

Julian Jaynes new mysterians

In the mid-1970's, the psychologist Julian Jaynes created a sensation with his intimidatingly titled book, "The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind." People, he declared, indeed used to be zombies, with no more feeling of I-ness than the living dead. For centuries they were steered through life by persistent inner voices, as controlling circuits in the right side of the brain sent signals to the left side. Modern people experience these thoughts as the sound of the inner self. But in the beginning, Jaynes says, they were interpreted as the voices of gods. There were no private ambitions, no private grudges, no private frustrations, no private anything," Jaynes wrote. As the world grew more complicated, this "bicameral mind" broke down. The two sides of the brain became more closely intertwined and consciousness, the sense of being a self, was born. The spirits were replaced by the ego, the I.

From studying ancient texts like the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey," Jaynes concluded that in Europe and Asia consciousness arose around 3,000 years ago. When the Asiatic tribes believed to be the ancestors of all Native Americans crossed the Bering land bridge at least 12,000 years ago, could they still have been Jaynesian robots haunted by inner voices? Had consciousness dawned by the late 13th century when the Anasazi abandoned their empire on the Colorado Plateau, dispersing to places like Yapashi, and eventually settling in the pueblos along the Rio Grande?

We have no way of knowing. Science can study the signs of self-awareness: drawings on rock walls and pottery, written words, facial expressions. But the only consciousness anyone has access to is the private world inside oneself. In trying to map this unique geography, the scientific method of separating subject and object breaks down. The subject is the object, and in thinking about thinking we get caught in dizzying regresses of introspection.

No wonder archeologists have habitually regarded ancient peoples as automatons, moved around like pawns by geographical forces. Why did the southwest pueblo cultures so often build on mesa tops, like Yapashi, when the source of water and the best farmland was down below on the canyon floors? The common textbook explanation is that the villagers were defending themselves against enemies. But maybe they were just enjoying the view.

One can always find a reductive answer. When the Anasazi scratched their patterns on the rocks, maybe they were just instinctively marking territory like ancient gangs. Even the curiosity that drives modern astronomers to explore the night sky could be no more than an outgrowth of the primitive need to watch for invaders.

It all seems so logical, and so unsatisfying. I pick up a shard of glassy black obsidian, wondering if it's a flake left by the maker of an arrowhead or by the insentient weathering of nature. My visual sensors register black and shiny. My tactile sensors register the sharpness of the edge. But I also experience the feeling, both subtle and intense, of seeing and holding the rock: the sharpness of the sharp, the blackness of the black.

The immediacy of subjective experience is so overwhelming that the New Mysterians believe conventional science will never explain it. Their predecessors, the Old Mysterians, were dualists, who saw mind as a spiritual essence separate from matter. Members of the new wave assume that consciousness is a natural feature of brain matter.

The problem, as Colin McGinn argues in his new book, "The Mysterious Flame," is that people simply haven't evolved enough to understand it, and probably never will. The most provocative of these skeptics, David Chalmers, offers a strange kind of hope: he believes that the impenetrability of consciousness is a clue that science needs to start over again from scratch and carve up the world in a whole new way.

"The physical structure of the world -- the exact distribution of particles, fields and forces in space-time -- is logically consistent with the absence of consciousness," he recently wrote, "so the presence of consciousness is a further fact about our world." Science has been treating consciousness as something secondary, to be explained in terms of existing concepts. Chalmers believes it will be necessary to admit consciousness into science as an irreducible thing-in-itself, along with matter, energy, space and time. Then perhaps we will truly understand the universe.

It seems absurd to think that this newfound quality would happen to reside only in human heads. So Chalmers has joined a handful of philosophers who reluctantly entertain the possibility that what we call consciousness might somehow pervade the material world. This notion, panpsychism ("mind everywhere"), is not so different from what the Anasazi believed -- that everything is full of spirits. And so we return, full circle, to the philosophy of Yapashi.

The idea seems crazy. But so, a century ago, did the notion that a lump of seemingly inert matter holds vast amounts of energy -- the discovery that put Los Alamos on the map and almost erased Hiroshima.

The modern Pueblo Indians, who trace their ancestry to Yapashi and other nearby ruins, teach that northern New Mexico is the center of the universe. Four sacred mountains, one for each direction, mark the boundaries of this mythological world. But the cosmologists, at Los Alamos and elsewhere, say there is no center. The universe, as Freeman Dyson put it, is infinite in all directions.

As I look one last time at the mountainous panorama, it's easy to understand the pueblo view. The center is right here where I am standing, at the focus of my awareness. In trying to make sense of the world, we fight to overcome such parochial feelings. But future archeologists -- if they are able to decipher the scratchings we leave in our books and on our computer disks -- will probably understand, and maybe even improve upon our confusion.

George Johnson is the author of "Fire in the Mind: Science, Faith and the Search for Order." His book "Strange Beauty: Murray Gell-Mann and the Revolution in 20th-Century Physics" will be published this month by Knopf.