

Book Review: Origin Of Consciousness In The Breakdown Of The Bicameral Mind

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I.

Julian Jaynes' *The Origin Of Consciousness In The Breakdown Of The Bicameral Mind* is a brilliant book, with only two minor flaws. First, that it purports to explain the origin of consciousness. And second, that it posits a breakdown of the bicameral mind. I think it's possible to route around these flaws while keeping the thesis otherwise intact. So I'm going to start by reviewing a slightly different book, the one Jaynes should have written. Then I'll talk about the more dubious one he actually wrote.

My hypothetical Jaynes 2.0 is a book about theory-of-mind. Theory-of-mind is our intuitive model of how the mind works. It has no relation to intellectual theories about how the mind is made of cognitive algorithms or instantiated on neurons in the brain. Every schoolchild has theory-of-mind. It goes like this: *the mind is an imaginary space containing things like thoughts, emotions, and desires. I have mine and you have yours. I can see what's inside my mind, but not what's inside your mind, and vice versa. I mostly choose the things that are in my mind at any given time: I will thoughts to happen, and they happen; I will myself to make a decision, and it gets made. This needs a resource called willpower; if I don't have enough willpower, sometimes the things that happen in my mind aren't the ones I want. When important things happen, sometimes my mind gets strong emotions; this is natural, but I need to use lots of willpower to make sure I don't get overwhelmed by them and make bad decisions.*

All this seems so obvious that it sounds like common sense rather than theory. But it has to be learned. Very young children don't start out with theory of mind. They can't separate themselves from their emotions; it's not natural for them to say "I'm really angry now, but that's just a thing I'm feeling, I don't actually hate you". It's not even clear to them that people's minds contain different things; children are famously unable to figure out that a playmate who has different evidence than they do may draw different conclusions.

And the learning isn't just a process of passively sitting back observing your own mind until you figure out how it works. You learn it from your parents. Parents are always telling their kids that "I think this" and "What do you think?" and "You look sad" and "It makes me feel sad when you do that". Eventually it all sinks in. Kids learn their parent's theory-of-mind the same way they learn their parents' language or religion.

When in human history did theory-of-mind first arise? It couldn't have been a single invention – more like a gradual process of refinement. “The unconscious” only really entered our theory-of-mind with Freud. Statements like “my abuse gave me a lot of baggage that I’m still working through” involves a theory-of-mind that would have been incomprehensible a few centuries ago. It’s like “I’m clicking on an icon with my mouse” – every individual word would have made sense, but the gestalt would be nonsensical.

Still, everyone always assumes that the absolute basics – mind as a metaphorical space containing beliefs and emotions, people having thoughts and making decisions – must go back so far that their origins are lost in the mists of time, attributable only to nameless apemen.

Julian Jaynes doesn't think that. He thinks it comes from the Bronze Age Near East, c. 1500 – 750 BC.

II.

Jaynes (writing in the 1970s) was both a psychology professor at Princeton and an expert in ancient languages, so the perfect person to make this case. He reviews various samples of Bronze Age writing from before and after this period, and shows that the early writings have no references to mental processes, and the later ones do. When early writings do have references to mental processes, they occur in parts agreed by scholars to be later interpolations. If, with no knowledge of the language itself, you tried to figure out which parts of a heavily-redacted ancient text were early vs. late by their level of reference to mental processes, you could do a pretty decent job.

I don't speak fluent Sumerian, so I am forced to take Jaynes' word for a lot of this. It's even worse than that, because Jaynes argues that other translators sometimes err and translate non-mental terms in mental ways. This is an easy mistake for them to make, because most cultures, once they got theory of mind, repurposed existing language to represent it. Jaynes makes a convincing case for why this would happen, and convincingly argues for why his interpretations are truer to the spirit of the text, but it does mean you can't double-check his work by reading the works in translation.

