

The question of how we become aware of our own intentions has been widely debated in cognitive science, especially in relation to free will, with some scholars, such as Daniel M. Wegner, arguing that the process is interpretive, based on our own bodily movement, and others, such as Patrick Haggard, arguing that the process is perceptual, based on awareness of our intentions themselves. An idea that has not been sufficiently explored in this literature is that we could come to be aware of our own intentions by way of interpreting our own sensory states. Here I explicate this proposal, drawing on ideas developed recently in the debate on self-knowledge, and show that the proposal has advantages, when compared to its rivals.

Specifically, I will be looking at Haggard's three objections to Wegner's proposal, presented in the former's recently published review of the literature on the neurocognitive bases of volition, in order to show that the interpretive-sensory access account can resist these objections, as well as at empirical evidence that the perceptual account finds harder to accommodate. On the one hand, I will discuss cases of bodily movement without a feeling of volition, such as the case of involuntary tics in people with Tourette syndrome, as well as the complementary cases of a feeling of volition without bodily movement, such as when the supplementary motor cortex is artificially stimulated to induce this feeling, or when subjects form an intention to move and then desist from implementing it. On the other hand, I will discuss cases where delayed perception of movement shifts participants' judgement of intention timing, as well as cases where the participants' judgement of action timing is influenced by the success or failure to attain the action's goal. I propose to look at these empirical findings from the perspective of the Interpretive-Sensory Access theory of self-knowledge, recently developed by Peter Carruthers, which has yet to receive due attention in the debate on free will, and which claims that we gain knowledge of our own intentions by turning our mindreading capacities onto ourselves. It allows that we interpret our own intentions based not only on bodily movement, but also on the full spectrum of our sensory and quasi-sensory mental states, including proprioceptive and interoceptive ones, as well as inner speech and other forms of mental imagery.

I argue that awareness of mental imagery of the possible bodily movements and their outcomes makes us interpret ourselves as intending to move, and this happens in absence both of actual movement and of perceptual access to our own intentions. In conclusion, there is an account promising to adequately explain the fact that awareness of one's own intentions is influenced by both internal and external factors: by such things as perception of one's bodily movement and its consequences, as well as by something inside, which becomes indispensable in absence of bodily movement.