

The Folly of Fools

Robert Trivers

A renegade genius, a tonic for our times

Occasionally you come across a polymath, somebody who has done everything in his life and seems to have done it well. One of my favorites of the genre is Richard Feynman, the nuclear physicist. Also the samba bandleader, Romeo among the airlines stewardesses of Rio, and the investigator of the Challenger disaster. He is a guy who was so talented that he could do anything he wanted in life, and he chose among things that interested him.. No surprise that Robert Trivers, who has kind of done the same thing, cites Feynmann as a hero. Trivers started out wanting to become a theoretical mathematician, but burned himself out – had a nervous breakdown, he spun through the fields of psychology, anthropology, and a couple of others sparking new ideas that were so radical it took a couple of decades for them to take root. He coincidentally became a buddy of Black Panther Huey Newton, married a couple of Jamaican women, and fathered a spate of kids. Off the map unpredictable.

One of the things he did along the way was to attract the attention of the leading intellectuals of his age. For better and worse – Trivers is not a bland personality. He made solid enemies out of Richard Lewontin and Stephen J Gould, the reigning Marxists of his era at Harvard, and he steadfastly opposed their politically driven beliefs about man, the so-called Standard Social Science Model, which posits that all people are born with equal abilities, and it is only culture that makes us different, and the thesis of group rather than individual selection as an evolutionary mechanism..

He developed friendships, or at least alliances, with the leaders of the sociobiology movement: its founder, EO Wilson, and Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett. This group has won the day intellectually, though the Marxist/leftist cadres which still largely dominate our universities despise their findings and do their best to simply ignore the science. Trevor is in turn richly despises them.

The point of disagreement is a matter of the very definition of science. Starting with Francis Bacon, the principle of science has been reproducible results. You do an experiment, you describe your experimental technique, your theory – which you expect to prove, your measurements, and your conclusions. The idea is that you lay everything out for the whole world to see, so that they can challenge your findings by undermining your technique.

Several so-called sciences – economics, psychiatry, and cultural anthropology, to name three the Trivers assails with gusto, are not built on any such solid foundation. Psychoanalysis is built on clinical notes and surmises by Sigmund Freud. In other words, his theories of penis envy and anal retention are purely creations of his own imagination based on clinical notes of his patients in Vienna. He didn't do any rigorous data collection, statistical analysis, and certainly didn't have any biological theory for what he came up with. Instead, Freud used his dominant personality to dictate a dogma which reigned for the best part of the century. Trevor's notes that sciences which flourish are usually built on solid foundations; sciences likes psychoanalysis, which have no more foundation than Scientology, tend to

wither away over time. Trivers doesn't mention it, but Marx' "scientific socialism" certainly falls in this category.

Trivers is harsh on the self-deception among people in authority, who suppress facts that they perceive to be inimical to their own ends. He observes that such self-deception can be incredibly expensive. A few trillion, for example, in the most recent Iraq war. The people who got the US and Britain into that war neglected the intelligence to the effect that Saddam really wasn't a threat, Saddam wasn't allied with Al Qaeda, and they underestimated the amount of manpower that it would take to win the war. It was telling that prominent military figures such as Eric Shinseki and Colin Powell refused to support him. The utter absence of a plan for occupation once Baghdad fell was nothing more than willful ignorance. Because there could not be a meaningful plan, they simply had no plan at all for the most part. The people who had been assigned to develop a plan were systematically isolated from the decision-makers, and their work ignored. Trevor's documents the same willful ignorance in NASA, the air transport industry, and in economics. He faults the economists for having theories of human behavior, especially the notion that our behavior is rational, which are not empirically grounded in evolutionary biology or a close observation of how humans actually work. He echoes Norman Finkelstein's unpopular, but difficult to refute, assertions about Israel's denial of the reality that their country was rather fully occupied by Arabs when they took it over, and of their ongoing harsh measures to control the land they captured and continue, with strong support from the US, to possess.

As a young man Trivers opposed the theory of group evolution, saying the common sense requires that evolution be a matter of selection of individuals. Such traits as altruism, which favored groups, would have to be beneficial to individuals. Certainly deceit, the organizing theme of this book, is as well something that favors individuals. Trivers also posited that each individual has its own interests, and in particular, within a family the father, mother, and children may have interests which conflict with one another. Specifically, the father's reproductive success may be enhanced by philandering, which doesn't help his wife. A child's reproductive success is enhanced by commandeering his parents full resources, whereas their reproductive success will be maximized by sharing their attention among several offspring.

Trevor is predictably goes on to the deceit which is involved in religion, the fables which underlie any system of belief. He would do well to take on atheism as well, inasmuch as militant atheism usually depends just as much as religion on a number of a priori's. And it is more deadly – explicitly atheist governments such as the Communists, and others which had no more interest in religion than to exploit it, such as Nazism, Japanese imperialism, World War I and the Napoleonic Empire, caused more bloodshed than purportedly Christian governments ever did.

I would advocate that Trivers investigate the hypothesis that self deceit is essential for propagating our species. The premise is that having children in any modern society is a fundamentally absurd proposition: they do not generally benefit parents. They are an immense sink for resources: food, clothes, education, entertainment and so on. They cannot be counted on to contribute economically

when they grow up, and because they did not have much societal or cultural pressure to do so, they all to seldom even express gratitude.

The self-deceit of religion, that having children is God's will, may be required if we are going to perpetuate ourselves. No other species is as successful as ours at curbing its fertility. Even in classical times we had enlarged our perspective on sex from being primarily a process for procreation to being a recreation and a vehicle for displaying status. In modern times we have almost completed the transition. Playboy and Cosmo celebrate sex for itself, everybody insists that whether or not the aim is procreation, the sex has to be great, and procreation has few supporters in secular society. Birth control and abortion have been almost perfected. Recoiling from such horrors as the USSR's "Mother Heroines" who bore ten children as cannon fodder, and the Nazis offered a "Mother's Cross of Honor," few governments in our times offer incentives great enough to put much more than a dent in the tremendous costs of raising children. If we are to survive, it will be on the strength of self-deception, chiefly of a religious nature.

I'll close in observing that no matter who you are, Trivers has something to say which will offend you. He is smart enough that you should overlook the hurt and think about it. He might have a point.