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# Why We Lie

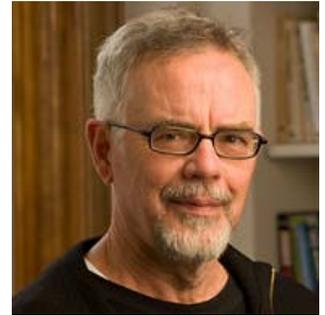
By JOHN HORGAN  
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In 1995 I traveled to the University of California, Santa Barbara, for the annual meeting of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society, which turned out to be a pep rally for psychologists, anthropologists and others who view humanity through the lens of evolutionary theory. Attendees heard Darwinian takes on lust, love, infidelity, status-seeking, mental illness, violence, patriotism, politics, economics and religion, as well as keynote addresses from such luminaries as Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker.

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Nick Romanenko/Rutgers University  
Robert Trivers

The most influential thinker there, arguably, was a scruffily bearded fellow, wearing sunglasses and a knitted cap, who never gave a talk. He lurked around the margins of the conference; at one point I spotted him puffing a joint outside a meeting hall. This, at any rate, is how I remember Robert Trivers, although as he points out in "The Folly of Fools," memory often tricks us. He also confesses to being a pothead, so I'm pretty sure my recollection is accurate.

## THE FOLLY OF FOOLS

### The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life

By Robert Trivers  
397 pp. Basic Books. \$28.

As a Harvard graduate student in the 1970s, Trivers wrote a handful of papers showing how our genes' relentless drive to self-replicate underpins even our most apparently magnanimous impulses. According to his theory of reciprocal altruism, we occasionally act kindly toward strangers because our ancestors — over time and in the aggregate — received a quid pro quo benefit from acts of generosity. In other papers, Trivers proposed that families

roil with conflict because parents share no genes with each other and only half of their genes with children, who unless they are identical twins also have divergent genetic interests.

These concepts were popularized by others, notably Edward O. Wilson in "Sociobiology," Dawkins in "The Selfish Gene" and Pinker in "How the Mind Works." All have credited Trivers, whom Pinker has called "an underappreciated genius, and one of history's greatest thinkers in the analysis of behavior and emotion." If Trivers is not better known, that may be because he has struggled with bipolar disorder since his youth. He is also, by his own admission, an irascible anti-authoritarian, whose sharp tongue often

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gets him into trouble. He left Harvard in the late 1970s, eventually ending up at Rutgers. He also has a home in Jamaica.

No doubt tired of seeing others crank out well-received elaborations of his work, Trivers has finally produced a popularization of his own. His topic is deceit, with which by his own admission he has wrestled — on a personal as well as professional level — throughout his adult life. Trivers's scope is vast, ranging from the fibs parents and children tell to manipulate one another to the “false historical narratives” political leaders foist on their citizens and the rest of the world.

Trivers calls deceit a “deep feature” of life, even a necessity, given genes' brutal struggle to prevail. Anglerfish lure prey by dangling “bait” in front of their jaws, edible butterflies deter predators by adopting the coloring of poisonous species. Possums play possum, cowbirds and cuckoos avoid the hassle of raising offspring by laying their eggs in other birds' nests. Even viruses and bacteria employ subterfuge to sneak past a host's immune systems. The complexity of organisms, Trivers suggests, stems at least in part from a primordial arms race between deceit and deceit-detection.

Our big brains and communication skills make us master dissemblers. Even before we can speak, Trivers notes, we learn to cry insincerely to manipulate our caregivers. As adults, we engage in “confirmation bias,” which makes us seize on facts that bolster our preconceptions and overlook contradictory data. We wittingly and unwittingly inflate the qualities of ourselves and others in our religious, political or ethnic group. We denigrate those outside our in-group as well as sexual and economic rivals.

Fooling others yields obvious benefits, but why do we so often fool ourselves? Trivers provides a couple of answers. First, believing that we're smarter, sexier and more righteous than we really are — or than others consider us to be — can help us seduce and persuade others and even improve our health, via the placebo effect, for example. And the more we believe our own lies, the more sincerely, and hence effectively, we can lie to others. “We hide reality from our conscious minds the better to hide it from onlookers,” Trivers explains. But our illusions can have devastating consequences, from the dissolution of a marriage to stock-market collapses and world wars.

One intriguing theme running through “The Folly of Fools” is that self-deception can affect our susceptibility to disease, for ill or good. Trivers speculates that some illusions — for example, a daughter's insistence that her alcoholic, abusive father is a good man — require so much effort to maintain that they drain energy away from our immune systems. Conversely, religious fundamentalism, which often restricts mating or even interactions with outsiders, may help protect the faithful from parasites carried by infidels. According to Trivers, religions are more likely to split into rival factions in regions with high rates of infectious disease.

Trivers will no doubt alienate many readers when he turns his attention to politics. Although he indicts many nations for denying their sins, he is especially incensed by Israel's treatment of Palestinians and the United States' treatment of American Indians, blacks, the Vietnamese, Iraqis, Afghans and other groups. I found Trivers too shrill in these sections, even though my political views overlap with his. Also questionable are his put-downs of cultural anthropologists, whom he accuses of denying — for ideological rather than scientific reasons — biological research that can deepen our understanding of human behavior. In my experience, evolutionary scholars are at least as driven by ideology as cultural anthropologists are.

But I cut Trivers slack for his denunciations of others because he is so hard on himself. Throughout the book, he recalls instances in which he lied — to girlfriends (he has apparently had many), wives (two), children (five) and colleagues. In one especially

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poignant passage, Trivers recalls walking down a city street with an attractive young woman, “trying to amuse her,” when he spots “an old man on the other side of her, white hair, ugly, face falling apart, walking poorly, indeed shambling.” Trivers abruptly realizes he is seeing his reflection in a store window: “Real me is seen as ugly me by self-deceived me.”

Trivers is not an elegant stylist like Dawkins, Wilson or Pinker. His technical explanations can be murky, his political rants cartoonishly crude. But Trivers’s blunt, unpolished manner — which I assume is not feigned — makes me trust him more than some slicker writers. “The Folly of Fools” reminds me of other irreducibly odd classics by scientific iconoclasts like “The Fractal Geometry of Nature,” by the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot, and “The Society of Mind,” by the artificial-intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky.

Only in one passage does Trivers strike me as insincere, when he notes how prone academics are to self-importance; one survey found that 94 percent considered themselves to be above average in their fields. “I plead guilty,” Trivers adds. That, surely, is false modesty. May his new book give him the attention he so richly deserves.

*John Horgan directs the Center for Science Writings at Stevens Institute of Technology. His book “The End of War” will be published next month.*

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