He did not aim to dislodge the important common-sense notion that conscious mental states are—at least in some cases—among the causes of actions. He says this much in a number of places in his published writings. His negative argument was different. He claimed that our subjective sense of being the authors of our actions is not quite reliable.

I will defend my interpretation of Wegner’s theory by first clarifying what he meant by “conscious will” and what picture of human agency he was criticizing. Then, I will proceed to examine the claims that seemingly contradict my interpretation. I will show that, understood in the broader context of his work, the problematic passages in his writings can be understood in a way that allows for mental causality. I will conclude by indicating Wegner’s preferred way of investigating the reality of mental causality, or lack of it.

## **Wegner on conscious will and apparent mental causality**

At the core of Wegner’s contribution to the theory of action is the distinction between *conscious will* and *empirical will* (Wegner, 2002, Chapter 1). Conscious (or “phenomenal”) will is the subjectively felt sense of being the author of an action. It is not a capacity or power to produce voluntary actions, as the title may misleadingly suggest. Rather, it is a kind of feeling with distinctive phenomenology. Actions accompanied by this “authorship emotion” feel “willed.” Those that are not so accompanied do not feel like our own actions.<sup>1</sup> Empirical will, on the other hand, is the sum of those causal mechanisms that produce an action.

Wegner’s writings on agency are primarily concerned with this subjective feeling of being in charge of one’s actions. His main point was not that the conscious will does not causally contribute to action production. As Hardcastle (2004) and Mele (2009) remark, it would be odd to expect that the subjective feeling accompanying some of our actions is actually causing the actions. It is not my *experience* of willing something, but my actually willing something that does, or does not, cause the corresponding action. My turning the light on is the result of me switching the flip, not of my conscious experience of willing to turn the light on. By the same token, a subject’s feeling of consciously willing to flip the switch cannot be among the actual causes of the subject’s flipping the switch, but

some of their mental states—such as their proximal intention to flip the switch—could be (Mele, 2009, pp. 32 ff., 148). Instead of arguing against the causal impotence of the feeling of conscious will, Wegner aimed to demonstrate the epistemic unreliability of this feeling, and proposed a hypothetical explanation of how it arises in us.

Wegner's experimental work supports the unreliability claim by showing the various ways in which the feeling of conscious will is manipulable. In some circumstances, the feeling of authorship may mark an action as mine even if I did not cause it to happen. Wegner calls such cases the *illusion of control*. In other circumstances, the converse may happen: I may not feel the action as being mine even though I causally brought it about. Wegner calls instances of this class *automatisms*. Together, both phenomena form dissociations between exercise of agency and the phenomenology of agency.<sup>2</sup>

Illusions of control and automatisms demonstrate the double dissociation of the actual agency and of the subjective feelings of agency. The feeling of conscious will is not a completely reliable indicator of the real causality of action. Yet did Wegner want to say that our mental states, such as intentions, are always cut off from the action-producing causal chains—from the *empirical will*?

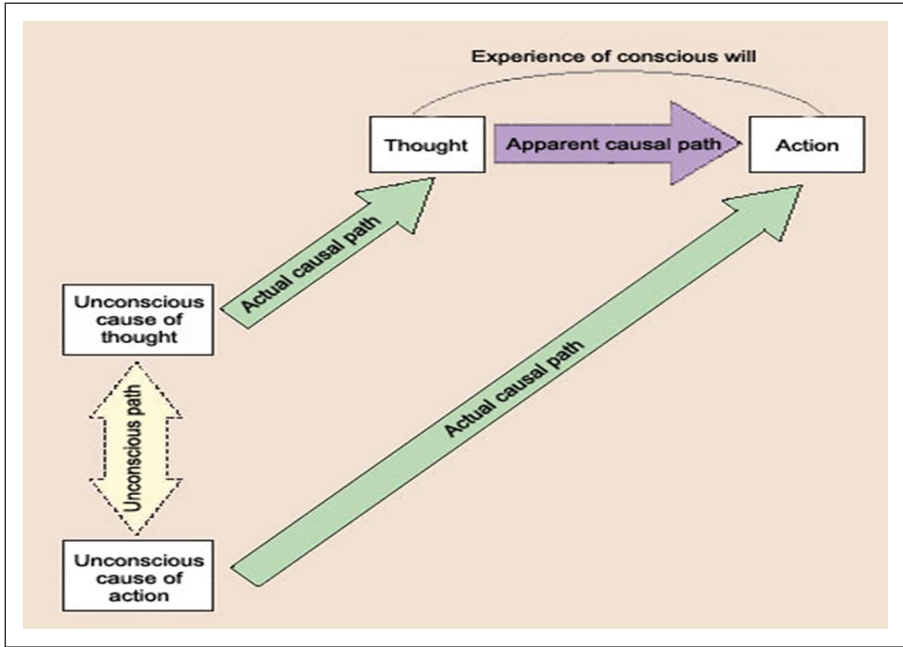
Many interpreters believe he did. What is their argument? The experiments on the dissociations of the feelings of conscious will from the real agency alone cannot be sufficient. Such dissociations only manifest the manipulability of the feelings of agency but cannot constitute a proof that no conscious mental state ever contributes to action production. I believe it was Wegner's theory of "apparent mental causality" that persuaded the interpreters that Wegner aimed to dislodge mental causality.

