

Was man really unconscious for centuries?

THE ORIGIN OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE BREAKDOWN OF THE BICAMERAL MIND. by Julian Jaynes, Houghton-Mifflin, 46 pp.

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: first in Mesopotamia around 1300 BC, then 600 years later, it spread or was reinvented in Greece and Palestine. He also holds that the Incas, lacked consciousness until subdued by the Spanish Conquistadores in the 16th Century. (The main evidence in this latter case being the ease 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, deceive 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 Hammurabic 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 deceive and hope," no "private ambitions, ... grudges, ... 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 automata 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 are, of course, preposterous. Even chimpanzees plan, devise, deceive and harbor grudges and frustrations. In one experiment, a chimp was given two sticks, neither one 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 chimp suddenly put the sticks together and in one motion snared the banana. And on occasion, a chimp is observed to fill his mouth with water and coax a disliked keeper close enough to spit the water in his face. So chimps can plan, deceive, etc., and are thus conscious in Jaynes's sense. Can anyone take seriously the idea that most any zoo contains creatures higher on the consciousness hierarchy than Homer and Hammurabi?

But we don't need animal experiments to show Jaynes's claim that the ancients lacked

consciousness to be absurd. These supposedly unconscious folk planned sophisticated cities, monuments, buildings and wars, and invented writing, embalming and all manner of machines. Even the ancient texts Jaynes appeals to are rife with anger, vengeance, plans, hopes and deceit. In the Old Testament, Joseph's brothers envy him and conspire to get rid of him, deceiving their father by dipping Joseph's coat in goat blood. In the Iliad, Patroclus disguises himself as Achilles in order to scare the Trojans, and a Trojan spy is treacherously murdered after giving up military secrets under a false promise of security.

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, deceive, etc.; rather he was commanded to take certain actions (by the hallucinated voices), and he obeyed. "The Trojan War," Jaynes says, "was directed by 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, indecision, 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 spontaneous.

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.

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