Language, consciousness and the bicameral mind

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1 Research question

How does the embodied mind and enactivism relate to the hypothesis of the bicameral mind? Is the self a linguistic construction?

2 Elaboration, projected contents

2.1 The Embodied Mind

In analytic philosophy it is customary to conceive of language as directly relating to objects in the world, as well as to conscious thoughts: the representational view of language (and cognition in general). Continental philosophy takes a much less simplistic point of view, but has been less succesful at informing science. Varela, Thompson & Rosch (1991) argue for enactivism: the mind as a non-representational, self-modifying part of our bodies. Enactment is the process where something is brought from the background to the fore. According to them two fundamental mistakes characterize Western thought. On the one hand the concept of the self, which is argued to be illusory, and on the other that of the pre-given world, imbued with significance when in fact it is only constituted

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through our interaction with it, as in "laying down a path in walking." Lakoff and Johnson (1999) also argue for embodiment, but add a focus on metaphors as constitutive of cognition. They claim that the self is a metaphor, and identify several different selves.

According to Clark (1998), the concept of self is a result from "second-order cognitive dynamics." Clark describes language, in a very optimistic and practical manner, as a tool for cognition. He draws from Vygotsky to argue for the importance of inner speech and scaffolding in development. This leads to a much more concrete form of embodiment, so-called 'active externalism,' where the mind is extended onto tools, both material and abstract. Language, in this view, is a problem solving tool (aside from its obvious role in communication).

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) commence their book by arguing the importance of the *cognitive unconscious*. It is a rule of thumb in cognitive science that 95% of cognition is unconscious. Since consciousness is such a small part of coginition, might this suggest, evolutionarily, that consciousness is not necessary for cognition?

2.2 The Bicameral Mind

> "At one time, human nature was split in two, an executive part called a god, and a follower part called a man. Neither part was Consciously aware." (Jaynes, 1976)

Jaynes (1976) puts forth the radical but fascinating thesis of the bicameral mind. He argues that consciousness is a linguistic skill, and merely a relatively recent phenomenon at that. Before devoloping consciousness humans had a bicameral mind, a division of two chambers: one in regular control, and the other occasionally intervening. These interventions were experienced as divine voices (such as from dead leaders and kings, and later, as religion developed, of gods). Evidence for this is claimed to be in classical texts such as the Iliad and the Old Testament, which contain no introspection, initiative or conscious reasoning, but only divine interventions. Rather than being merely a literary or poetic device, this taken to be a significant feature of ancient psychology. Radical as this hypothesis may sound, it has received some empirical corroboration (Kuijsten, 2007) and favourable reviews such as Dennett (1986).

> "Subjective conscious mind is an analog of what is called the real world. It is built up with a vocabulary or lexical field whose terms are all metaphors or analogs of behavior in the physical world." (Jaynes, 1976)

The skill of consciousness was developed, Jaynes argues, shortly after the Iliad was written. This led to the possibility for people to reflect and introspect, as well as to

the development of the concept of self — the very concept that Varela et al. (1991) argue is causing our philosophical confusion. Note that the invocation of metaphor as crucial to cognition appears to agree well with Lakoff and Johnson's (1999) views; this is striking because the Bicameral Mind hypothesis was published in a time when traditional cognitivism still 'the only game in town.' Jaynes derives his views, instead, from comparative psychology, history and ancient texts. Some of the same examples of the power of metaphor are mentioned. For example the metaphor of "time as a spatial dimension." With this metaphor the possibility of history comes into being. Keeping track of one's own history makes the concept of a stable self possible. Following that, is the emergence of the feeling that one is causing one's own actions, and not some god or inner voice.

The result is that inner speech, far from being an obvious phenomenon, is a contingent skill that follows communicative use of language. The bicameral undivided (not individual) mind is not yet capable of inner speech of its own, such that there is no conscious control. Communicative use of language always requires two parties: a speaker and a listener; this originally inner speech had a bicameral structure. Later this developed into full-blown consciousness, through an internalization (turning inwards) of language, as opposed to it being merely external, directed to each other or heard as inner voice. This development could have occured due to having to survive in isolation. The transition was marked by desperate attempts to retain the influence of the gods, by heeding oracles and looking for god's will in the intestines of animals. Ironically, this seems to be a precursor to an "active externalism" – deferring import decisions to externalities, in a somewhat more passive way. The way the divine voices of the bicameral mind are portrayed by Jaynes as intervening in unknown and difficult situations is also in accordance with language as a problem solving tool. Clark, however, sees "language as the ultimate upgrade," whereas bicameralism shifts the weight to the emergence of consciousness and the concept of self.

It is important to note that Jaynes is talking about a specific kind of consciousness. It is not about perception and sensation. Mere self-awareness, such as that of monkeys who came to recognize themselves through a dot they see in the mirror, is not consciousness in the proper sense of self-reflection and control. Ned Block (1981) has argued that Jaynes has only dated the forging of the *concept* of consciousness, while consciousness might have been present *sans* so-called higher-order thought. Dennett (1986) effectively disproves this criticism, however.

The arguments for the thesis rests on evolutionary psychology: experiments with split-brain patients and schizophrenics on the one hand, and classical philology on the

other. But it does not seem to be in conflict with the critical re-appraisal of evolutionary thinking made by Varela et al. (1991): there is no pre-given, objective external world steering towards optimality, but consciousness is a toolbox invented through enculturation, which actively shapes the world.

3 Expected conclusion

An embodied view of consciousness with a formative role for metaphor is called for; this leaves the self as either illusory, or as a useful linguistic construction. Language on the other hand might be independent from consciousness, and perhaps also from metaphor. Although it is hard to imagine, 'primitive' man might have been wholly unconscious. This thesis does not seem to contradict enactivism or embodied cognition, but lessens the influence of language in itself. Instead, it is consciousness which is the quantum leap.

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