Conscious Will

What makes us feel that we are consciously willing our actions? Is this feeling a true indication of how our actions are caused? Or is it an interpretation, a way the mind has of keeping track of what it thinks it may have done? This course examines the second possibility—that the experience of consciously willing actions comes from the mind’s efforts to understand its own authorship. It turns out that this idea leads to new approaches to classic questions of free will vs. determinism and mind vs. body, and also helps to understand unusual phenomena of will or volition—from phantom limbs, Ouija boards, and dowsing rods to hypnosis, spirit possession, auditory hallucinations, and dissociative identity disorder. Conscious will can be approached on many levels, from the neuropsychological to the cognitive, social, and cultural, and each of these is useful in coming to an understanding of how people gain a sense of self as a conscious causal agent.

REQUIREMENTS

Comments on the Main Readings. Each week there will be one or more main readings for the class (listed first under each topic in the outline below). Your assignment is to do the readings and then turn in a page (or so) of comments on the week’s readings by the Tuesday of that week. The comments should include at least 2 of these 4 elements: a summary (a few sentences summarizing the reading), an idea (the most interesting or important idea you found in the reading or had about the topic), a question (a query, comment, complaint, wish, issue for class discussion), or a personal example (something you have experienced that is relevant to the topic). This requirement accounts for 20% of your course grade.

Class Participation. Your discussion, questions, and comments in class will account for 20% of your course grade. Late arrival and/or absence from class are considered lapses in participation.

Individual Reports on the Special Readings. In addition to the main readings, there are several special readings noted for each week’s topic. Each member of the class will select 2 of the weekly topics and do one of the special readings those weeks. A 10-minute presentation on the special reading will be done in class on the Thursday of that week (beginning Sept. 28). Your assignment is to present the special readings clearly and creatively, and to explain how the reading relates to the week’s topic. This requirement accounts for 25% of your course grade.

Research Project. A paper examining a specific topic in the psychological study of conscious will accounts for 35% of your grade. A proposal for the project (under one page) is due Oct. 28; a written project paper in APA style is due Dec. 7; and a brief presentation of your project to be given in class should be prepared for Dec. 7 as well.
OUTLINE AND READINGS

The main readings are available from the instructor. Readings labeled ICW are chapters in Wegner, D. M. (2002). *The illusion of conscious will*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. The special readings for individual reports (*) are available on file in 1472 William James Hall, and the background sources (+) are available from the library.

**Sept. 21/23**  Organizational Meetings

**Sept. 28/30**  Mind Perception

*ICW*, Chapter 1: The illusion


**Oct. 5/7**  Brain, Body, and Will

*ICW*, Chapter 2: Brain and will


**Oct. 12/14**  
**Apparent Mental Causation**

*ICW*, Chapter 3: The experience of will


**Oct. 19/21**  
**Automatisms and Ideomotor Action**

*ICW*, Chapter 4: An analysis of automatisms

Oct. 26/28  Automaticity and Unconscious Processes


Nov. 2/4  Self-Perception and Interpretation

*ICW, Chapter 5: Protecting the illusion*


Nov. 9/16  Action Projection and Virtual Agency

ICW, Chapter 6: Action Projection
ICW, Chapter 7: Virtual Agency


Nov. 18/23  Hypnosis

ICW, Chapter 8: Hypnosis and Will


**Nov. 30/Dec. 2**  
**Why is There Will?**

*ICW, Chapter 9: The Mind’s Compass*  


**Dec. 7/14/16/21**  
**Project Presentations**