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Book Review

All the Better to Fool You With, My Dear

A review of Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life*. Basic Books: New York, 2011, 397 pp., US\$28.00, ISBN 978-0-465-02755-2.

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I well remember the revolutionary fervor of the late 1960s and early 1970s when I was a graduate student in zoology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1966-1970). I'm not thinking of the anti-war political turmoil – although my grad school memories are thoroughly infused with the mordant odor of tear gas – but rather, of what Thomas Kuhn famously labeled “revolutionary science.” Jump-started by George C. Williams' book, *Adaptation and Natural Selection*, and especially William D. Hamilton's seminal work on inclusive fitness, we nascent sociobiologists found ourselves riding a truly [r]evolutionary scientific and intellectual tsunami, and without a doubt the biggest wave-maker was a young rebel named Robert Trivers.

In a handful of truly extraordinary, paradigm-shifting papers, Trivers laid out many of the paths that the rest of us have subsequently followed, and which for some involved morphing into “evolutionary psychology” (a term I accept, incidentally, but only grudgingly, for several reasons: 1. Despite efforts at disciplinary hair-splitting, evolutionary psychology to my mind is nothing but sociobiology applied to *Homo sapiens*, and 2. I look forward to the time when the designation itself goes extinct, attendant upon the recognition that *all* psychology is and must be evolutionary).

In any event, although Trivers didn't start the revolution, nor pen its earliest manifestos (that latter honor goes to Edward O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins), he provided much of the ammunition. Let's change the metaphor: Speaking of politics, not science, Emma Goldman once famously announced that “If I can't dance, I won't go to your revolution.” A half-century later, Robert Trivers wrote much of the music to which we are still dancing. Where would we be today without the revolutionary melodies of parental investment theory, reciprocal altruism and the relevance of game theory, parent-offspring conflict, and natural selection of parental ability to vary offspring sex ratios? Maybe we'd be deceiving ourselves into thinking we were further along than we actually are ... and, funny thing about that, deceit and self-deception is precisely what Trivers has been worrying and thinking about for lo these many years!

I must confess that when I first learned that his major project was the question of deceit and especially self-deception, I was somewhat disappointed, feeling that it was too limited a vehicle; hence, undeserving of his time and attention. But having read it, I'm not so sure. Rephrasing Gertrude Stein on Oakland, there's a whole lot of there there.

Long ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, Trivers started writing a book on self-deception with – of all people – Huey Newton (insight here into Robert's non-traditional approach to things). The project collapsed when the intended publisher went belly-up, but the lure of the topic has persisted. Finally and fortunately, it has not only germinated but flowered, in *The Folly of Fools*, henceforth *TFF*. And it would be folly indeed to ignore this book's scientific insights, its provocative suggestions, and – perhaps most of all - the sheer intellectual delight in reading something that is so cogent, so relevant to one's own daily life, and, it must be said, so damned obvious ... once a genius like Robert Trivers points it out! (Please note: I don't use the "g-word" often, or lightly.)

Early in *TFF*, Trivers sets out the following paradox, noting that there is a striking contradiction lurking at the heart of our personal and social lives (p. 2):

We seek out information and then act to destroy it. On the one hand, our sense organs have evolved to give us a marvelously detailed and accurate view of the outside world ... Together our sensory systems are organized to give us a detailed and accurate view of reality, exactly as we would expect if truth about the outside world helps us to navigate it more effectively. But once this information arrives in our brains, it is often distorted and biased to our conscious minds. We deny the truth to ourselves ... We repress painful memories, create completely false ones, rationalize immoral behavior, act repeatedly to boost positive self-opinion, and show a suite of ego-defense mechanisms. Why?

Decades ago, in his foreword to Dawkins' original 1976 edition of *The Selfish Gene* - a superb introduction to selfish genery that sadly and unaccountably has not been reproduced in any subsequent editions of that fine book - Trivers set the stage for what was to evolve into *TFF*, when he noted that if "deceit is fundamental to animal consciousness, then there must be strong selection to spot deception, rendering some facts and motives unconscious so as not to betray – by the subtle signs of self-knowledge – the deception being practiced."

