

**The Creation of I**  
**Identity Liberalism and the Common Good**

By  
**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**  
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*Cogito, ergo sum*, Rene Descartes famously said, “I think therefore I am.” He couldn’t be sure of anything else, not even that there’s a real world outside his own mind. But he was certain of one thing, that which he could not doubt, his own existence. He could not doubt the being capable of thinking *I*. On the one hand, we might wonder why Descartes should have become famous for saying something so obvious. As many a great philosopher has heard in response to other such discoveries, *Dah!* But on the other hand, the sense of self we all take for granted today may not have been so obvious to those living in the not too distant past. I’m not speaking of primitive hunter-gatherers who may have depended so much upon the other members of their small troops that they felt indistinguishable from one another. I’m talking about people who lived in cities, wrote books, had religion, art, economics, and other expressions of civilization, yet may have been without conscious awareness of their own individual identities.

This is precisely what the late Princeton professor of psychology Julian Jaynes suggests in his well substantiated, groundbreaking, and intriguing 1976 bestselling book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. In it, Jaynes make the case that until as recently as 3,000 years ago the right and left sides of the human brain played a very different role than they do today. In brief, the two-chambered, or, *bicameral* brain, as he calls it, behaved like two separate brains; a speaking side and a hearing side. Unaware the speaking side’s voice was its own, the hearing side mistook it for the voices of dead ancestors, and, later, of the gods. Individuals didn’t make conscious decisions. They simply obeyed the voices in their heads, which they mistook as the authoritative voices of our dead relatives and deities. If this is so, what we call schizophrenia today, or considered demon possession not long ago, may be caused by people who still have bicameral brains. Unfortunately, hearing voices doesn’t work as well for people nowadays as Jaynes argues it did thousands of years ago.

If this sounds crazy, let me give you a quick rundown of the evidence Jaynes offers in support of his theory. He begins with ancient literature, including the *Iliad*, written around 850 BCE. “There is in general no consciousness in the *Iliad*,”<sup>1</sup> he points out, meaning there’s no mention of the inner, or subjective thoughts and reactions, of its characters. Nor, at the time, was there language for expressing such experiences. What today we consider the result of our own subjective emotional responses, were cause be external divinities in the *Iliad*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jaynes, Julian, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA, 1976, 1990, p. 69.

When Agamemnon, king of men, robs Achilles of his mistress, it is a god that grasps Achilles by his yellow hair and warns him not to strike Agamemnon (1:197ff.). It is a god who then rises out of the gray sea and then consoles him in his tears of wrath on the beach by his black ships, a god who whispers low to Helen to sweep her heart with homesick longing, a god who hides Paris in the mist in front of attacking Menelaus, a god who tells Claucus to take bronze for gold (6:234ff.), a god who leads the armies into battle, who speaks to each soldier at the turning points... It is the gods who start quarrels among men (4:437ff.) that really causes the war (3:164ff.), and then plan its strategy (2:56ff.).<sup>2</sup>

These are only a few examples of the kind of behaviors the Iliad explains as being driven by external forces instead of an individual's own subjective decisions; in response to the voices of the gods, that is, instead of one's own emotions. This is not unlike what happens to patients who have had their anterior commissures surgically severed. That's the bundle of axons that, like a cable, runs between and connects the two sides of the brain, the speaking side to the hearing side. Jaynes says, "the right hemisphere of these patients can respond emotionally without the left talking hemisphere knowing what it is all about."<sup>3</sup> With the cable communicating between the two sides severed, one hemisphere isn't consciously aware of the other. For example, when researchers flash a nude picture at the left hemisphere, Jaynes explains, "the patient says... that it saw nothing or just a flash of light. But the grinning, blushing, and giggling during the next minute contradicts what the speech hemisphere has just said."<sup>4</sup> Many such patients also report hearing voices they can't explain, voices that most of us experience as our own internal voices.

Jaynes also says bicameral thinking explains the ancient practice of treating the bodies of the dead as if there were still alive by, for example, dressing them, seating them, and sometimes even feeding them. Though it sounds more like a frightening Alfred Hitchcock movie today, it may have been usual for the people in the past to have mistook their own inner voices for the external voices of their dead ancestors, resulting in the ubiquitous practice of ancestor worship.

