
Acts of Will?

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I don't know why I did it. But today I can recognize that events back then were part of a lifelong pattern in which thinking and doing have either come together or failed to come together—I think I reach a conclusion, I turn the conclusion into a decision, and then I discover that acting on the decision is something else entirely, and that doing so may proceed from the decision, but then again it may not. Often enough in my life I have done things I had not decided to do. Something—whatever that may be—goes into action; “it” goes to the woman I don't want to see anymore, “it” makes the remark to the boss that costs me my head, “it” keeps on smoking although I have decided to quit, and then quits smoking just when I've accepted the fact that I'm a smoker and always will be. I don't mean to say that thinking and reaching decisions have no influence on behavior. But behavior does not merely enact whatever has already been thought through and decided. It has its own sources, and is my behavior, quite independently, just as my thoughts are my thoughts, and my decisions my decisions. (Schlink, 1997, p. 20)

The present series of four articles have been written by distinguished social and clinical psychologists and address the issue of will and the frequent disconnect between what people intend to do and what they actually do, as so eloquently expressed above by Bernhard Schlink (1997). The authors of all four articles in the present series suggest that we perceive ourselves to have far more control over our everyday behavior than we actually do. Moreover, these authors present a conceptual and empirical framework for understanding the causes of our behavior for the times when we recognize that “will” has broken down, and we are unable to act as we desire. According to these authors, the source of behavioral control comes not from active awareness but from subtle cues in the environment and from thought processes and information not readily accessible to consciousness. The theory and data presented in these articles represent recent fundamental breakthroughs in the understanding of motivations, free will, and behavioral control. Because of the importance of this issue to all psychologists—both basic researchers of human behavior and practicing clinicians, *American Psychologist* has devoted nearly all of the July issue to integrative articles on this topic. The premise of all four articles is this: There are mental activations of which we are unaware and environmental cues to which we are not consciously attending that have a profound effect on our behavior and that help explain the complex puzzle of

human motivation and actions that are seemingly inexplicable, even to the individual performing the actions.

In the first article, John A. Bargh and Tanya L. Chartrand focus on how many everyday behaviors, prejudices, and feelings are controlled by automatic processes, which are sensitive to environmental cues of which we are not consciously aware, thus “leaving the conscious mind free to roam elsewhere.” In the next article, Daniel M. Wegner and Thalia Wheatley argue that the sense that we have intentionally caused an action is frequently in error. They discuss the principles that lead to the experience that one has performed a conscious, willful act, when in fact such an act did not occur. In the third article, Peter M. Gollwitzer addresses a remarkable and simple technique for exploiting automatic processes to enhance the completion of important goals. This work has stunning implications for increasing the success of desired goals by exploiting environmental cues and unconscious processes. Finally, the series concludes with an article by Irving Kirsch and Steven Jay Lynn on the role of automatic processes in the practice of clinical psychology, with many helpful observations and suggestions of interest to the practicing clinician. I believe this series should be of profound interest to all psychologists—academic, applied, and those in clinical practice. These articles challenge the reader's view of reality and of one's own actions in a rich and provocative manner. We hope that these articles will be a fertile source for both new research efforts and paradigms and the development of new therapeutic techniques in the future.

It was a pleasure to work on this series. A great deal of interchange and commentary on various drafts of the articles occurred among the authors, and I appreciate the authors' free exchange of ideas in addition to their work on the individual articles. I join the authors in thanking Larry Jacoby of New York University and Ian Skurnik of the University of Michigan for outstanding advice.

REFERENCE

Schlink, B. (1997). *The reader*. New York: Random House.

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