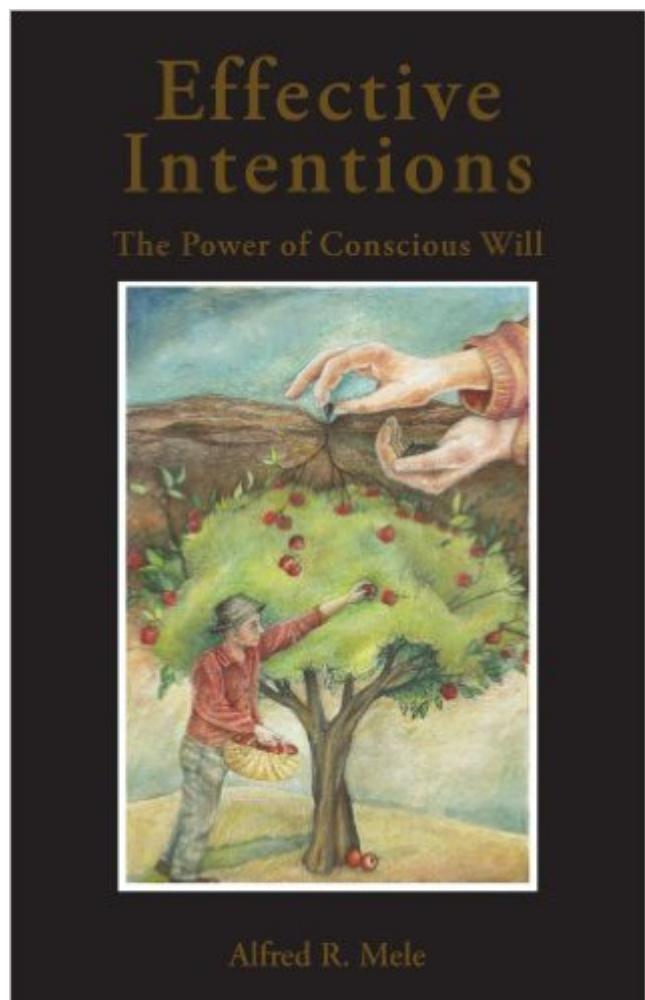


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Effective Intentions: The Power Of Conscious Will



Synopsis

Each of the following claims has been defended in the scientific literature on free will and consciousness: your brain routinely decides what you will do before you become conscious of its decision; there is only a 100 millisecond window of opportunity for free will, and all it can do is veto conscious decisions, intentions, or urges; intentions never play a role in producing corresponding actions; and free will is an illusion. In *Effective Intentions* Alfred Mele shows that the evidence offered to support these claims is sorely deficient. He also shows that there is strong empirical support for the thesis that some conscious decisions and intentions have a genuine place in causal explanations of corresponding actions. In short, there is weighty evidence of the existence of effective conscious intentions or the power of conscious will. Mele examines the accuracy of subjects' reports about when they first became aware of decisions or intentions in laboratory settings and develops some implications of warranted skepticism about the accuracy of these reports. In addition, he explores such questions as whether we must be conscious of all of our intentions and why scientists disagree about this. Mele's final chapter closes with a discussion of imaginary scientific findings that would warrant bold claims about free will and consciousness of the sort he examines in this book.

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Customer Reviews

Considerable media attention has recently been devoted to attacks on the power of conscious will based on the neurophysiological experiments of Benjamin Libet and the psychological observations

of Daniel Wegner. The "willusionists", as they have been dubbed by philosopher Eddy Nahmias, argue that conscious will has no causal power, but is merely an illusory impression constructed after the event. Alfred Mele is a philosopher specializing in free will, who is well informed about the neurophysiological and psychological literature. In this book he convincingly refutes the claims of the willusionists, showing that their most striking claims depend on naïf conceptions of free will and human agency. His focus is mainly philosophical, but he does also address difficulties at the level of the scientific experiments. This is an important contribution to the debate. It is not light bedtime reading for the casual reader, but will repay serious study.

As a bit of a neophyte to matters concerning the philosophy of the mind, I found this book a bit challenging to work through. However, the content is clear, reflective, and mind expanding. The overarching theme of the book seems to be an analysis of what is meant conceptually when we refer to "intentions" (conscious or otherwise). Mele handled the material adeptly. I found the illustrations and thought experiments he provides to be particularly helpful in understanding difficult concepts. For example, the idea that subjects of Libet-like studies may well be consciously priming themselves to make a decision when they say "now" in their minds or how we may well intend to do things unconsciously, such as utilize turn signals when driving. Mele also elucidates interesting insights into concepts surrounding consciousness, such as considerations on the timing of conscious awareness, as well as providing a particularly clear description of the terms surrounding the conflicting opinions concerning free will. In addition to the conceptual analysis of intention and consciousness, Mele also takes to task the carelessness with which some thinkers have approached data obtained from Libet style experiments. Given Mele's analysis, it seems unambiguously clear that the conclusions to be drawn from the results of such experiments are clearly ambiguous. All in all, this is probably not a recommended book for a beginner, but it is a good read for those who possess some familiarity with the subject matter or are willing to stick it out. I spent a lot of time reading the same sentences over and over and over again before the content really sank in, but that mostly had to do with my lack of familiarity with the topic.

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