Jaynes spends the most time talking about the *Iliad*, with good reason – it's the longest Bronze Age work we have, and in many ways it's a psychodrama, focusing as much on the characters of Achilles, Hector, etc as the plot itself. It came together piecemeal through the efforts of Greek bards between about 1100 and 800 BC, finally reaching a canonical version in the mouth of “Homer” around 700 BC – the period Jaynes says theory of mind was starting to evolve. Jaynes uses it to trace the development process, showing how older sections of the *Iliad* treat psychology in different ways than newer ones.

So for example, a typical translation might use a phrase like “Fear filled Agamemnon’s mind”. Wrong! There is no word for “mind” in the *Iliad*, except maybe in the very newest interpolations. The words are things like *kardia*, *noos*, *phrenes*, and *thumos*, which Jaynes translates as heart, vision/perception, belly, and sympathetic nervous system, respectively. He might translate the sentence about Agamemnon to say something like “Quivering rose in Agamemnon’s belly”. It still means the same thing – Agamemnon is afraid – but it’s how you would talk about it if you didn’t have an idea of “the mind” as the place where mental things happened – you would just notice your belly was quivering more. Later, when the Greeks got theory of mind, they repurposed all these terms. You can still find signs of this today, like how we say “I believe it in my heart”. In fact, you can still find this split use of *phrenes*, which has survived into English both as the phrenic nerve (a nerve in the belly) and schizophrenia (a mental disease). As the transition wore on, people got more and more flowery about the kind of feelings you could have in your belly or your heart or whatever, until finally belly, heart, and all the others merged into a single Mind where all the mental stuff happened together.

The *Iliad* uses these body parts to describe feelings despite its weak theory of mind. Its solution for describing thoughts and decision-making is more...unconventional.

Suppose Achilles is overcome with rage and wants to kill Agamemnon. But this would be a terrible [idea]; after [thinking] about it for a while, he [decides] against. If Achilles has no concept of any of the bracketed words, nothing even slightly corresponding to those terms, how does he conceptualize his own actions? Jaynes:

The response of Achilles begins in his *etor*, or what I suggest is a cramp in his guts, where he is in conflict, or put into two parts (*mermerizo*) whether to obey his *thumos*, the immediate internal sensations of anger, and kill the king, or not. It is only after this vacillating interval of increasing belly sensations and surges of blood, as Achilles is drawing his mighty sword, that the stress has become sufficient to hallucinate the dreadfully gleaming goddess Athene who then takes over control of the action and tells Achilles what to do.

Wait, *what?*

III.

As you go about your day, you hear a voice that tells you what to do, praises you for your successes, criticizes you for your failures, and tells you what decisions to make in difficult situations. Modern theory-of-mind tells you that this is your own voice, thinking thoughts. It says this so consistently and convincingly that we never stop to question whether it might be anything else.

If you don't have theory of mind, what do you do with it? Children don't have theory of mind, at least not very much of it, and more than half of them have imaginary friends. Jaynes has done some research on the imaginary friend phenomenon, and argues that a better term would be "hallucinatory friend" – children see and hear these entities vividly. The atheoretical mind is a desperate thing, and will comply with any priors you give it to make sense of its experiences. If that prior is that the voice in your head is a friend – or god – it will obediently hallucinate a friend or god for you, and modulate its voice-having accordingly.

I know some very smart and otherwise completely sane evangelical Christians who swear to me that God answers their prayers. They will ask God a question, and they will hear God's voice answer it. God's voice may not sound *exactly* like an external voice, and it may give them only the advice they would have given themselves if they'd thought about it – but they swear that they are not thinking about it, that their experience is qualitatively different than that. And these are normal people! If you're a special person – a saint or mystic, say – and you actively court the experience by fasting and praying and generally stressing your body to the limit – then the voice will be that much louder and more convincing.

