PSYCHOLOGY & HUMAN NATURE

The Folly of Fools

by Robert Trivers

We lie to ourselves so we can fool others with a straight face - and the habit runs our whole lives.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **We deceive ourselves the better to deceive others.**

Trivers' central claim: if you believe your own story, you show none of the nerves and leaks of a liar - so the falsehood comes out sounding like truth.

02 **Deceit is an arms race running through all of nature.**

Mimic butterflies, bluffing predators, cuckoos in other birds' nests: better lies evolve, then better lie detectors evolve to catch them. A deception pays only while it stays rare, so the contest never ends.

03 **Your conscious mind is a press secretary, not the commander.**

Decisions begin in the unconscious before awareness catches up; the conscious self then issues clean reasons for what was already done. In experiments, people can even fail to recognize their own recorded voice when it threatens their self-image.

04 **Self-deception can be installed in you by other people.**

Trivers calls it imposed self-deception: parents, abusive partners, interrogators, and propagandists all gain when you believe a story that serves them. False confessions and planted false memories show how far it can go.

05 **You are not one unified self - and the family is where the splitting starts.**

Genomic imprinting means genes from your mother and father can push opposite agendas inside one body, while parents and children manipulate each other's beliefs over food, care, and attention. Internal conflict is built in, not a personal failure.

06 **In sex and love, the illusions are built in.**

Trivers notes men systematically over-read women's sexual interest, while couples who last tend to hold kindly inflated views of each other. The same machinery that bonds pairs also sets up jealousy, betrayal, and pain.

07 **Denial sends its bill to your immune system.**

Studies Trivers cites link concealing the truth about yourself - including men hiding their sexuality during the AIDS years - to faster immune decline, while writing honestly about trauma measurably improves immune markers.

08 **Your mind rigs the evidence at every stage: what you seek, what you notice, what you remember.**

The result, in Trivers' words: 'We deny the truth to ourselves. We project onto others traits that are in fact true of ourselves - and then attack them!'

09 **Success is my skill, failure is bad luck - and the surer you feel, the more it can cost you.**

Self-inflation is the default setting: most of us rate ourselves above average. In stock trading, Trivers points out, the overconfident trade more often and earn less - confidence is often just self-deception with a brokerage account.

10 **When whole institutions believe their own story, people die.**

NASA managers talked themselves past the warnings before the Challenger and Columbia disasters; nations teach themselves flattering false histories - and for wars launched on believed stories, Trivers writes that truth 'is often dead long before war begins.'

11 **Religion, Trivers argues, is this same machinery scaled up to a tribe.**

In his telling, shared sacred stories bind the in-group, harden the line against outsiders, and protect themselves from correction - one of the book's most contested claims, and a direct extension of his logic from individuals to groups.

12 **You fight self-deception with mechanics, not good intentions.**

Trivers' own defenses: correct your estimates by the size of your known bias, keep written records your memory cannot edit, and recruit friends willing to tell you the truth. Treat fantasy as a warning sign - it feels like planning and works like hiding.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

At the heart of our mental lives, Trivers argues, sits a contradiction: evolution gave us senses that report the world in fine detail - and a brain that promptly bends, buries, or rewrites the report. His explanation, first sketched in the 1970s and built over four decades of work, is that self-deception evolved in the service of deceit. A person who believes his own falsehood shows none of the tells of lying - no nerves, no inconsistencies to keep straight - so the surest way to fool others is to fool yourself first.

He builds from nature, where deception is an arms race: mimics and bluffers evolve better lies, their targets evolve better detection, and any trick pays only while it is rare. In humans the split is built into the machinery. The unconscious starts decisions before awareness catches up, leaving consciousness to act as a press secretary issuing reasons afterward - and self-deception can also be imposed from outside, by parents, authorities, and abusers. Even the self is not single: genes

inherited from mother and father can pull in opposite directions, and the family becomes the first arena of manipulation.

The middle chapters tour daily life. Sex and courtship run on built-in illusions, from men's systematic over-reading of women's interest to the kindly inflated views that hold couples together. Denial and concealment measurably weaken the immune system, while honest disclosure strengthens it. And the everyday mind searches for, encodes, and remembers evidence in its own favor - projecting its own faults onto others and inflating its confidence, at real cost: in financial markets, the overconfident trade more and earn less.

Then Trivers scales the problem up. Institutional self-deception about risk helped kill the Challenger and Columbia crews; nations teach themselves false historical narratives that flatter the group and erase its victims; wars are launched on stories leaders have come to believe - 'truth,' he writes, 'is often dead long before war begins.' He turns the same lens on religion, which he treats as group-level self-deception, and even on the social sciences themselves, psychoanalysis included.

Self-deception, he concludes, wins minor victories and sets up major disasters: it buys comfort, confidence, and social ease today, paid for later in health, money, safety, and lives. His countermeasures are deliberately mechanical - correct your judgments by the size of your known biases, keep records your memory cannot rewrite, invite honest friends to contradict you, and watch your own fantasies. There is no cure, he suggests, but there is a fighting chance of catching yourself in the act.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, pick one story you tell about yourself - your spending, your skill level, your health, your workload - and audit it against records your memory cannot edit: bank statements, calendars, test results, timesheets. Write down the gap between the story and the numbers. Then take Trivers' two follow-ups: shrink your next estimate or prediction by the size of that gap, and tell one honest friend what you found. Saying the gap out loud is what stops it from quietly refilling.

By Robert Trivers, first published 2011. Read it if you want the biology behind spin, denial, and the stories we swear are true - fascinating and uncomfortable in equal measure.