Was man really unconscious for centuries?


By Ned Block

Most of us believe that human adults are conscious by nature. Princeton Professor Julian Jaynes in this strange, fascinating book tells us, that, on the contrary, consciousness was invented, and relatively recently at that: five thousand years ago, in Mesoamerica around 1300 BC, then 600 years later, it spread or was reinvented in Greece and Palestine. He also holds that the Incas, lacking consciousness until subdued by the Spanish Conquistadores in the 16th Century, (the main evidence in this latter case being the case with which the Incas were conquered by the Spaniards).

The concept of consciousness he usually intends is consciousness as the ability to think, plan, want, hope, decide and the like. So according to Jaynes, the inventors of writing, the builders of the ziggurats of Babylon and the Pyramids of Egypt, the author and subjects of the Hammurabi Code and the familiar characters and original authors of the Old Testament and the Iliad, were "automata, who knew not what they did... They were what we would call signal bound, that is, responding each minute to cues in a stimulus response manner, and controlled by those cues. They had no "subjective consciousness in which to plan and devise, and decide and hope," no "private ambitions... judgements... frustrations." Hence they were "not responsible for their actions," and undeserving of "the credit or blame for anything that was done over those vast eons of time."

News to you? There's more! According to Jaynes, these unconscious automatons were controlled by hallucinated voices (speaking in verse) which they thought to be the voices of the gods. "At one time, human nature was split in two, an executive part called a god, and a follower part called a man. Neither was conscious." The mind of these men is called by Jaynes the "bicameral, (two chambered) mind." And poetry, music, hypnosis, schizophrenia (and of course religion) are all supposed to be vestiges of this bicameral mind, remnants of the days before consciousness was invented.

These claims, of course, preposterous. Even chimpanzees plan, devise, decide and harbor grudges and frustrations. In one experiment, a chimpanzee was given two sticks, neither long enough to reach a banana suspended outside the cage, but joinable to make a long enough tool. After trying to reach the banana with a single stick and giving up, the chimpanzee suddenly put the sticks together and in one motion reached the banana. And on occasion, a chimpanzee is observed to fill his mouth with water and coax a disliked keeper close enough to spit the water in his face. So chimpanzees plan, devise, decide and hope, no "private ambitions... judgements... frustrations." Hence they were not responsible for their actions, and undeserving of "the credit or blame for anything that was done over those vast eons of time."

Thus sayeth the voices of the gods.

While Jaynes never grapples with the obvious absurdity in his view, it seems clear that he would reply by saying that bicameral man did not plan, devise, decide, etc.; rather he was commanded to take certain actions (by the hallucinated voices), and he obeyed. "The Trojan War," Jaynes says, "was directed by the hallucinations." But if Odysseus hallucinated and obeyed a voice telling him to build a hollow horse, fill it with soldiers, leave it at the gates of Troy and pretend to leave, then Odysseus HAs planned, devised and deceived, albeit in a rather odd way. For after all, whose voice is it, if not his?

Jaynes's main argument for his view is that the literatures of the "bicameral" period do not talk of reasons, motives, deceit, hope, decision, etc., and instead they ascribe the springs of action to the gods. But even supposing Jaynes is right about bicameral literature, there is a better explanation of this "data": namely that while the ancients thought and decided much as we do, they nonetheless falsely believed that they were ordered about by the gods rather than deciding for themselves.

In other words, it is far more plausible to suppose that their basic processes of thought and action were like ours, though they had a bizarre theory about these processes. Indeed, throughout the book, Jaynes confuses the nature of people's thought processes with the nature of their theories of their thought processes.

Of course, people's theories of thought do influence the way they think, at least to some extent, and therein may lie an important grain of truth in what Jaynes says. If the ancients had a totally different theory of the springs of their action according to which they were the mere tools of the gods, they on that account may have been less introspective, more spoon-fed.

There have been changes of "consciousness" in this limited sense closer to home. For example, Freudian ideas seem to have made us more introspective in some respects than our grandparents. But such a grain of truth is not considered by Jaynes—indeed, he says nothing of such revolutions in the style or content of thought.

While the book contains many confusions, they are woven into a fascinating collection of lore from psychology, physiology, and archaeology, all juxtaposed in bizarre and stimulating ways. The aim of all this is to support Jaynes's crackpot claim, but the result is a book that is never boring.

Ned Block teaches philosophy at MIT.

March 6, 1977, p. A17