In *TFF*, he proceeds to explore the phenomenon, in many seemingly different but ultimately connected explorations, including neurobiology and immunology, natural animal systems, parent-offspring interactions, intra-genomic conflict depending on whether the alleles in question are maternally or paternally derived and imprinted, and sexual deception - all of which might be expected as part of the "natural" Triversian intellectual landscape. But there are some unexpected departures as well. Thus, he dives deeply into social psychology in particular, emerging – as ever - with novel insights. (Personal aside: I've long been struck that social psychology, more than any other subdiscipline of psychology, is filled with innumerable nifty little empirical generalizations, each constituting its own self-enclosed private "phenomenon" or "effect," but heretofore stunningly lacking in conceptual coherence. *TFF* does a lovely job of tying many of these together.)

There are other, even more unanticipated excursions, such as an entire chapter on “self-deception in aviation and space disasters,” sufficient perhaps to keep readers grounded for quite some time ... even without terrorism-generated anxiety. His account of “false historical narratives” shows a deft grasp of history as he especially skewers the U.S., Japan, and Israel. And his chapter on “self-deception and war” deserves to be read by policy-makers, but won’t be, precisely perhaps because they have largely deluded themselves that this sort of thing happens to others, but not to them – which is exactly why they should read it! Trivers account begins as follows:

It has been said that truth is the first casualty of war. Actually, truth is often dead long before war begins. Processes of self-deception make an unusually large contribution to warfare – especially in the decision to launch aggressive ones. This is as depressing as it is important: one of our most critical behaviors, often with huge, widespread costs, appears to be strongly ruled by forces of self-deception. (p. 247)

Observations in this chapter include the following gem, motivated by ruminations about the Vietnam War compared to chimpanzee raiding parties:

There may well have been stronger selection against warlike stupidity and self-deception in chimpanzees than in ourselves where the decision-makers are far removed from the biological consequences of their decisions. Herbert Spencer summarized the general effect: ‘The ultimate effect of shielding men from the effects of their folly is to fill the world with fools.’ (p. 251)

And on the Iraq War:

When you are selling a lousy product under false pretenses, you do not wish to hear about the downside. This was not a war in which the adversary needed to be fooled or in which capturing the capital and routing the enemy could be in any kind of doubt. So there was little or no self-deception to deceive the enemy on this point – all of the self-deception was directed toward internal and international consumption and had to do with the aftermath of this action and its beneficent effects, for which no rational planning was seen as either necessary or desirable, turning a blunder into a catastrophe. (p. 257)

Those benighted souls – and there still are a few – who seriously think that evolutionary biology applied to human behavior constitutes some sort of right-wing plot will have their hands full explaining away *TFF*.

I found Trivers’ treatment of “self-deception and the structure of the social sciences” to be especially insightful, notably his argument that “The more social the discipline, the more retarded its development,” largely because psychology, sociology, anthropology and economics “have direct implications for our view of ourselves and of others,” therefore making themselves especially vulnerable to self-deception compared, for

example, to physics. Trivers is especially lacerating in his assessment of anthropology, notably its retreat from biologically semi-receptive “social anthropology” to ardently anti-biological, post-modernist “cultural anthropology”:

Strong people welcome new ideas and make them their own. Weak people run from new ideas, or so it seems, and then are driven into bizarre mind states, such as believing that words have the power to dominate reality, that social constructs such as gender are much stronger than the 300 million years of genetic evolution that went into producing the two sexes – whose facts in any case they remain resolutely ignorant of, the better to develop a thoroughly word-based approach to the subject.

In many ways, cultural anthropology is now all about self-deception – other people’s. Science itself is a social construct, one among many equally valid ways of viewing the world: the properties of viruses may also be social constructs, the penis may, in some meaningful sense, be the square root of -1, and so on. (p. 315)

If you detect here a stiletto sense of humor combined with a rigorous insistence not to suffer fools gladly – indeed, not at all – you got the point. Here is Trivers on the lure of inflated self-perception, which results in people routinely putting themselves in the top half of positive distributions and the lower half of negative ones.

... But for self-deception, you can hardly beat academics. In one survey, 94 percent placed themselves in the top half of their profession. I plead guilty. I could be tied down to a bed in a back ward of some hospital and still believe I am out-performing half of my colleagues – and this is not just a comment on my colleagues. (p.16)

The above selection also highlights yet another notable aspect of *TFF*: The author’s refreshing, almost startling and even sometimes off-putting willingness to write about himself, warts and all. None of this should be altogether surprising, however, in a book about self-deception, and one that distinctly aligns itself *against* this powerful tendency. “If I am in a big city,” we read:

I experience the effect almost every week. I am walking down the street with a younger, attractive woman, trying to amuse her enough that she will permit me to remain nearby. Then I see an old man on the other side of her, white hair, face falling apart, walking poorly, indeed shambling, yet keeping perfect pace with us – he is, in fact, my reflection in the store windows we are passing. Real me is seen as ugly me by self-deceived me. (p. 17)

