



FOUR WONDERFUL MONTHS AT WIKO –
ENDING WITH A NEW UNDERSTANDING
OF SPECIES SELECTION
ROBERT L. TRIVERS

Born in 1943 in Washington, DC. Education: 1972, Harvard University, Biology (Ph.D.); 1965, Harvard University, History (B.A.); Employment: 1999–present, Adjunct Professor of Pediatrics, UMDNJ; 1994–present, Professor of Anthropology and Biological Sciences, Rutgers University; 2005 (spring), Visiting Professor of Psychology, Harvard University; 1978–94, Professor of Biology, University of California, Santa Cruz; 1975–78, Associate Professor of Biology, Harvard University; 1973–75, Assistant Professor of Biology, Harvard University; 1971–72, Instructor in Anthropology, Harvard University. I devoted my life to building social theory based on natural selection, applied to individuals within species as well as genes within individuals. My most recent book on the logic of self-deception (*The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life*. New York, 2011.) was written at the Wissenschaftskolleg 2008/09 and is being translated into seven languages, including German and Spanish. – Address: Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University, 131 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1414, USA.
E-mail: trivers@rci.rutgers.edu

I arrived in Berlin on a bitterly cold January 17th, three days after leaving Jamaica and less than 24 hours after seeing my 7th grandchild in a New York City hospital two hours after his birth. I was looking forward to Berlin, to Wiko-land, and to getting some work done. In particular, I was hoping to write a draft of two scientific papers, one on species selection and one on the genetics of pediatric growth disorders. For my intellectual work, the outside cold was pure advantage, since even at 21:30 in the evening – not having seen a woman (nor indeed any human being) for a good eight hours – I was not tempted to

leave my 3rd-floor quarters high up the parking-lot side of Villa Walther in search of company. Better to remain warm – at least through early March!

I was expecting to spend two or three weeks on 1) the German translation of my self-deception book (written at Wiko in 2008/09) and on 2) the Penguin paperback version of the same book. In fact, these two tasks consumed two months of my time. The Germans were very meticulous (Ullstein in Berlin), catching numerous minor errors (the precise Turkish words in the law against “insulting the Turkish nation”) and also subjecting my chapters on “False Historical Narratives” and on “Self-Deception and War” to very careful scrutiny. They had good reason to be sensitive to both chapters, since one was very critical of the Israeli (and linked US) false narratives, and there was the matter of World Wars I and II. But their criticism, positive support, and demands that controversial assertions have at least two citations only strengthened the book.

As for the Penguin paperback, Penguin is famous as the premier English-language paperback. Second editions of a book (as, in effect, this would be) are often the best, correcting the errors in the first, before becoming bogged down later with more and more material that is less and less useful. So I added 50 references, the endnotes that integrated them, and several new sections, such as an account of how massive top-down self-deception led to the air force jet crash in Smolensk that took out the top leadership of Poland in 2010. Of course there are new jokes, such as this one by Groucho Marx, “The key to life is honesty and fair play; if you can fake those, you’ve got it made.” I spent a week with Penguin in London and worked very carefully with them on this version of my book. I was happy that a Chinese publisher recently became the 9th foreign-language publisher of my book and the first that will base its translation on the 2nd edition of self-deception produced at Wiko this spring.

This left only two months for fresh work, so I went to work producing a first draft of a paper on species selection. The task turned out to be far more rewarding than I had expected. No one has ever done a decent paper on this subject. The traditional work is entirely trivial and mistaken – trying to make species selection replace natural selection as the key explanatory principle in biology. But natural selection refers to selection within species that produces the traits we find in those species. Species selection refers to the fact that some kinds of species go extinct more quickly than others do and some speciate more rapidly. This changes the relative frequency of different kinds of species, but not the traits within the species. For example in animal species larger than small insects, asexual species often appear but then rapidly go extinct, so at any given time, there are relatively few of them.

My interest in species selection grew out of work I had done in the '70s showing that ant species usually produce female-biased ratios of investment (since workers are more related to their sisters than brothers), which should lead to greater species survival in competition with those producing 1:1 ratios, since in these ants more work would be invested in the working sex (females) while the reduction in the males was expected to be trivial. Female-biased ratios have been abundantly confirmed since the '70s and there are now a set of factors known to be associated with a relatively greater or lesser female bias. Since Koos Boomsma in Copenhagen is an expert on precisely this subject, I had asked him to work with me on the paper and took a two-day trip to Copenhagen that was both fruitful and enjoyable. So it was a special pleasure to send him the first draft of our paper a week before I left Wiko in mid-May.

One surprise was how often the principle of investment in females vs. genetic variability played itself out. Haplodiploid species were not just vulnerable to species selection in highly social species with female-biased investment; they also had an intrinsic advantage, especially under inbreeding (as Jack Werren quickly convinced me). Likewise, there were once equal numbers of gymnosperms (pine trees) and angiosperms (flowering plants); now there are 1,000 species of the former and 100,000 species of the latter, and this appears chiefly to be due to greater efficiency of female production in flowering plants not found in pine trees.

What was not a surprise was that I had a wonderful time at Wiko and emerged stronger than when I arrived. This is mostly due to the staff, loving and supportive people, highly efficient, who act as if they are dedicated to your every (legitimate) need and happiness. They give "Gemütlichkeit" a new meaning. At the same time, skill in choosing a highly diverse, high-quality, and fascinating set of Fellows only makes the stay the more enjoyable, and I cherish the friendships made and renewed.

Von ganzem Herzen möchte ich Ihnen sagen: Vielen Dank für alles, was Sie für mich 2013 getan haben.