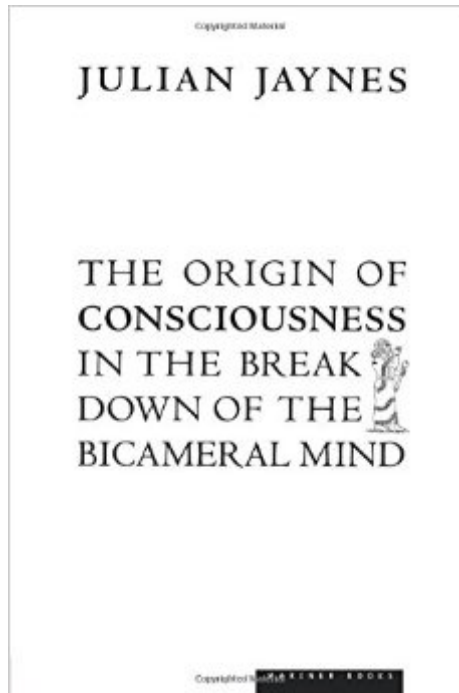


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The Origin Of Consciousness In The Breakdown Of The Bicameral Mind



Synopsis

At the heart of this classic, seminal book is Julian Jaynes's still-controversial thesis that human consciousness did not begin far back in animal evolution but instead is a learned process that came about only three thousand years ago and is still developing. The implications of this revolutionary scientific paradigm extend into virtually every aspect of our psychology, our history and culture, our religion -- and indeed our future.

Book Information

Paperback: 512 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books (August 15, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0618057072

ISBN-13: 978-0618057078

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (278 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

First of all the book was copyrighted in 1976 and apparently first published in 1982. That is eons ago in the science of cognition and brain imaging. So I would like to know how the past 2 and a half decades have affected the theories in this book. I also note that the author taught at Princeton University (he died in 1997), so his theories ought to have received a hearing. But apparently the follow-up book he intended was never published, and he was considered somewhat of a maverick, if not quite a crackpot. This website offers some perspective: [...]His theory, in simplest terms, is that until about 3000 years ago, all of humankind basically heard voices. The voices were actually coming from the other side of the brain, but because the two hemispheres were not in communication the way they are now for most of us, the voices seemed to be coming from outside. The seemed, in fact, to be coming from God or the gods. So far, so good. That is certainly imaginable to most of us, because we know that schizophrenics and some others still hear voices in apparently this manner today. But he also posits that many sophisticated civilizations were created by men and women who were all directed by these godlike voices. What is not very clearly

explained (a serious gap in his theory) is how all the voices in these "bicameral civilizations," as he calls them, worked in harmony. But his theory is that ancient Greece, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and less ancient but similar Mayan and Incan kingdoms were all built by people who were not "conscious" in our modern sense. When one hears voices, whether then or now, the voices tend to be commanding and directive, and the need to obey them compelling. Free will is not possible.

What high standards we have for Julian Jaynes. We ask that he be more revolutionary than Copernicus, whose heliocentric theory was wrong in almost every particular except the one that matters; more consistent than Darwin, who advocated many of the Lamarckian principles that are now considered anathema to his theory; more positivist than Freud, who despite being just as "unfalsifiable" today as he was 100 years ago is universally considered to have redefined our understanding of the self. Whatever Jaynes may have gotten wrong, his insights into the problems posed by consciousness, the self, and political evolution seem more giant each time I revisit this book. Too few scholars are willing to look at the darker chambers of the human psyche through history, especially the vulnerability of the mind to the "power of suggestion" found in hypnosis and schizophrenia, and the recurring, prominent role of trance in religious ritual. Like Freud, Jaynes reminds us we aren't half as rational and autonomous as we tell ourselves we are (ironically it is the "faith-based" philosophies that seem most threatened by this idea.) 150 years ago we bristled at the suggestion that our distant ancestors were apes. Even the "intelligent design" crowd doesn't take issue with this fact today. But to suggest that our ancestors of just 200 generations ago were, by our modern standards, just plain nuts raises all the old hackles. Why? Are we each afraid, at such a small remove, that we might personally revert to our quasi-schizophrenic, bicameral origins? If Jaynes had postulated an origin of consciousness 10 millennia ago instead of 3 would we breathe more easily?

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