

## The Problem of Consciousness

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I remember well how Barbara Wright once shocked people with the idea that many of the words that people in Gurdjieff, including myself, throw around thoughtlessly are what she called “praise words.” They tend to be used without critical thought, as if they were something understood, and good. “Consciousness” is one.

As an illustration of this attitude, I was recently reading to an online meeting from the introduction to Julian Jaynes’ seminal work *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. The title of this chapter is “The Problem of Consciousness.” A certain very senior Gurdjieff person objected: “There is no problem with consciousness!” But there is. More, it is the very work of the philosopher to problematize things that had been assumed to be known—to light the candle of critical thinking, challenge established ideas, and evoke new thought.

As Jaynes points out, there are many naively accepted “definitions” of consciousness, none of which do justice. He proposes and proves a stunning new definition: “Consciousness is thinking in metaphor.” The word itself “Con-sci-ous-ness” is a metaphor. The roots are Latin: “Con” with. “Sci” awareness, knowledge, sensing. So consciousness is something that goes alongside, sensing, something added on to mere sensing and feeling.

It is as if there are two boats, in two different streams: one observing and possibly directing the other. Rather than identifying with the passive boat, the sensing and feeling and moving self, the post-bicameral person identifies with the observing, directing boat. External “god” is replaced by inner “I.”

Inspired by recent reading of Jaynes and some of his followers, I set my time machine for a trip back to around 1200 BCE, the “great catastrophe,” the very short period during which most of the bronze age empires fell, or at least their urban command centers such as Troy, Atlantis (which may have been the same as Troy—see *The Flood from Heaven: Deciphering the Atlantis Legend* by Eberhard Zangger), Pharaonic Egypt, Sumer, Babylonia, the Hittites, Mycenaean Greece, Minoan. The bicameral mind, which worked well in a smallish tribe, could not sustain competing claims of empire and hierarchy. The empires all constructed giant monuments of stone—obelisks, towers, pyramids, ziggurats—which symbolized their hieratic structures of political power and religion. Towers of babel, doomed to fall.

People could no longer lean on gods and god-kings. What arose was not self-contained empires but new religions, overlapping, intersecting. Amidst competing claims upon hearts and minds, individuals had to become responsible for themselves. According to Jaynes, this was when subjective consciousness appeared, when people first became capable of thinking “I” and acting from “I” and of narrating the odyssey of their “I” through life.

A long darkish age ensued, lasting until the Axial “enlightenment” about 600 years later. Dark ages tend to be more interesting than ones illuminated by the suspiciously narrow beam of

historical praise and contestation. Some literature survives, notably Homer's *Odyssey*. The differences between that post-bicameral work and Homer's earlier *Illiad* are striking. They form a significant part of Jaynes' argument. In the *Illiad* nobody makes decisions what to do: the voice of a god is heard, literally heard as spoken words.

"In the beginning was the word," [John 1:1, KJV]. "Εν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος" goes back long before Christ. It is an echo of the bicameral condition. The word Λόγος (logos) meant "spoken words" and still does in modern Greek—the metaphysical sense of "logos" was added by damn theologians (literally god-word-people), making it into a praise word implying divine authorization of a religion.

Bicameral people usually obeyed the word of god they heard (the word "obey" etymologically means "to hear"). Post-bicameral people sometimes hear a voice, but it is not a constant part of human experience, and obedience tends to be optional. The person himself cogitates and decides and acts. Less natural, perhaps, but often more effective in dealing with complex situations. In modern times, hearing voices is often considered mental illness. People are conditioned to feel ashamed to admit it if they do. They suppress awareness of voices and visions. This habit can be unlearned. This can become a spring of artistic creativity.

Creative thought is generative (like "AI," like Gurdjieff's notional "Formatory Apparatus" in the human mind, both of which recombine stored material but don't generate anything genuinely new) but to be creative it also must be critical. Everything thought about must be problematized. It is the force of a problem that makes mentation truly thinking. Though long recognized by philosophers, artists, writers, thought in the twentieth century, having largely freed itself from religion, is marked an accelerated understanding of this, in the hands of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Derrida, many others. by As Heidegger observed in *What is called Thinking* "we are not thinking yet"—we are only associating. What is needed is presence of a post-bicameral "I." This is rare, even in Gurdjieffians, and very hard to make persistent.

Odysseus was the first "sly man." His cunning was the salt and spice of his epic tale of return home, overcoming many difficulties, finally achieving fully human status, reuniting with his wife. Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales* was his *Odyssey*. All his works seem to be autohagiographies of a man whose deeds were full of cunning and presence. He seems to have achieved a remarkable individual "I" but in his second- and third- and later generation followers it appears less and less. As he tells it, all the pressure and suffering of his life created this power in him; but later followers received it only in proportion to their suffering, which diminishes in quantity and quality generation by generation. Indeed nobody has the right or the power to enforce it upon anybody else: it has to come from one's own intention, and/or one's own fate.