There are even whole forms of therapy based on this kind of thing. In Internal Family Systems, the therapist asks the patient to conceptualize some part of their mind (maybe the part that's producing a certain symptom) as a person, and to talk to it. I know people who swear that this works. They approach their grief or anger or anxiety, and they get a clear image of what "he" or "she" looks like, and then "he" or "she" talks to them. Usually he/she tells them some appropriately psychological sounding thing, like "Hello, I am your anxiety, and I'm only inflicting these fears on you because we were abused as a child and I want to make sure nobody ever abuses us like that again". Then the patient talks to their anxiety and hopefully strikes a bargain where the patient agrees to take the anxiety's perspective into account and the anxiety agrees not to make the patient so anxious all the time. Some people swear by this, say it's helped them where nothing else can, and absolutely insist they are having a real dialogue with their anxiety and not just making up both sides of the conversation.

Most of the people who seem to really like IFS have borderline personality disorder. And borderline people are also at the most risk of dissociative identity disorder (multiple personality). Multiple personality has two main risk factors: borderline, and somebody suggesting to you that multiple personality disorder might be a reasonable thing to have. For a while in the 80s, psychiatrists were really into multiple personality and tried diagnosing everyone with it, and sure enough all those people would admit to having multiple personalities and it would be very exciting. Then the APA told the psychiatrists to stop, people stopped talking about multiple personality as much, and now the condition is rarer.

A few years ago, someone rediscovered/invented tulpamancy, the idea of cultivating

multiple personalities on purpose because it's cool. People who try to do this usually succeed. At least they say they've succeeded, and I believe they think this. I think their internal experience is of talking to a different entity inside of them. Also, I have a friend who writes novels, and one time she created such a detailed mental model of one of her characters that it became an alternate personality, which she still has and considers an important part of her life. She is one of the most practical people I know and not usually prone to flights of fancy.

I also have less practical friends, friends who are into occultism. They tell me they sometimes make contact with spiritual entities. I believe them when they say they have these experiences. I believe them when they say that they were not purposely guiding their Ouija board to say whatever it said. I don't have any friends who are cool enough to have gone through the whole procedure for summoning your Holy Guardian Angel, but from what I read, completing the ritual directly does tend to leave you with an angel who hangs around you and gives you advice. I believe the people who say this is their experience of completing the ritual.

I conclude that giving yourself multiple personalities is actually pretty easy under the right circumstances. Those circumstances are a poor theory of mind (I think borderlines are naturally bad at this) and a cultural context in which having a multiple personality is expected.

Jaynes says ancient people met both criteria. They had absolutely no theory of mind, less theory of mind than the tiniest child does today. And their cultural context was absolutely certain that gods existed. Just as we teach our children that the voice in their mind is them thinking to themselves, so the ancients would teach their children that the voice in their head was a god giving them commands. And the voice would dutifully mold itself to fit the expected role.

Here Jaynes is at his most brilliant, going through ancient texts one by one, noting the total lack of mental imagery, and highlighting the many everyday examples of conversations with gods. Every ancient culture has near-identical concepts of a god who sits inside of you and tells you what to do. The Greeks have their *daemons*, the Romans their *genii*, the Egyptians their *ka* and *ba*, and the Mesopotamians their *iri*. The later you go, the more metaphorically people treat these. The earlier you go, the more literal they become. Go early enough, and you find things like the Egyptian Dispute Between A Man And His Ba which is just a papyrus scroll about a guy arguing loudly with the hallucinatory voice of his guardian spirit, and the guardian spirit's hallucinatory voice arguing back, and nobody thinking any of this is weird (people who aren't Jaynes would wimp out and say this is "metaphorical"). Every ancient text is in complete agreement that everyone in society heard the gods' voices very often and usually based decisions off of them. Jaynes is just the only guy who takes this seriously.

Turn on what Terry Pratchett called “first sight and second thoughts” and try to look at the Bronze Age with fresh eyes. It was *really* weird. People would center their city around a giant ziggurat, the “House of God”, with a giant idol within. They would treat this idol exactly like a living human – feeding it daily, washing it daily, sometimes even marching it through the streets on sedan chairs carried by teams of slaves so it could go on a “connubial visit” to the temple of an idol of the opposite sex! When the king died, hundreds of thousands of men would labor to build him a giant tomb, and then they would kill a bunch of people to serve him in the afterlife. Then every so often it would all fall apart and everyone would slink away into the hills, trying to pretend they didn’t spend the last twenty years buliding a jeweled obelisk so some guy named Ningal-Iddida could boast about how many slaves he had.