Wegner did not only demonstrate the manipulability of the sense of action authorship. He also proposed a speculative view as to how this feeling arises in us: the theory of apparent mental causality (AMC for short). According to the theory, the feeling of agency arises as a result of an inferential process. The feeling is dependent upon three conditions: (a) the action followed our conscious thought (*the condition of priority*); (b) there was a match in content between the thought and the action (*the condition of consistency*); and (c) we are not aware of any competing cause (or causes) of the action (*the condition of exclusivity*; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999). Whenever all three conditions obtain, we make an inference that we are the causal source of the action, and the feeling of agency appears.

## Interpreting the AMC theory

Thus far, the AMC theory is only a theory about how a certain distinctive feeling arises in us when we act, or seemingly act. However, Wegner summarized the AMC theory with a figure that, I believe, is directly responsible for much of the interpretive confusion (see Figure 1).

The problem with this picture is that it seems to put forward a *general* theory of action production. In particular, the theory seems to exclude all conscious mental states from action production. In the AMC schema, Wegner seems to have risen above the circumscribed theory of how agentic feelings arise, and entered the metaphysical debate about mental causation. However, I think that this interpretation of his motives should be resisted.



**Figure 1.** Apparent mental causality.

Note. Reprinted from "The Mind's Best Trick: How We Experience Conscious Will," by D. M. Wegner, 2003, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7(2), p.66 ([https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613\(03\)00002-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1364-6613(03)00002-0)). Copyright 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd.

I suggest that we must interpret Wegner's picture of AMC in the broader context of his writings on action. This broader context makes it clear that Wegner believed conscious mental states may causally contribute towards actions. To begin with, this is how Wegner characterizes empirical will, the collection of those causally sufficient mechanisms that produce an action:

Each of our actions is really the culmination of an intricate set of physical *and mental processes*, including *psychological mechanisms that correspond to the traditional concept of will*, in that they involve linkages between our thoughts and our actions [emphasis added]. (Wegner, 2002, p. 27)

Earlier in the same book, empirical will is said to involve causal relations between "people's thoughts, beliefs, intentions, plans, or other conscious psychological states and their subsequent actions" (Wegner, 2002, p. 15). Upon reading these words, would anyone unfamiliar with the AMC theory come to the conclusion that Wegner is rejecting mental causality? I doubt it. Wegner seems to accept not only the bare possibility but also the reality of mental causation.

Other passages in his writings tell the same story. In his 2003 article, "The Mind's Best Trick," Wegner reproduces the AMC schema from his earlier writings, but immediately adds the proviso: "Does all this mean that conscious thought does not cause action?"

It does not mean this at all” (p. 68). As if aware of the danger that people will read his theory as a defence of the epiphenomenality of conscious mental states, Wegner hastens to fend off this reading. In his 2005 paper, “Who Is the Controller of Controlled Processes?,” we read the following words to the same effect:

Questions of whether thought actually does cause action, for example, have been left in peace, and the issue of the role of consciousness in the causation of action has been ignored as well. This is because the focus . . . is the experience of conscious will, not the operation of the will. (p. 32)

Finally, in reply to the critics of his 2002 book *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, Wegner seems genuinely puzzled as to why people think he was proposing a general theory of the causal relations between conscious thought and action (Wegner, 2004, p. 683).

Not all interpreters have missed these important passages. For instance, Lumer (2014, pp. 111 ff.) draws attention to some of them.<sup>3</sup> However, because he believes that Wegner was really denying mental causation, he is perplexed by what looks to him as ad hoc retractions. In my view, the quoted passages do express Wegner’s true views on mental causality. The challenge is therefore to show that the AMC picture does not contradict the possibility of real mental causality.

