


THE ORIGIN OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE BREAKDOWN OF THE BICAMERAL MIND BY JULIAN JAYNES

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From The New Yorker

"When Julian Jaynes . . . speculates that until late in the twentieth millennium b.c. men had no consciousness but were automatically obeying the voices of the gods, we are astounded but compelled to follow this remarkable thesis."

Review

"When Julian Jaynes . . . speculates that until late in the twentieth millennium b.c. men had no consciousness but were automatically obeying the voices of the gods, we are astounded but compelled to follow this remarkable thesis." -- John Updike The New Yorker

About the Author

Julian Jaynes (1923-1997) achieved an almost cult-like reputation for this controversial book, which was his only published work.

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At the heart of this classic, seminal book is Julian Jaynes's still-controversial thesis that human consciousness did not begin far back in animal evolution but instead is a learned process that came about only three thousand years ago and is still developing. The implications of this revolutionary scientific paradigm extend into virtually every aspect of our psychology, our history and culture, our religion -- and indeed our future.

- Sales Rank: #44528 in Books
- Color: White
- Brand: Jaynes, Julian
- Published on: 2000-08-15
- Released on: 2000-08-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.25" w x 6.00" l, 1.38 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 512 pages

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Intriguing

By Evelyn Uyemura

First of all the book was copyrighted in 1976 and apparently first published in 1982. That is eons ago in the science of cognition and brain imaging. So I would like to know how the past 2 and a half decades have affected the theories in this book.

I also note that the author taught at Princeton University (he died in 1997), so his theories ought to have received a hearing. But apparently the follow-up book he intended was never published, and he was considered somewhat of a maverick, if not quite a crackpot. This website offers some perspective: [...]

His theory, in simplest terms, is that until about 3000 years ago, all of humankind basically heard voices. The voices were actually coming from the other side of the brain, but because the two hemispheres were not in communication the way they are now for most of us, the voices seemed to be coming from outside. They seemed, in fact, to be coming from God or the gods.

So far, so good. That is certainly imaginable to most of us, because we know that schizophrenics and some others still hear voices in apparently this manner today.

But he also posits that many sophisticated civilizations were created by men and women who were all directed by these godlike voices. What is not very clearly explained (a serious gap in his theory) is how all the voices in these "bicameral civilizations," as he calls them, worked in harmony. But his theory is that ancient Greece, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and less ancient but similar Mayan and Incan kingdoms were all built by people who were not "conscious" in our modern sense.

When one hears voices, whether then or now, the voices tend to be commanding and directive, and the need to obey them compelling. Free will is not possible. And so the people who built the pyramids were not self-aware as we are, did not feel self-pity, did not make plans, but simply obeyed the voices, which somehow were in agreement that the thing must be done.

Again, when he mentions that hypnosis may be triggering a reversion to a similar kind of consciousness, in which a voice, somehow channeled through the sub-conscious rather than the reasoning part of the brain, has an unusual compelling quality to it, and enables a person to do things that in their conscious analytic mind they are unable to do, we feel that we do have a glimmer that such a state of being is possible.

Of course, he connects these ideas to schizophrenia, seeing that as a throw-back to an earlier kind of mind-state, though now socially unacceptable and also unacceptable to its victim, who retains a remembrance of what it was to have control of his or her own mind.

He also sees prophets as remnants of the older mind, still able to hear the voices after most people had lost the ability. And he sees idol worship and modern religious behavior as both signs of a longing for the lost certainty and simplicity of a world in which decisions didn't have to be made, and all were of one accord as to what the gods wanted done.

I don't see much evidence for the pastoral simplicity which he thinks the bicameral mind lived in. But I do think that it is possible that not only ancient people but even many modern people have mind-experiences that are very different from our individualistic, introspective, self-determined ideas. In fact, I think relatively few human beings question and ponder and change belief systems as we might. The feeling of being adrift in a world that we can't understand, struggling with questions about everything, is far from universal, I think.