All of this began to change, he posits, around 3000 years ago when we first begin to see literary expressions of introspection in the newer parts of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as in Homer's *Odyssey*, and other writings around the same time. More interestingly, the stories they contain often reflect the angst experienced during the breakdown of the bicameral mind, the confusion, that is, of not having a voice telling them what to do. Jaynes suggests bicameralism quit working as human civilizations grew larger and began encountering people from other civilizations with different voices. The story of the Tower of Babel which Yahweh destroys, casting people into confusion, is one example. As for the *Odyssey*, Jaynes

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 115f.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

says, "It is a story of identity, of a voyage to the self that is being created in the breakdown of the bicameral mind"<sup>5</sup>

This leads to one of the most fascinating pieces of evidence for his bicameral theory, the invention, if you will, of prayer. It was during this same period that people began pleading for the gods to start speaking again. Jaynes illustrates with a nearly 4000-year-old Mesopotamian stone carving of Babylon's King Hammurabi standing before the throne of his god Marduk, having a conversation with him, eyeball to eyeball. A few centuries later, closer to when the Hebrew scriptures and the *Odyssey* were being composed, another carving was made in Mesopotamia, this one depicting the Assyrian King Tukulti standing, then kneeling before an empty throne, praying to a god that has become absent. One such Babylonian prayer from the period says, "My god has forsaken me and disappeared, My goddess has failed me and keeps at a distance, The good angel who walked beside me has departed."<sup>6</sup>

The other side of the brain, the speaking side, became angry at the hearing side that no longer seemed to obey its commands. Adam and Eve are evicted from Eden upon disobeying Yahweh's command, by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and gaining the ability to distinguish the difference between good and evil for themselves, "becoming like us," the Elohim complain. Zeus is so enraged he torments Prometheus for all eternity after he steals fire from the gods and gives it to humans so they can light their own way, no longer dependent upon Zeus' thunderous commands. Not coincidentally, Prometheus' name means, "forethought."

When the breakdown of the bicameral mind occurred, due to a number of conflicting voices in the violent clash of civilizations, Jaynes says;

Chaos darkened the holy brightness of the unconscious world. Hierarchies crumbled. And between the act and its divine source came the shadow, the pause that profaned, the dreadful loosening that made the gods unhappy, recriminatory, jealous. Until, finally, the screening off of their tyranny was effected by the invention... of an analog space with an analog "I." The careful elaborate structures of the bicameral mind had been shaken in the consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

I won't go into the complicated explanations Jaynes gives saying how this might have happened. It's only necessary to grasp that, according to his theory, the human mind created an individual sense of identity in response to the crisis caused by the breakdown of the bicameral mind. Without the gods to tell us what to do, we had to find a way to make decisions for ourselves, and, in only a short time, philosophers became so convinced of its reality they were saying things like, "Know thyself," "To thine own self be true," and, "I think, therefore I am."

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

Whether you accept this theory or not, which, in my opinion, is difficult not to, I bring it up so we might at least question the one thing Descartes claimed is unquestionable, and that most of us also take for granted. There is a space in our heads aware enough of itself to say *I*, but how much does it really know about itself? This new voice in our heads, which we now take as our own, is more often like a hitchhiker that's along for the ride. When we go about most our tasks—driving a car, cooking a meal, reading a book, carrying a hot cup of coffee to the table—the thing calling itself *I* hardly notices, because it's busy thinking random thoughts while our bodies are doing their own thing. If I let my *I* concentrate on carrying a full cup to a table, I can hardly keep from spilling it. It is only when don't think about it that my body carries it with perfect balance. How many us have driven a car while daydreaming, only to find we have gone to the wrong place out of habit, or arrived at our intended destination and wondered how we got there so fast? But if it's not *I*, then who's driving the car or carrying the cup? Perhaps, from just these examples, you can imagine how easy it might have been for our conscious ancestors to go through their lives without much need for the part of the mind that now calls itself *I*.

Nevertheless, today we take our *I*-identity for granted and usually think it epitomizes who we are as individuals. But even if we don't buy into Jayne's convincing theory, the notion of identity has only been central in our lives, and in society for that matter, for little more than 200 years. In his book *Identity*, Francis Fukuyama says there has long been something innate in human beings, at least for the past three millennia, that causes each of us to want recognition, a desire the Greeks called, *thymos*, which he says expresses itself in three ways, "Thymos is the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity; *isothymia* is the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people; while *megalothyia* is the desire to be recognized as superior."<sup>8</sup>

This desire for recognition may be universal, Fukuyama points out, but, "Unlike thymos, which is a permanent part of human nature, what was to become the modern concept of identity emerged only as societies started to modernize a few hundred years ago. While it originated in Europe, it has subsequently spread and taken root in virtually all societies around the globe."<sup>9</sup> It began, Fukuyama says, with the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, who stressed salvation comes only from within one's inner-self, "since faith alone justifies, it is clear the inner [person] cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inner [person]."<sup>10</sup>