If the Bronze Age seems kind of hive-mind-y, Julian Jaynes argues this is because its inhabitants weren’t quite individuals, at least not the way we think of individuality. They were in the same kind of trance as a schizophrenic listening to voices commanding him to burn down the hospital. All of it – the ziggurats, the obelisks, the pyramids – were an attempt to capture not individual humans, but those humans’ daemons – to get people to identify the voice in their head with the local deity, and replace their free will with a hallucinatory god who *represented their mental model of society’s demands on them*. In the best case scenario, the voice would be interpreted as the god-king himself, giving you orders from miles away. Jaynes argues the Bronze Age was obsessed with burials and the afterlife (eg the Pyramids) because if you had internalized the voice in your head as Pharaoh Cheops, the voice wasn’t going to go away just because the actual Pharaoh Cheops had died hundreds of miles away in the capital. So even after Pharaoh Cheops dies, as far as all his subjects can tell, he’s still around, commanding them from the afterlife. So they had better keep him really, really happy, just as they did during life. Jaynes presents various pieces of evidence that the main function of pyramids was as a place where you could go to commune with the dead Pharaoh’s spirit – ie ask it questions and it would answer them.

He has a similar explanation for idols. The Bronze Age loved idols. There were the giant idols, ones that made the statue of Zeus at Olympia look like a weak effort. But also, every family had their own individual idols. Archaeologists who dig up Bronze Age houses just find idol after idol after idol, like the ancient Sumerians did nothing except stare at idols all day. Jaynes thinks this is approximately true. Idols were either cues to precipitate hallucinatory voices, or else just there to make conversation more comfortable – it’s less creepy if you can see the person you’re talking to, after all.

Then, around 1250 BC, this well-oiled system started to break down. Jaynes blames trade. Traders were always going into other countries, with different gods. These new countries would be confusing, and the traders’ hallucinatory voices wouldn’t always know all the answers. And then they would have to negotiate with rival merchants! Here theory of mind

becomes a huge advantage – you need to be able to model what your rival is thinking in order to get the best deal from him. And your rival also wants theory of mind, so he can figure out how to deceive you. Around 1250 BC, trade started picking up, and these considerations became a much bigger deal. Then around 1200 BC, the Bronze Age collapsed. It's still not exactly clear why (some of you may have heard me give a presentation on this), though most guesses involve a combination of climate change plus the mysterious Sea Peoples. Whole empires were destroyed, their populations become refugees who flooded the next empire in turn. Now *everyone* was in unfamiliar territory; *nobody* had all the answers. The weird habits of mind a couple of traders had picked up became vital; people adopted them or died.

But as theory of mind spread, the voices of the gods faded. They receded from constant companions, to only appearing in times of stress (the most important decisions) to never appearing at all. Jaynes interprets basically everything that happened between about 1000 BC and 700 BC as increasingly frantic attempts to bring the gods back or deal with a godless world.

Now, to be fair, he cites approximately one zillion pieces of literature from this age with the theme “the gods have forsaken us” and “what the hell just happened, why aren't there gods anymore?” As usual, everyone else wimps out and interprets these metaphorically – claiming that this was just a poetic way for the Mesopotamians to express how unlucky they felt during this chaotic time. Jaynes does not think this was a metaphor – for one thing, people have been unlucky forever, but the 1000 – 750 BC period was a kind of macabre golden age for “the gods have forsaken us” literature. And sometimes it seems oddly, well, on point:

My god has forsaken me and disappeared
My goddess has failed me and keeps at a distance
The good angel who walked beside me has departed.

Or:

One who has no god, as he walks along the street
Headache envelops him like a garment

Jaynes says that “there is no trace whatsoever of any such concerns in any literature previous to the texts I am describing here”.

So people got desperate. He says this period was the origin of augury and divination. Omens “were probably present in a trivial way” before this period, but not very important; “there are, for example, no Sumerian omen texts whatsoever”. But after about 1000 BC, omens become an international obsession.

