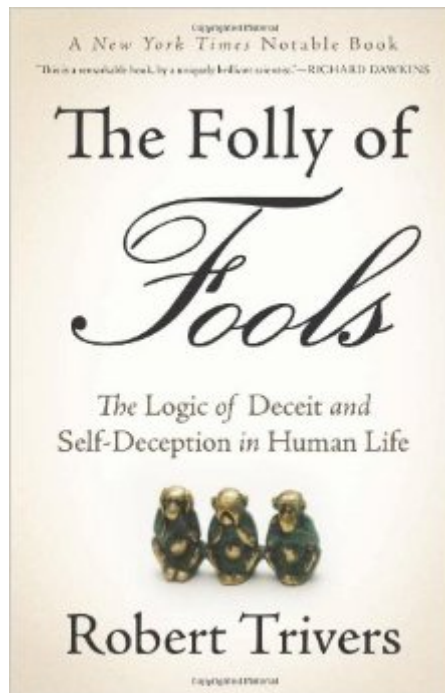


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The Folly Of Fools: The Logic Of Deceit And Self-Deception In Human Life



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book of 2012 Whether it's in a cockpit at takeoff or the planning of an offensive war, a romantic relationship or a dispute at the office, there are many opportunities to lie and self-deceive—but deceit and self-deception carry the costs of being alienated from reality and can lead to disaster. So why does deception play such a prominent role in our everyday lives? In short, why do we deceive? In his bold new work, prominent biological theorist Robert Trivers unflinchingly argues that self-deception evolved in the service of deceit—the better to fool others. We do it for biological reasons—in order to help us survive and procreate. From viruses mimicking host behavior to humans misremembering (sometimes intentionally) the details of a quarrel, science has proven that the deceptive one can always outwit the masses. But we undertake this deception at our own peril. Trivers has written an ambitious investigation into the evolutionary logic of lying and the costs of leaving it unchecked.

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Customer Reviews

I am a researcher in behavioral economics working on self-deception (among other things), and so I was excited to find that this most eminent socio-biologist had applied himself to the topic at book length. My disappointment after reading this book is well summarized by Trivers himself, who writes in the conclusion: "I have noticed that the standards regarding my own arguments I am willing to push forward has dropped" (p.322). The main thesis of the book is that self-deception helps people to deceive others. The evolutionary benefit of being better at deception outweighs the costs

associated with having a biased conception of reality. To support this thesis, Trivers draws from neurology, biology, psychology and history. Some of the material is interesting, exciting and funny, and the range of ideas and applications is impressive. Naturally, Trivers is at his best when he describes stories of deception in the animal kingdom, and outlines links between self-deception and genetics. Unfortunately, almost 400 pages do not add up to a convincing thesis. Rather, the book is a loosely organized collection of hypotheses, experimental descriptions, anecdotes, accusations and political rants. The further one progresses through the book, the more the author is distracted by half-irrelevant anecdotes that often involve episodes from his own sex life and have only a foggy connection to self-deception. More problematic even is that Trivers intersperses factual statements with his own (political) opinions throughout the book, implicitly or explicitly calling his opponents self-deceivers. Although I happen to agree with him more often than not, it undermines his scientific aims. In addition, I find some of his accusations against social scientists rather bizarre.

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 intellects 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.

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