Though Protestantism established the centrality of the inner-self, it wasn't until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Fukuyama says, that, "The idea at the core of modern identity had evolved much

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<sup>8</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *Identity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2018, p. xiii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26f.

further and now took on a secular form.”<sup>11</sup> That’s when Western philosophers like Rosseau, Kant, and Hegel argued human dignity is based upon our individual freedom to make moral choices. Hegel, however, took it a step further by suggesting recognition alone, “ultimately fails to be satisfying [when] it is the recognition of a slave, that is, of someone without dignity.”<sup>12</sup> This led further to the ideas enshrined in Thomas Paine’s, *The Right’s of Man*, and to the demand for universal recognition at the heart of the French Revolution, and, ultimately, to the idea of democracy. “The rise of modern democracy is the story of the displacement of megalothymia by isothymia,” Fukuyama says, “societies that only recognized an elite few were replaced by ones that recognized everyone as inherently equal.”<sup>13</sup> Obviously we’ve had a few setbacks as of late, but democracy remains a principle that’s spreading across the globe.

“By the early nineteenth century,” Fukuyama continues, “most the elements of the modern concept of identity our present: the distinction between the inner and the outer selves, the valuation of the inner being above existing social arrangements, the understanding that the dignity of the inner self rests on its moral freedom, the view that all human being share this moral freedom, and the demand that the free inner self be recognized.”<sup>14</sup> The latest evolution regarding our sense of individual identity, however, is the phenomenon known as *Identity Politics*, which Fukuyama says happens when, “The broadening and universalization of dignity turns the private quest for self into a political project.”<sup>15</sup>

The Brookings Institution defines Identity Politics as, “Political mobilization organized around group characteristics such as race, gender, and sexuality, as opposed to party, ideology, or pecuniary interest.”<sup>16</sup> This doesn’t sound so bad, yet Fukuyama warns, “The rise of identity politics in modern liberal democracies is one of the chief threats that they face, and unless we can work our way back to more universal understandings of human dignity, we will doom ourselves to continuing conflict.”<sup>17</sup> The issue with politics based mostly upon issues of individual or group identity, from a practical standpoint, is most groups are too small to have enough political presence to accomplish what they want. If they are unable to connect with others, societies splinter, and we end up with megalothymians like Donald Trump in power, elected by a minority because most of us can’t get past our own interests. Referring to such behavior as, “self-sabotage,” in his book, *The Once and Future Liberal*, Mark Lilla laments, “At a time when liberals need to speak in a way that convinces people from

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Lukianoff, Greg and Haidt, Jonathan, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Fukuyama, *ibid.*, p. xvi.

very different walks of life, in every part of the country, that they share a common destiny and need to stand together, our rhetoric encourages self-righteous narcissism.”<sup>18</sup>

From a moral standpoint, the problem with identity politics, though it embraces the principle of equality, is that it does so at the expense of freedom. We saw this occur in the Soviet Union, when young revolutionaries fighting for income equality did so by establishing one of the most authoritarian states in modern history. “Those socialist regimes that tried to make this reality,” Fukuyama reminds us, “soon found themselves running afoul of the first principle of freedom, requiring as they did massive state control over their citizen’s lives.”<sup>19</sup> Though it is a difficult balance, modern liberal democracies must be based upon what he calls, “the twin principles of freedom and democracy.”<sup>20</sup> Freedom without equality leads to too few having all the wealth, power, and dignity, while equality without freedom only makes everyone equally as miserable.

“True, human beings are essentially social,” philosopher Philip Devine says in his book *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars*, “But each one of us is nonetheless unique, among other things, in the network of social relations in which we participate. No one is simply a woman, a black person, or a male or female homosexual, just as no one is simply a man, a white person, or a heterosexual.”<sup>21</sup> Hence, as we pursue the equality and dignity each of us deserves, for ourselves and others, we should remember identity is a nebulous thing that is fleeting and changes over time, and there is much more to each of us than the identities we find for ourselves, and certainly more than those others force upon us. In our quest for thymos, for recognition—to be seen and appreciated for who we are—I hope we will also see ourselves in others, recognizing we are all alike in our common humanity and, for this reason, must work together to create a world in which all people are both free and equal, in which we may celebrate our differences while living together as one human family. Society and the individual. Freedom and equality. *I* and *Thou*. Both are true, but one without the other becomes a lie. Somewhere between them is where we find justice and learn to love one another.

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<sup>18</sup> Lilla, *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Fukuyama, *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Devine, Philip E., *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT, 1996, p. 58.