Towards the end of the second millennium BC...such omen texts proliferate everywhere and swell out to touch almost every aspect of life imaginable. By the first millennium BC, huge collections of them are made. In the library of King Ashurbanipal at Nineveh about 650 BC, at least 30% of the twenty to thirty thousand tablets come into the category of omen literature. Each entry in these tedious irrational collections consists of an if-clause or protasis followed by a then-clause or apodosis. And there were many classes of omens...

- If a town is set on a hill, it will not be good for the dweller within that town.
- If black ants are seen on the foundations which have been laid, that house will get built; the owner of that house will live to grow old.
- If a horse enters a man's house, and bites either an ass or a man, the owner of the house will die, and his household will be scattered.
- If a fox runs into the public square, that town will be devastated.
- If a man unwittingly treads on a lizard and kills it, he will prevail over his adversary.

And then there are the demons. Early Sumerians didn't really worry about demons. Their religion was very clear that the gods were in charge and demons were impotent. Post 1000 BC, all of this changes.

As the gods recede...there whooshes into this power vacuum a belief in demons. The very air of Mesopotamia became darkened with them. Natural phenomena took on their characteristics of hostility toward men, a raging demon in the sandstorm sweeping the desert, a demon of fire, scorpion-men guarding the rising sun beyond the mountains, Pazuzu the monstrous wind demon, the evil Croucher, plague demons, and the horrible Asapper demons that could be warded off by dogs. Demons stood ready to seize a man or woman in lonely places, while sleeping or eating or drinking, or particularly at childbirth. They attached themselves to men as all the illnesses of mankind. Even the gods could be attacked by demons, and this sometimes explained their absence from the control of human affairs...

Innumerable rituals were devoutly mumbled and mimed all over Mesopotamia throughout the first millennium B.C. to counteract these malign forces. The higher gods were beseeched to intercede. All illnesses, aches, and pains were ascribed to malevolent demons until medicine became exorcism. Most of our knowledge of these antidemoniac practices and their extent comes from the huge collection made about 630 B.C. by Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. Literally thousands of extant tablets from this library describe such exorcisms, and thousands more list omen after omen, depicting a decaying civilization as black with demons as a piece of rotting meat with flies.

...and angels, and prophets, and all the other trappings of religion. When the gods spoke to you every day, and you couldn't get rid of them even if you wanted to, angels – a sort of intermediary with the gods – were unnecessary. There was no place for prophets – when everyone is a prophet, nobody is. There wasn't even prayer, at least not in a mystical sense – as Jaynes puts it, “schizophrenics do not beg to hear their voices – it is unnecessary – in the few case where this does happen, it is during recovery when the voices are no longer heard with the same frequency.”

The Assyrians invented the idea of Heaven. Previously, Heaven had been unnecessary. You could go visit your god in the local ziggurat, talk to him, ask him for advice. But word went around that gods had retreated to heaven – some of the stories even use those exact words, blaming the Great Flood or some other cataclysm. The ziggurats shifted from houses for the gods to *e-temen-an-ki* – pedestals that the gods could descend to from Heaven, should they ever wish to return.

By 500 BC, the ability to hear the gods was limited to a few prophets, oracles, and poets. Jaynes is especially interested in this last group – he cites various ancient sources claiming that the poets only transcribe what they hear gods and goddesses sing to them (everyone else wimps out and says this is metaphorical). For Jaynes, the *Iliad* starts “Sing, O Muse...” because the poet was expecting a hallucinatory Muse to actually appear beside him and start singing, after which he would repeat the song to his listeners as a sort of echolalia.

Jaynes ends by referencing one of my favorite ancient texts, Plutarch's *On The Failure Of Oracles*. Plutarch, writing around 100 AD, is not a skeptic. He believes oracles work *in theory*. But he records a general consensus that they don't work as well as they used to, and that some day soon they will stop working at all. Jaynes believes that as the theory-of-mind waterline rises, fewer and fewer people hear the voices of the gods. By the Golden Age of Greece, it was so difficult that only a few specially selected people placed in specially numinous locations could manage – the oracles. By Plutarch's own time, even those people could barely manage.

