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## Recent changes in the structure of consciousness?

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### **Abstract**

Consciousness is generally seen as an endogenous asset of the mind/brain that is responsive to pressures on an evolutionary time scale, but that is largely unaffected by cultural history. Substantial changes in recent history are ruled out apriori. A typical example of this bias is Block's dismissal of Jaynes's theory that consciousness emerged late in the second millennium BC (Block 1995, Jaynes 1976). In an earlier paper (Sleutels 2006), I argued against Block that there is reason to believe that cultures like that of the early Greeks in fact did not have so-called A-consciousness, i.e., they did not have access to discrete mental representations poised for use in reasoning and rational control of action.

Taking this argument one step further, I discuss a change in the structure of conscious experience that is likely to have occurred in Western society mere centuries ago. I start from the premise that conscious experience crucially involves a conceptual framework, an idea that has proved exceptionally fecund since its codification by Kant in 1781. In contrast, pre-modern accounts of consciousness and cognition consistently did not use the concept of a framework. From a modern point of view, the most straightforward explanation of this contrast is that pre-modern thinking was based on a different framework that lacked the conceptual resources available to us

today. Call this the standard account: earlier minds had frameworks, but not the concept of a framework.

Unlike earlier critics of conceptual frameworks such as Davidson (1984) and Rorty (1972), I take the framework view to be basically correct as an account of modern experience. Drawing on an analogy with Block's argument against Jaynes, however, I argue that the standard account of pre-modern experience should be rejected. A better way to understand the nature of our ancestors' conscious experience is to assume that it was in fact frameless, as has also been suggested by Heidegger (1938).

I discuss three arguments for my claim. First I show that the standard account's explanatory value is highly doubtful. I then argue that historical changes in folk psychology are *prima facie* evidence of changes in mental structure, and I consider examples of such changes. Finally, with reference to the extended mind approach, I argue that modern frame-based experience is best seen as an internalization of new communications technologies developed in the late Middle Ages and early modern period as a result of the rise of manuscript industry and the invention of the printing press (cf. Olson 1994).

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