It is pertinent that he calls the shift from bicameral (two houses) to modern consciousness a "breakdown." He sees the shift as happening in response to crises and threats in the environment, but he doesn't present it as necessarily positive, and certainly not as pleasant to those living in its shadow. He sees the cries of the Jews and many other people for God to "rend the heavens and come down," to "not forsake them," as cried from people who no longer hear the "voices" that seemed to be the gods, and who desperately miss them.

In view of individuals such as Mother Teresa, who at one point had a clear inner sense of being directed by God (not necessarily actual auditory voices) and then lost that sense of presence and had to walk blindly thereafter (or silently would be a better metaphor), perhaps we would agree that the experience of the gods or God going silent not only happened at large in human history but is often recapitulated in individuals' personal history as well.

If Jaynes is on to something (and I think he is, though I think he may have pushed his "theory of everything" too far and lost scientific credibility), his theory does help us understand why there is a widespread belief that in Biblical times, God interacted with people in a very different way than He does now. The Bible, and other holy books as well, are remnants of a time when human beings own inner sense of right and wrong, clean and unclean, enemy and neighbor, were experienced as coming from outside of them, from disembodied voices that commanded great power. As the mind (or brain) developed, this split healed (or this mind broke down?) and this knowing became a still small voice in many people, and in others a resounding silence.

The question remains: should we take the reductionist view, and look at all religious ideas as merely misunderstandings based on schizophrenic-like delusions and hallucinations? Or should we take the view that God, who in times past spoke to us in fire and plague and audible voices (and later in dreams and visions) has now become one with humanity and speaks to us in the silence of our own hearts?

A fascinating book, raising as many questions as it answers, but well worth the reading.

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Fascinating thesis

By James Frohnhofer

Why is it that the characters in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Iliad and the oldest books of the Bible behave in a manner that seems utterly alien to modern readers, but by the time of the New Testament and the classic Greek dramatists characters seem to have the same feelings and motivations of modern man? Jaynes addresses this question, among others, in one of the most thought provoking books I've read.

Basically, he posits that lacking full consciousness (yet having language), prehistoric man's actions were often governed by voices, which are in many ways similar to certain forms of schizophrenia. His full argument is much deeper and far more subtle than I can deliver in a one-line synopsis.

The book is not a drum-beating New Age manual for making peace with our proto-selves, although many readers seem to have taken just that away from his discussion on the origins of religion.

The thesis is, of course, utterly unprovable, and both orthodox classicists and anthropologists are at odds with it. But it is remarkable in its originality. One needn't be convinced by the book to enjoy it; read it purely for Jayne's breadth of knowledge and his originality of thought and it will be well worth your time.

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A paradigm-buster par excellence

By Timothy Dougal

It's hard to describe exactly what this book did to me. Suffice it to say that my views on history, religion, language and consciousness seem to be permanently altered, and my reading and thinking have broadened as a result. Jaynes defines consciousness too narrowly for some philosophers and psychologists, who seem to want it to include all of perception, but for me, his focus on interior dialogue, conceptual space, the notion of self, the ability to narratize and project this self into theoretical situations, is right on target. These are the kinds of things that create our notions of ourselves as human. Considerable space is devoted to anatomy, and split-brain studies, but the bulk of the book relies on archaeology, ancient art, ancient texts, and their use of language. This is the thrust of Jaynes' argument: consciousness arose only relatively late in human development, appearing first in the Middle East at the end of the second millennium BCE., and this consciousness was dependent on language. He theorizes that the right hemisphere of the brain was specialized to recall longterm information, as the left was (and still is, in most people) specialized for language. Pre-conscious people, he contends, hallucinated instructions of a super-ego-like nature generated in the right brain. In the simplest, small scale, early societies, these hallucinations were attributed to ancestors, chiefs, or kings. Eventually they were attributed to gods. As societies became increasingly complex, personal hallucination as a guiding force in life declined in value, and modern consciousness was born. To make his case, Gilgamesh, the Iliad, the Odyssey, Hesiod, and the Bible are examined, ancient carvings and burial practices are considered, and the evolution of religious practices involving idols, sacrifices, prophecy, omens and divination are all looked at. They give support to Jaynes' contentions and open the mind of the reader. This is a book that keeps on giving.

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