The last oracle to fade away was the greatest – Delphi, perched atop a fantastic gorge as if suspended between Heaven and Earth. Jaynes tries to give us an impression of how important it was in its time; important people from all over the classical world would make the pilgrimage there, leave lavish gifts, and ask Apollo for advice on weighty matters. He thinks that the oracle's fame protected it; if a cultural validation is an important ingredient in god-hearing, Delphi had the strongest and best. Its reputation was unimpeachable. Still, in the centuries after Plutarch, its prophecies became rarer and rarer; the Pythia's few divine utterances became separated by more and more incoherent raving. Finally:

As part of [the Emperor Julian's] personal quest for authorization, he tried to rehabilitate Delphi in AD 363, three years after it had been ransacked by Constantine. Through his remaining priestess, Apollo prophesied that he would never prophesy again. And the prophecy came true.

IV.

The real *Origin Of Consciousness In The Breakdown Of The Bicameral Mind* is like my edited version above, except that wherever I say “theory of mind”, it says “consciousness”.

Jaynes has obviously thought a lot about this, and he's a psychology professor so I'm sure he's heard of theory of mind. Still, I am so against this choice. Consciousness means so many different things to so many different people, and none of them realize they're talking past each other, and it's such a loaded term that any argument including it is basically guaranteed to veer off into the fantastic.

Did he literally believe that the Sumerians, Homeric Greeks, etc were p-zombies? That there was nothing that it was like to be them? That they took in photons and emitted actions but experienced no “mysterious redness of red”? I cannot be completely sure. At times he refers to Bronze Age people as “automatons”, which seems like a pretty final judgment. But he also treats them as genuinely hearing, seeing, and having feelings about the hallucinatory gods who appear to them. The god-human interaction seems like it involves the human being at least minimally conscious. But if Jaynes has a coherent theory here, I must have missed it.

I think he is unaware of (or avoiding) what we would call “the hard problem of consciousness”, and focusing on consciousness entirely as a sort of “global workspace” where many parts of the mind come together and have access to one another. In his theory, that didn't happen – the mental processing happened and announced itself to the human listener as a divine voice, without the human being aware of the intermediate steps. I can see how “consciousness” is one possible term for this area, if you didn't mind confusing a lot of people. But seriously, just say “theory of mind”.

Jaynes seems aware of this objection, which he summarizes as “the Bronze Agers did not lack consciousness, they just lacked the *concept* of consciousness”. His retort is that in some cases, the concept of a thing is the same as the thing itself – he suggests baseball as an example. This seems a little sophistic to me. If somebody told me that Mandarin Chinese doesn't have a word for “consciousness”, I would be surprised but not stunned – it seems like a strange word for a rich and ancient language to lack, but weirder things have happened. If somebody told me that Chinese people didn't even have the *concept* of consciousness until it was introduced from the West, that wouldn't shock me either – sometimes I think half of philosophers don't even have the same concept of consciousness I do, and I can imagine the Chinese carving up the world in very different ways. But if

someone told me that Chinese people *were not conscious*, I would dismiss them as a crank. So I can't accept that having consciousness and having a concept of consciousness are exactly the same thing, and I continue to think "theory of mind" is better here.

The other major difference between my rewrite and Jaynes' real book is that Jaynes focuses heavily on "bicamerality" – the division of the brain into two hemispheres. He believes that in the Bronze Age mind design, the left hemisphere was the "mortal" and the right hemisphere the "god" – ie the hallucinatory voice of the god was the right hemisphere communicating information to the left hemisphere. In the modern mind design, the two hemispheres are either better integrated, or the right hemisphere just doesn't do much.

