

Review of “Gods, Voices and the Bicameral Mind, the theories of Julian Jaynes”, first edition, 2016, 312 pages, edited by Marcel Kuijsten

February 16th 2017 Reviewed by Roland Sassen (sassen@thinsia.com)

[Editors' preview](#)

From voices to choices

Sometimes in history a theory emerges which is widely ignored by academics. Such an incredible theory about consciousness or conscious interiority, was proposed by Julian Jaynes in 1977.

Bicameral Mind

Bicameral means two chambers, the left and right hemispheres of our brain.

What is the breakdown of the bicameral mind?

Julian Jaynes wrote in 1976 the book “The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind”.

Until 1000 BCE (in Greece) verbal hallucinations (voices) from the right hemisphere told people what to do. As communities became larger and interactions between communities happened more often, the voices (gods) were not capable anymore to deal with new situations, hence they “broke down”. The human brain became aware of the voices, and thereby of itself. As people started to write things down, the dependency on voices for decisions further diminished. The left hemisphere, language, took over and started to make its “own” decisions.

You can see a breakdown of the bicameral mind in several places at different times on this planet. That means that modern consciousness developed several times as well. For example in Greece approx. 500 BCE, and with the Incas 1200 CE.

In Greece, approx. 500 BCE, the voices stopped talking, the gods went silent, and it was here that people invented many religions, as a substitute for the lost voices.

Consciousness, what it is and what not

Consciousness is (a mental process creating) an introspectable mind-space. Non-conscious mental processes are cognition, learning, and sense and perception.

14 scientists write essays about Jaynes's theories

Kuijsten, in his 2016 book, has collected essays from 14 different scientists on the Julian Jaynes theory. Evidence for Jaynes's theory has been found in, Mesopotamia, Greece, Egypt, Israel, early China and India. This book provides us with a wealth of stunning viewpoints, showing us the support from different doctrines for Jaynes's theories after nearly 40 years of dormancy, and adds Tibet as a country where the development of religion and language follows Jaynes's theory.

Kuijsten states: "Consciousness is learned, not innate. It is that which is introspectable. Consciousness operating on human emotions causes shame to become guilt, fear to become anxiety, anger to become hatred and mating behavior to give rise to sexual fantasy."

According to Charles Hampden-Turner, hearing and obeying voices, which we all did before being conscious, was much easier than living with consciousness. "Greek tragedy stressed the price of consciousness, that the hubris of the analogue "I" on the screen of consciousness could find itself in agonizing contradiction with real events."

James E. Morriss on Jaynes's theory: "It is a theory of monumental dimension, that can alter our view of consciousness, revise our conception of the history of mankind and lay bare the human dilemma in all its existential wonder".

Brian J. McVeigh is beautifully poetic in describing Jaynes: "Conscience is waiting for a heavenly voice to tell us what to do before we realize we are that voice".

He refers to Nørretranders: "People experience far more than what they consciously register, and the control of actions that consciousness feels it exercises is an illusion".

McVeigh lists seven characteristics of consciousness, and reminds us that conscious interiority is not necessary for complex thought processes. He shows five intellectual barriers to deal with consciousness, the most difficult to discuss is the lack of amazement at the very existence of interiority.

Bill Rowe tells us about the evidence, from Jaynes and others, that the gods came from the dead. He examined the time frame between 1200 and 800 BCE, which saw the collapse of the Bronze Age civilizations. He compared 11 theories that tried to explain how it came about that nearly 50 cities were destroyed during this time. The collapse of the bicameral mind, belonging to the theory of Jaynes, seems to be the most plausible at the moment, according to Rowe.

From visiting voices to visiting visions: dreams

Robert Atwan describes the connection between dreams and interiorization, alias consciousness. In the third millennium BCE people lost the direct guidance of gods, prophetic possession started to be used for divination. Oracles preceded dreams as conduits of divine communications. Penelope's dream includes its own interpretation, her dream becomes Odysseus's oracle. From then on, dreams are not auditory anymore but visual, thereby changing the structure of human consciousness. He cites Jaynes: "The coming of consciousness can in a certain vague sense be construed as a shift from an auditory mind to a visual mind". As the dream begins to move inside the mind of the dreamer, around 500 BC, and the dreamer begins to move inside her dream, interiorization can be observed for the first time.

Judith Weissman knows about poets hearing commanding voices. Poems inspired by such voices retain their power over readers. She tells us: "Jaynes suggests that after the invention of language, auditory hallucinations developed to enable tribal people to remember the commands of their leaders". The source of these voices changed over time, kings, god-kings, idols, Olympian gods, Yahweh. And

they always spoke in poetry, in verse, associated with rhythm, not with reason. Poetry and sermons are closer to the special language of auditory hallucinations than philosophy and history are.

Edward Proffitt. From voices to the mundane language of human speech. More poets.

Because poets in recent history (Romantic poetry, 1800-1850) were conscious, they had no choice but to switch from singing to writing. They had to “give up the magic of verbal music for the musicality of speech”. Fortunately we have the work of Jaynes to be able to follow the transition from sung rhymes (Homer, Iliad and the Odyssey) to written poems. The loss of voices to obey, the loss of bicameral authorization, is a result of the evolution of consciousness, leading to the development of science in the last five hundred years. In the past two hundred years this loss has become most overt.

