

## Notes on Julian Jaynes' 'The origin of consciousness'

Title: *The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind*

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JULIAN JAYNES

THE ORIGIN OF  
CONSCIOUSNESS  
IN THE BREAK  
DOWN OF THE  
BICAMERAL MIND

Humans as late as 3,500 years ago were not conscious in the sense that we understand consciousness. They were more akin to automatons, carrying out orders as heard in their minds, the mysterious phenomenon of which they were yet incapable of questioning. In this sense did Gods truly walk the earth.

This scenario, far out as it is, is difficult to accept unconditionally, but the late Julian Jaynes, first raising it in the 1970s, was able to account for the mental states of schizophrenics and feral children, even drunks, and his theory seems to explain the absence of memories of infancy. The mind requires social interactions, particularly language use, in order to develop what Jaynes refers to as spatialization of time, a narratization of events indicative of consciousness.

Reading 'The origin of consciousness' last year has been one of the biggest events in my life. To realize just how fragile consciousness really is, for it to be a mere matter of culture and habit as opposed to something fixed in one's biology, has profoundly affected my view of the value of being human. At the very least, Jaynes' ideas have inspired a good deal of my writing, as can be gleaned now and then in my short-story collection '[Be kind to puns.](#)' Another dead visionary, David Bowie, listed the book (Jaynes', not mine) as a favorite.

Jaynes saw memory not as a recording of things per se, but a making-sense of what we perceive:

**“Memory is the medium of the must-have-been.”**

- Page 30, Location 403 (Amazon Kindle edition)

**“Conscious retrospection is not the retrieval of images, but the retrieval of what you have been conscious of before...”**

- Page 48, Location 653

We may believe our material explanations of phenomena make for 'science,' when we may be merely grasping for useful metaphors:

**“[W]e reduce the storm to various supposed experiences with friction, sparks, vacuums, and the imagination of bulgeous banks of burly air smashing together to make the noise. None of these really exist as we picture them. Our images of these events of physics are as far from the actuality as fighting gods.”**

- Page 53, Location 716-717

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Why do ancient people constantly refer to gods if these weren't a literal and immediate presence in their lives, rather than a mere tool of communication?

**“To say the gods are an artistic apparatus is the same kind of thing as to say that Joan of Arc told the Inquisition about her voices merely to make it all vivid to those who were about to condemn her.”**

- Page 79, Location 1076-1078

Our minds, involving the brain among other things, seem suited for the evolution required to be conscious:

**“The biological purpose or selective advantage of... redundant representation and multiple control and its resulting plasticity is twofold: it protects the organism against the effects of brain damage, and, perhaps more important, it provides an organism of far greater adaptability to the constantly changing environmental challenges.”**

- Page 123, Location 1649-1651

A 'bicameral' mind, that is, one in which one's thoughts manifested as sensory information, i.e. voices of the gods, was possible in small tribes, where 'group think' appeared infallible, remaining unchallenged:

**“Like the queen in a termite nest or a beehive, the idols of a bicameral world are the carefully tended centers of social control, with auditory hallucinations instead of pheromones.”**

- Page 144, Location 1914-1915

As societies further engaged in trade with outsiders, bicameral voices' authority was undermined by conflicting voices:

**“[E]xtensive exchanging of goods between bicameral theocracies may in itself have weakened the bicameral structure that made civilization possible.”**

- Page 206, Location 2693-2694

In a way we are still reeling from the breakdown where back then people drew from the wisdom of the subconscious and people since are left with guesswork and bursts of inspiration.

Jaynes observes the change in the use of language over millennia, indicating the ongoing evolution of our minds:

**“Word changes are concept changes and concept changes are behavioral changes. The entire history of religions and of politics and even of science stands shrill witness to that. Without words like soul, liberty, or truth, the pageant of this human condition would have been filled with different roles, different climaxes.”**

- Page 292, Location 3878-3881

Today, our conscious wills are by no means certain. What we have gained in consciousness, we have lost in terms of conviction of action, that otherwise a god provides to the faithful:

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**“[W]hy is it that in our daily lives we cannot get up above ourselves to authorize ourselves into being what we really wish to be? If under hypnosis we can be changed in identity and action, why not in and by ourselves so that behavior flows from decision with as absolute a connection, so that whatever in us it is that we refer to as will stands master and captain over action with as sovereign a hand as the operator over a subject?”**

- Page 402, 5319-5322

Perhaps seeing ourselves as a duality of body-spirit serves as fuel to the will.

**“[W]e have to accept our lessened control. We are learned in self-doubt, scholars of our very failures, geniuses at excuse and tomorrowing our resolves. And so we become practiced in powerless resolution until hope gets undone and dies in the unattempted. At least that happens to some of us. And then to rise above this noise of knowings and really change ourselves, we need an authorization that ‘we’ do not have.”**

- Page 403, Location 5333-5335

**“Applied to the world as representative of all the world, facts become superstitions. A superstition is after all only a metaphier [Jaynes' term for the thing likened to the literal thing in a metaphor] grown wild to serve a need to know.”**

- Page 443, Location 5881-5882

**“The very notion of truth is a culturally given direction, a part of the pervasive nostalgia for an earlier certainty.”**

- Page 446, Location 5921

There is a *lot* in the book not covered here. I can't count the times while reading that I raised my fist in exhilaration, where a cry of “Yeah!” could barely suffice. I really hope that this tiny guide encourages you to read Jaynes for yourself.

For more notes on books I've read, visit <https://paulspurpose.com/tag/notes/>.

Buy Julian Jaynes' 'The origin of consciousness' on Amazon, [here](#).

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