I am not an expert in functional neuroanatomy, but my impression is that recent research has not been kind to any theories too reliant on hemispheric lateralization. While there are a few well-studied examples (language is almost always on the left) and a few vague tendencies (the right brain sort of seems to be more holistic, sometimes), basically all tasks require some input from both sides, there's little sign that anybody is neurologically more "right-brained" or "left-brained" than anyone else, and most neuroscientific theories don't care that much about the right-brain left-brain distinction. Also, Michael Gazzaniga's groundbreaking work on split-brain patients which got everyone excited about hemispheres and is one of the cornerstones of Jaynes' theory doesn't replicate. Also, Jaynes says his theory implies that schizophrenic hallucinations come from the language centers of the right hemisphere, and I think the latest fMRI evidence is that they don't.

(Also, Jaynes says his theory implies that demonic possession occurs in the right hemisphere. But some absolute madman actually put a possessed woman in an fMRI machine and then exorcised her while the machine was running and although it showed some odd deficiencies in interhemispheric communication, it didn't seem to show unusual right hemisphere activity. Imagine having to write that IRB application!)

I don't think either of these issues fundamentally changes Jaynes' theory. Just switch "consciousness" to "theory of mind", and change the psychiatry metaphor from split-brain patients to dissociative-identity patients, and you're fine.

V.

But there's another class of problem that Jaynes' theory doesn't survive nearly as well: what about Australian Aborigines?

Or American Indians, or Zulus, or Greenland Inuit, or Polynesians, or any other human group presumably isolated from second-millennium-BC Assyrians until anthropologists got a chance to examine them? If consciousness is an invention, and it didn't spread to these groups, did these groups have it? If so, how? If not, why aren't they hallucinating gods all the time?

I mean, some of these groups definitely have shamans and medicine men. I'm not saying none of them ever hear gods. But Jaynes claims Bronze Agers heard gods literally all the time, as a substitute for individual thought. Nothing I've heard from these people or the anthropologists who study them suggest anything like this is true. And these people also seem to be able to strategically deceive others, another key consciousness innovation Jaynes says Bronze Agers lacked. Or at least I assume I would have heard about it from some anthropologist if they weren't.

I don't have a good sense of how Jaynes would answer this objection. The most relevant part of the book is around page 135. Jaynes argues that bicamerality (his term for the hallucinatory gods) started with agriculture in the Bronze Age Near East, though there were scattered hallucinations before then. So plausibly the Inuit, aborigines, etc, were not bicameral. They are in a pre-bicameral state, where they have neither full subjective consciousness, nor clear hallucinations of gods. They may have flashes of both, or do something else entirely, or just be *blank*. Or something. The point is, if they were perfectly normal conscious people like us, then Jaynes is wrong about everything.

Maybe I've done some violence to Jaynes' theory by rounding it off to "theory of mind" and emphasizing it as an invented technology? But he tries to really emphasize the inventedness of it in the first few chapters, talking about how it had to be built up by layer upon layer of well-chosen metaphor. As far as I can tell I relayed that part faithfully.

And I'm looking at [the bulletin board on julianjaynes.org](http://the_bulletin_board_on_julianjaynes.org), and there's [a post](#) by someone who met Jaynes before he died and asked him this question. They write:

On the About Julian Jaynes page it says he gave a lecture at the Wittgenstein Symposium in [Kirchberg]. I was there. It was a wonderful lecture. It is a pity that his work has not had a deeper impact. I still believe he was basically right (and certainly his prose was brilliant).

I did ask him, by the way, whether he thought it possible that the Aborigines in Australia were not conscious as late as the 18th or 19th century. He said he was not sure and that it would be worthwhile to investigate. Well, I never did and probably no one else [did].

So I don't think I am misunderstanding him by making this criticism, and it sounds like he just bites the bullet and says maybe this was true. The main position on the forum seems to be that anthropologists weren't asking the right questions as soon as they met uncontacted tribes, and so maybe they would have missed this. I find this hard to believe. It should be *really* easy to notice, and also the process of them learning Western theory of mind should leave some scars – at least one of them should say something like “that couple-year period when we all stopped hallucinating gods and became conscious – that was a *weird* time.”

