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Behavioral and Brain Sciences / Volume 27 / Issue 05 / October 2004, pp 674 - 675  
DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X04390151, Published online: 17 March 2005

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### How to cite this article:

Johannes Schultz, Natalie Sebanz and Chris Frith (2004). Conscious will in the absence of ghosts, hypnotists, and other people. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 27, pp 674-675 doi:10.1017/S0140525X04390151

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## Conscious will in the absence of ghosts, hypnotists, and other people

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**Abstract:** We suggest that certain experiences reported by patients with schizophrenia show that priority, consistency, and exclusivity are not sufficient for the experience of willing an action. Furthermore, we argue that even if priority, consistency, and exclusivity cause the experience of being the author of an action, this does not mean that conscious will is an illusion.

Wegner (2002) discusses an impressive variety of phenomena demonstrating that when the three conditions, priority, consistency, and exclusivity are met, an action feels willed, whereas when one or more do not apply, the cause of an action is attributed to forces other than the self. He convincingly shows that the feeling of conscious will can be erroneous, such that a person can either believe he was the author of an action even though he was not, or that he can believe he was not the author while in actual fact he was. The strongest version of Wegner's claim would be that priority, consistency, and exclusivity are both necessary and sufficient for the experience of willing an action. However, we suggest that certain experiences reported by patients with schizophrenia show that priority, consistency, and exclusivity are not sufficient for the experience of willing an action.

Patients with delusions of control report that their actions, even quite trivial actions, are being controlled, not by themselves, but by some alien force. Patients report such abnormal experiences even though they have the prior intention to make the action, the action made is consistent with their intention, and there is no obvious ambiguity about who is making the action. We have suggested elsewhere (Hohwy & Frith 2004) that what is missing is an aspect of

the feeling of what it is like to be in control of one's actions; knowing what is going to happen and, at the same time, minimal awareness of the sensory consequences. Thus, will has a specific phenomenology in addition to the knowledge of authorship.

We also propose that, even if priority, consistency, and exclusivity are sufficient for the experience of being the author of an action, this does not mean that conscious will is an illusion. The situations Wegner draws upon to claim that conscious will is simply an emotion of authorship are all very specific and differ in important ways from everyday settings. First, they are characterized by a lack of exclusivity, such that the intention to perform an action can either be attributed to oneself or another entity, be it a hypnotist, a ghost, or simply another person. Faced with a lack of exclusivity, we are likely to attribute authorship of an action to somebody else – unless priority and consistency are reinforced as in the “I Spy” study, wherein people are tricked into attributing to themselves an intention they never had. In everyday life, most of our actions and intentions can usually unambiguously be attributed to ourselves. Second, Wegner focuses on situations where intentions in action rather than prior intentions (Searle 1983) are at stake. He investigates the feeling of authorship in situations where one did not have a strong prior intention to perform a specific action. However, in everyday life, many of our actions seem to be the consequence of prior intentions that have been formed following conscious deliberation. A recent experiment (Lackner et al., in preparation) suggests that when a prior intention for an action has been formed, performance of the action is less susceptible to the influence of a distracter (a voice referring either to the action to be performed or an action not to be performed) than when the action is only accompanied by an intention in action. It seems that Wegner, in his remarkable study of the phenomenal will, has extended his conclusions slightly too far to include all kinds of intentions, and while his thought-provoking ideas explain cases of intentions in action, they do not explain prior intentions very well.

Finally, we suggest that from the finding that the phenomenal will can be illusory it does not follow that the empirical will, defined as “the causality of the person's conscious thoughts as established by a scientific analysis of their covariation with the person's behavior” (Wegner 2002, p. 14) is also an illusion. Although Wegner claims to address only the phenomenal will, he uses demonstrations of how the feeling of conscious will can be erroneous at times to draw conclusions about the empirical will, suggesting that all or most of our voluntary actions are caused by unconscious forces rather than conscious intentions. From the observation that the feeling of conscious will and actions are not causally related in certain specific conditions such as hypnosis, automatism, and particular experimental settings, it does not automatically follow that conscious thoughts are generally not causally related to actions.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Johannes Schultz and Chris Frith are supported by the Wellcome Trust. Natalie Sebanz is supported by the Max-Planck Gesellschaft.

## Is the illusion of conscious will an illusion?

Robert J. Sternberg

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**Abstract:** This book is a tour de force in showing that what we believe to be actions dictated by conscious will are not, in fact, wholly dictated by conscious will. However, Wegner has fallen into the trap of making claims that go beyond his data to make his case more compelling and newsworthy. Psychology needs to be informed by common sense.