Or consider this, which under only slightly modified circumstances, could have come from the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or even Augustine:

Where women really get upset is in response to two related deceptions: men misrepresenting the depth of their feelings prior to first having sex and men failing

to call or contact them after sex. That these behaviors may also involve self-deception, I have no doubt. In the early '60s, when I was a young man, I was conscious of something I called 'false emotion.' I would meet a woman, develop a strong attraction, wheel out my full show, feel I was in love, have sex with her two or three times, and then find the entire attraction collapsing – indeed, often turning into aversion. The false emotion of romantic love must have been generated the better to induce the sex that ended it, but I was conscious of this only after the fact. The women, of course, were bitter. (p. 100)

And of course, there is drug use, of which Trivers notes, that self-deception is virtually a prerequisite:

I remember the first time I tried cocaine, I said to myself, 'Why this drug will pay for itself! I am so much more clear-headed and will get so much more work done while using it.' Of course, in reality the drug was very expensive and entirely counterproductive where work was concerned. (p. 174)

There is much more in *TFF* that is striking and unexpected, not least when I found myself laughing out loud, as during a discussion of religion as self-deception (a potential universe of inquiry unto itself), where, after recounting Daniel Dennett's oddly naïve and optimistic prediction that religions will have diminished dramatically in twenty-five years, Trivers counters,

I think it more likely (though not the most likely) that twenty-five years from now, evolutionary biologists and philosophers will be in hiding from the then-dominant religious groups. Fifty years from now, no one stubbing his or her toe will say, 'Charles Darwin, Charles H. Darwin, this hurts!' but they will still be saying, 'Jesus H. Christ, this fucking hurts.' (p. 278)

Tender-minded readers might well be shocked, shocked by the language; more astute ones will likely be intrigued by the abundant insights, some of them tossed in almost carelessly, but all likely to repay further examination.

I do, however, have a few gripes, notably about some unfortunate omissions. I searched in vain, for example, for mention of the other biologist who has deeply explored deceit and self-deception - Richard D. Alexander – and who, in the process, went so far as to suggest that human social life is so thoroughly infused with deception (of self and others), that one reason for communicating truth – which we presumably do at least on occasion – may be to soften up our audience for the dissemination of self-serving lies! And oddly, not even a nod appears to David Livingstone Smith's *Why We Lie*, with its laudably clear discussion of, well, why we lie. And – not so much a criticism as an opportunity missed - I think Trivers' case would have been strengthened by attention to Erving Goffman's classic treatise, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, with its groundbreaking account of how and to some extent why (sociologically if not biologically) we go about forging a face to meet the faces that we meet.

Much as I enjoyed and profited from the material explored in *TFF*, I for one would have liked to see more biology, perhaps if need be even at the cost of less social criticism. I'm left wondering, for example, what precisely is the connection between deceit and self-deception, such that the former ostensibly requires the latter. And if self-deception is as costly as Trivers claims, then I don't see why natural selection, given its manifest capacity to forge impressively detailed adaptations in other respects, hasn't reduced its immunologic and physiologic downsides, or, insofar as those downsides may themselves somehow be inevitable, why selection hasn't diminished the linkage between fooling others and fooling ourselves. Maybe those costs aren't quite as large as presented, or perhaps the upside of deceit is even more robust than the author acknowledges.

There can be little doubt, however, that it is widespread. Thus, according to that great evolutionary theorist, Groucho Marx, "the secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made."

Trivers doesn't need Groucho, however. He makes plenty of his own jokes, as when discussing the placebo effect, he informs us about the surgical phenomenon of "remunectomies, performed solely to remove a patient's wallet." Nonetheless, the author of *TFF* has a serious point to make, beyond exploring the science behind two important phenomena.

In addition, *TFF* is more than simply an excellent example of scientific exposition, although it surely is that. The author has seen deceit and self-deception and he does not like them. Accordingly, he not only emphasizes their negative effects but offers numerous suggestions as to how to counter their nefarious influences. Surprisingly, perhaps, *TFF* is thus something of an advice book, complete with specific suggestions about how to beat back the evil demon of deception. It is, if nothing else, thought-provoking to see this brilliant former bad boy of sociobiology essentially endorsing Edgar's exhortation at the end of *King Lear* to: "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." Trivers' addition: When possible, we should "speak" this to ourselves, not just to others.