



Overview of Julian Jaynes's Theory of Consciousness and the Bicameral Mind

Julian Jaynes Society.¹

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ABSTRACT

It came from the CMS. Nobody could see it coming..

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In January of 1977 Princeton University psychologist Julian Jaynes (1920--1997) put forth a bold new theory of the origin of consciousness and a previous mentality known as the bicameral mind in the controversial but critically acclaimed book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Jaynes was far ahead of his time, and his theory remains as relevant and influential today as when it was first published.

Jaynes asserts that consciousness did not arise far back in human evolution but is a learned process based on metaphorical language. Prior to the development of consciousness, Jaynes argues humans operated under a previous mentality he called the bicameral ('two-chambered') mind. In the place of an internal dialogue, bicameral people experienced auditory hallucinations directing their actions, similar to the command hallucinations experienced by many people who hear voices today. These hallucinations were interpreted as the voices of chiefs, rulers, or the gods.

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To support his theory, Jaynes draws evidence from a wide range of fields, including neuroscience, psychology, archaeology, ancient history, and the analysis of ancient texts. Jaynes's theory has profound implications for our understanding of human history as well as many aspects of modern life.

Jaynes's theory can be broken down into four independent hypotheses:

1. Consciousness --- as he carefully defines it --- is a learned process based on metaphorical language. ***Misunderstandings about Jaynes's theory usually stem from not understanding Jaynes's more precise definition of consciousness.***
2. That preceding the development of consciousness there was a different mentality based on verbal hallucinations called the bicameral ('two-chambered') mind.
3. Dating the development of consciousness (as Jaynes carefully defines it) to around the end of the second millennium B.C.E. in Greece and Mesopotamia. The transition occurred at different times in other parts of the world.
4. The neurological model for the bicameral mind, which has now been confirmed by dozens of brain imaging studies.

Why Julian Jaynes's Theory is Important

There are many reasons why it's important to understand Julian Jaynes's theory, including:

1. It provides a new way of understanding of human history and the human condition. People that understand Julian Jaynes's theory see the world and humanity in a completely different way. Vestiges of the bicameral mind still influence us in many ways.
2. Jaynes's offers a much better understanding of human consciousness than other theorists, bringing much more clarity to the issue. Jaynes's ideas on consciousness encourage us to learn better ways of expanding our own capacity for conscious thought and teaching consciousness to future generations.
3. Jaynes's theory explains a wide range of otherwise inexplicable phenomena, such as divination, idols, the pyramids and other forms of monumental mortuary architecture, hypnosis, hallucinations, and children's imaginary companions. All of these things suddenly make sense when you understand the theory.
4. Jaynes's theory offers a fascinating explanation for the origin of gods and the origin of religion --- one of the great mysteries of human civilization.
5. Jaynes's theory provides a historical context for hearing voices --- providing a radical new way of understanding mental illness. Jaynes's theory helped inspire the modern interest in hearing voices and the Hearing Voices Network.
6. Jaynes's theory provides a neurological model for hearing voices, which has now been verified in dozens of brain imaging studies, and is being used to develop future treatments for those with persistent, obtrusive voices.

Understanding Julian Jaynes's Theory

Learning about Julian Jaynes's theory for the first time is an exciting intellectual journey. As Stanford professor Ernest Hilgard said, "The bold hypothesis of the

bicameral mind is an intellectual shock to the reader, but whether or not he ultimately accepts it he is forced to entertain it as a possibility. Even if he marshals arguments against it he has to think about matters he has never thought of before, or, if he has thought of them, he must think about them in contexts and relationships that are strikingly new."

We can't stress enough that brief summaries and reviews do not do the theory justice, and unfortunately many comments online (including Wikipedia) contain major misunderstandings and mistakes.

If you are interested in understanding of Jaynes's theory, we recommend the following:

1. Start by reading Jaynes's book, [*The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*](#). If you are short on time, start by reading Julian Jaynes's article "[*Consciousness and the Voices of the Mind*](#)."
2. Read our latest book, [*Conversations on Consciousness and the Bicameral Mind: Interviews with Leading Thinkers on Julian Jaynes's Theory*](#), which extends and clarifies the theory, and answers many of the questions people still have after reading Jaynes's book.
3. [Join the Julian Jaynes Society](#): Access exclusive content to better understand Julian Jaynes's theory while helping to support our mission. The Member Area is a treasure trove of articles, interviews, videos, audio programs, lectures, and book reviews about the theory. Also be sure to [subscribe to our mailing list](#) to get the latest updates and news related to the theory.
4. Read [*The Julian Jaynes Collection*](#), which contains additional material by Jaynes as well as interviews and in-depth discussion of his theory, and [*Gods, Voices, and the Bicameral Mind*](#) and [*Reflections on the Dawn of Consciousness*](#), which provide additional discussion of Jaynes's ideas by a variety of scholars, as well as articles by Jaynes himself. These three books expands on various aspects of Jaynes's theory, update the reader on research relevant to his ideas, and address common critiques of Jaynes's theory.

5. Listen to the [Digital Audio Programs](#) on Jaynes's theory and read [The Jaynesian](#), the newsletter of the Julian Jaynes Society. Both of these provide additional insights and discussion on Jaynes's theory. Review the [Myths vs. Facts](#) and [Critiques & Responses](#) sections of the website. Questions can be posted on the [Discussion Forum](#).
6. For those serious about gaining an in-depth understanding of Jaynes's theory, our [Self Study Course](#) provides a full course on the theory.