There is no denying that the AMC picture is unfortunate. It does seem to exclude conscious mental states from action causality. Still, we need to bear in mind that Wegner was consistently proposing the AMC theory as the explanation of how the feelings of agency arise, not of the empirical will. It cannot be sufficiently stressed that Wegner never meant to propose a general theory of action production, let alone a theory that would exclude all conscious states from the mechanisms of the empirical will. The AMC theory is a theory about how the causality of action *appears* to a subject. It is literally a theory of *apparent* mental causality. Apparent mental causation, for Wegner, is an inferential process, as we have seen. It depends on the fulfilment of the three conditions: priority, consistency, and exclusivity. The fact and mechanisms of apparent mental causality in no way put the causal efficacy of mental states in doubt. On the contrary, apparent mental causation is “fundamentally separate from the mechanistic process of *real mental causation* [emphasis added]” (Wegner, 2002, p. 97). This would be an extremely odd way of arguing if Wegner did not believe there to be at least a possibility of real mental causality.

## From apparent mental causality to real mental causality

To repeat, Wegner focuses on the subjective feeling of the conscious will, and tries to show that it is not a completely reliable indicator of real action causality. Because of this epistemic unreliability of the conscious will, Wegner suggests, we must use other means to determine whether and how conscious mental states contribute to action causality.<sup>4</sup> He writes:

If the feeling of conscious will is not authentic, can thought still cause action? Of course it can. The idea that the experience of conscious will is a poor indicator of a causal relation between

mind and action is not the same as saying that mind does not have a causal relationship to action. It could, and in fact we all should be fairly certain that it does. (Wegner, 2004, p. 683)

Wegner's (2002) positive proposal is that we use the standard scientific procedures of psychology to determine the actual contribution of conscious intentions to action. That is, we need to determine "the causality of the person's conscious thoughts as established by a scientific analysis of their covariation with the person's behavior" (p. 14). The way to do it is to treat conscious intentions and other conscious mental states related to action as variables. We test the subject in situations in which these states are present and when they are absent. If the absence of the mental state causes a significant decrease in the quality of the subject's performance, we can conclude that the state causally has contributed to the subject's actions.

This view is provocative in that it refuses to take folk-psychological attributions of action causality at face value. However, it is in no way a denial of the possibility of real mental causality. On the contrary, the scientific procedure may allow us to establish the reality of mental causation in a very strong, objective sense. A neurophysiological study by Zschorlich and Köhling (2013) provides an example of how this can be done in practice. Zschorlich and Köhling used transcranial magnetic stimulation to test the causal role of conscious intention in wrist movements. The intention was operationalized as a conscious effort to produce a specific movement. Their results speak in favour of a strong causal role of proximal conscious intentions in behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to deny that the causal role of conscious proximal intentions in action is probably quite limited. The subjective accessibility of conscious intentions may seduce us into believing that conscious mental states produce actions *directly*. The picture is that we consciously intend to do something and the action follows automatically, without the need for intervening neural mechanisms. Wegner would deny this simple picture of real mental causality. We do not "internally perceive" how our mental states cause our actions. Mental causality can be real in the sense that mental states can sometimes become part of the causal nexus of action-producing forces. However, this causal nexus is a massively complicated business involving a plethora of neural mechanisms. Most of this complex machinery operates below the radar of consciousness. Conscious intentions, decisions, and so forth are at best only a small part of this vast machinery.

## Conclusion

Wegner is often thought to present a great obstacle to the defence of mental causality. If my reading of Wegner is correct, these worries are misplaced: he was not questioning the reality of mental causality. His writings explore the subjective feeling of agency, not the underlying causality of human action. My overall impression is that Wegner would not have been surprised in the least if it turned out, thanks to science, that our mental states are often causally effective.

The advantage of my reading of him is that it allows one to interpret Wegner as a consistent thinker. The opposing, common reading of Wegner—as a denier of mental causality—paints a picture of him as a theorist who rejected all mental causality, but every now and then irrationally remarked that he was not denying mental causation at all.

I believe that an interpretation that allows an author to be reasonably consistent is preferable to one that renders them deeply irrational.

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### Notes

1. In terms of the contemporary neuroscience of action, Wegner’s conscious will is the “sense of agency.” As Moore (2016) defines it, a sense of agency is “the feeling of control over actions and their consequences” (p. 1). Wegner (2004) himself uses the term “sense of agency” (p. 654).
2. See the account and examples of illusions of control and automatism in Wegner (2002, Chapters 1, 3, 4).
3. See also Schlosser (2012, p. 139), and Walter (2014, p. 2222, fn. 8).
4. Note, however, that Wegner does not claim that the feeling of conscious will is *always* illusory; only that it sometimes is. Often, the feelings of agency are veridical, tracking the actions that we do, in fact, cause (Wegner, 2002, p. 97; 2004, pp. 658, 683). That is, the feelings can be veridical even if they are not appropriately causally hooked up with the systems actually producing actions.
5. Wegner (2002, p. 36) mentions a couple of earlier scientific attempts to prove the causal effectiveness of conscious intentions.

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