

FREE WILL XVI

Wegner: The Illusion of Conscious Will I

Why does Wegner think that it 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. 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.)

Worries:

- (i) Does the argument from illusion work even in the case of perception?
- (ii) Does it work in the specific case here? What is a conscious willing?