Do we consciously cause what we do, or do our actions happen to us? Most people are willing to accept that these alternatives are in fact opposites, and then they immediately become embroiled in argument. Determinism? Free will? Some middle ground? Philosophers have given us plenty of “isms” to use in describing the positions that can be taken on this question, meanwhile not really answering it in a satisfying way. Psychologists and neuroscientists, in turn, haven’t helped things much by often assuming that our actions are happenings that must, of course, be caused by prior events—and thus that questions of conscious will are not answerable. Students of religion and of the law, for their part, weigh in with substantial arguments on this question as well, anchoring the problem with deep concerns about responsibility and morality.

This is a book about a different sort of answer to the question. Here it is: Yes, we feel that we consciously cause what we do; and yes, our actions happen to us. Rather than opposites, conscious will and psychological determinism can be friends. Such friendship comes from realizing that the feeling of conscious will is created by the mind and brain just as human actions themselves are created by the mind and brain. The answer to the question of conscious will, then, may involve exploring how the mechanisms of the human mind create the experience of will. And the experience of conscious will that is created in this way need not be a mere epiphenomenon. Rather than a ghost in the machine, the experience of conscious will is a feeling that helps us to appreciate and remember our authorship of the things our minds and bodies do.

Now, of course, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. This is to be expected because I’ve already written this whole book and you’re just starting to
look it over. Let me just say here that as a scientific psychologist involved in research on how people think about themselves and others, I’ve always found it frustrating that no one seems to have thought all this through and done the proper research. So many intriguing philosophical questions have been approached in useful ways through science, and this is one that is still just begging to be addressed. If psychological and neural mechanisms are responsible for human behavior, why does it feel as though we are consciously causing the things we do? It turns out there is a world of scientific research on this question.

In these pages, this research is approached from several directions. We look at the conditions that influence illusions of the experience of will—the cases when people feel they are willing an act that they in fact are not doing, or when they feel they are not willing an act that they indeed are doing. We explore conscious will in settings such as hypnosis, Ouija board spelling, automatic writing, and facilitated communication. We examine, too, such unusual phenomena as spirit possession, dissociative identity disorder, and trance channeling, to grasp some of the extreme transformations of the experience of will. Psychological disorders—some caused by detectable brain damage and others, such as schizophrenia, by more subtle processes are examined also, to understand how the experience of conscious will is modified in these conditions. The goal of this book is to put conscious will into perspective as a topic of psychological study. To do this, we need to understand how conscious will might be an illusion, a feeling that comes and goes independent of any actual causal relationship between our thoughts and our actions.

Unlike anything I have ever studied before, the topic of conscious will excites interest and controversy. At first I didn’t like the controversy—the heated, seemingly interminable question periods following my talks, during which audience members pointed out the gaping holes in my thinking and in my head. More than once I found myself closing the question period early so I could escape the interrogation. As it turned out, though, these discussions were essential for shaping this book, and I am indebted to the many people who helped in this way. I express my thanks here for their wisdom and guidance.

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