“The self, still unprepared, must now take everything on itself, for the gods and the Muses alike have disappeared into the air.” With Sappho (Lesbos, c. 630 – c. 570 BC), (self-)consciousness starts to emerge. Octavio Paz (1914-1989 Mexico) gave us a concept of poetry that involves self-creation as a concept: the self can accept its own authorization. Proffitt sees Coleridge (UK 1772-1834) as an example of a poet in transition: he (Coleridge) wrote two kinds of poems: the conversational (left hemisphere) versus the incantatory (right hemisphere). Coleridge could not commit to human speech, to conscious reason. He longed for the impossible: to be a shaman, to be a vessel of the gods. The poet in the modern world must learn through singing not to sing. The phrase of Arnold (UK 1822-1888) “we are still between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born”, has been used in the television series *Westworld* recently (Nov 2016).

Most people mistrust voices. The poet William Blake was an exception, together with the genius Emanuel Swedenborg. John Sappington and John Hamilton discovered that hearing voices is much more common than most people assume and should not be treated as an illness. Many quadriplegic victims of cerebral palsy, who cannot gesture or speak, were classified as retarded, but they are able to answer to yes and no questions. Not only are they quite intelligent, they also routinely hear voices.

Russell T. Hurlburt has more than 30 years’ experience with his DES method: Descriptive Experience Sampling. At random times patients hear a beep and write down their thoughts. He describes in detail a schizophrenic woman who heard voices of the gods. He could distil several striking characteristics of her auditory and visual hallucinations.

In his second essay in this book Bill Rowe agrees with Jaynes that you can see the development of consciousness in two ways: from the history -- Bronze Age people had perfect executive functions, but were not conscious -- and from development in children. Around 500 BC, when consciousness developed, almost all world religions came into being. For children, Rowe describes five milestones to consciousness. If children missed participating in interpersonal affect attunements in the first year of life, they could develop the same inability with social interactions as autistic people have. Bicameral people, like autistic people, do have language, but they do not have a Theory of Mind.

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind is the ability to attribute mental states—beliefs, intentions, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc.—to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one's own.

You are not alone

Laura Mooneyham White shows us that Julian Jaynes is not alone with his theory of the bicameral mind and the origin of consciousness: Walker Percey published “The Message in a Bottle” in 1975, two years after Jaynes published his book. Both Percey and Jaynes see consciousness as a product of language. Language, 50,000 years old, gave rise to consciousness, for example in Greece about 500 BCE.

This “sudden” coming into existence of consciousness, in just a few hundred years, is difficult to grasp for many scientists. But when you examine the concepts and words used in the languages across the world, it becomes clear what kind of mindset people had.

Jaynes and Percey have a different view of the world after consciousness evolved: Jaynes sees people longing for the lost voices of the gods, whereas Percey believes that consciousness, not having to obey auditory hallucinations, paves the way for a new search for divinity. Neither Jaynes nor Percey would prefer to be without consciousness. Bob Comeaux managed to suppress consciousness by letting people drink water with heavy sodium content. As a consequence, these people lost familiar anxieties, terrors, panics, phobias and exhibited a curious flatness of tone. They lost all sense of shame, as we need consciousness for the emotions of guilt, shame and desire. Sex is just mildly entertaining for these drugged people. Without consciousness there is no fantasy. Also their language changed to using just two-word sentences, like three year old children or gorillas that were taught sign language—they have no sense of context or complex ideas; they are reduced to simple wants and needs. Maybe we can learn here that the absence of depression or anxiety does not constitute true wellness.

Consciousness is metaphor

Ted Remington shows us how modern Jaynes’s theory is seeing consciousness as a metaphorical use of language. Jaynes’s approach is to describe consciousness from many different views, and right here from the standpoint of rhetoric. He extends the theories of contemporary cognitive linguists. He develops the theories of Ivor Armstrong Richards (UK 1893-1979), who suggested two different uses of language: a scientific use, where references should be correct and relation of references should be logical, and emotional use, where reference to truth or logical arrangement are not necessary and may even constitute an obstacle. In these times of facts and alternative facts this approach might be useful. According to Remington, Jaynes has moved us closer to realizing Richard’s dream of consilience between psychology and rhetoric.

Todd Gibson sees the history of religious imagery in Asia as stunningly varied. In this essay he looks at Tibet, starting with a close examination of words and the evolution of their meaning. The language today in Tibet is largely inherited from the Indian Buddhist tradition. Buddhism, which arrived in Tibet about 800 CE, largely agrees with Jaynes. Gibson re-examines the language and development of religion in ancient Tibet through the lens provided by Jaynes’s bicameral theory. Also, in more recent versions of Tibetan religion, he finds support for Jaynes’s theory, for example the setting of the State Oracle of Tibet is similar to the description of the Delphic oracle in its final state.

Robert E. Haskell, in the last essay of this extraordinary book, brings Vico (Naples, 1668-1744) to life: like Julian Jaynes, Giambattista Vico sees the beginning of language in singing, in poetry.

Haskell: “Vico and Jaynes describe similar conditions that lead to the initiation of imagined and hallucinated gods. Both Vico and Jaynes see metaphor as a fundamental cognitive operation, it is not a mere extra trick of language, but the basic constructive ground of language”. In Jaynes’s words: “Consciousness is the work of lexical metaphor”; consciousness is constantly fitting things into a story.

Read and enjoy

Maybe just a couple of times a day we realize that we are thinking about things, ourselves included. Some say only the absence of thinking allows us to be creative. Other say that in the flow of automatic movements we can choose a new strategy, consciousness at work. The theories of Jaynes are guiding us to an understanding of consciousness. Perhaps after reading this book, we can “include the knower in the known”. It is a joy to read “Gods, Voices and the Bicameral Mind, the Theories of Julian Jaynes“, and we are indebted to Marcel Kuijsten for this most intriguing collection of essays.