Jaynes partisans are able to come up with a few anthropological works suggesting that the minds of primitive people are pretty weird, and I believe that, but they don't seem quite as weird as Jaynes wants them to be. So the question becomes whether we would notice if some people worked in a pre-bicameral and pre-conscious way.

I'm tempted to answer "yes, obviously", but for the counterargument, see this Reddit thread.

I never thought with language until now. This is my story. (self,self)
259 submitted 4 years ago by thegoldengiraffe

I think I'm very different from most people because of one main thing. I never thought with language. Ever. I moved to Canada when I was 2 from Asia, and have been basically been around English speakers my whole life. I'm in my twenties now and I can speak it relatively well, and can understand every single word. However, growing up, I never ever thought with language. Not once did I ever think something in my mind with words like "What are my friends doing right now?" to planning things like "I'm going to do my homework right after watching this show." I went through elementary school like this, I went through Highschool like this, I went through University like this...and I couldn't help but feel something was off about me that I couldn't put my hand on. Just last year, I had a straight up revelation, ephiphany...and this is hard to explain...but the best way that I can put it is that...I figured out that I SHOULD be thinking in language. So all of a sudden, I made a conscious effort to think things through with language. I spent a years time refining this new "skill" and it has COMPLETELY, and utterly changed my perception, my mental capabilities, and to be frank, my life. I can suddenly describe my emotions which was so insanely confusing to me before. I understand the concept that my friends are still "existing" even if they're not in site by thinking about their names. I now suddenly have opinions and feelings about things that I never had before. What the heck happened to me? I started thinking in language after not doing so my whole life. It's weird because I can now look back at my life before and see just how weird it was. Since I now have this new "skill" I can only describe my past life as"Mindless"..."empty"....."soul-less"..... As weird as this sounds, I'm not even sure what I was, if I was even human, because I was barely even conscious. I felt like I was just reacting to the immediate environment and wasn't able to think anything outside of it. It's such a strange time in my life. It feels like I just found out the ultimate secret or something.Can anyone relate, or understand what I'm saying? Can anyone explain what is happening to me? I have no idea where to even post this but this has been on my mind ever since I've been able to think about it.

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This guy thinks he "barely" had consciousness (in the Jaynesian sense), and it took him however many years to notice this *about himself*. It was just another universal human experience you can miss without realizing it! And notice how it was the *culturally learned knowledge* that other people worked differently which shifted him to the normal equilibrium. So maybe if there was some tribe like this somewhere, it would be easy to miss.

I'm also thinking of some cross-cultural psychiatry classes I had to take in residency. It's well-known that some other cultures rarely get depression and anxiety in the classical Western sense. Instead, in the situations where we would become depressed and anxious, they get psychosomatic complaints, especially stomach pain. This happens to Westerners too sometimes, but in other cultures (eg China, Latin America) it's by far the most common presentation. This seems similar to Jaynes' argument that the ancient Greeks talked about feelings in their stomachs when we would talk about thoughts in our minds. I'm not saying these people aren't conscious or have no theory of mind. But it seems like their theory of mind must be...arranged...differently than ours is, somehow. Or that cultural expectations about how these issues express themselves are shaping the way these issues express themselves, powerfully enough that you can just have whole cultures where depression the way we experience it *isn't a thing*. See also this list of culture-bound syndromes. Make sure

to read the discussion of Western culture-bound syndromes on the bottom – and make sure to spend a few moments considering what a politically-incorrect person might add to the list.

Even if I don't accept all the stuff about hallucinatory Athena choreographing the Trojan War, the most important thing I'm going to take away from *Origin of Consciousness* is that theory of mind is an artifact, not a given, and it's not necessarily the same everywhere. Much of the way we relate to our mind is culturally determined, and with a different enough cultural environment you can get some *weird* mind designs in ways that have real effect on behavior. Theory-of-mind-space is wider than we imagine, whether we're thinking about ancient Sumerians or our ordinary-seeming neighbors.

JULIAN JAYNES

THE ORIGIN OF
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IN THE BREAK
DOWN OF THE
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