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## The Origins of Deception

Swift

Written by [Jamy Ian Swiss](#)

Last October, at the invitation of the physicist and popular author Lawrence Krauss, I had the chance to take part in an interesting event, "The Great Debate," part of the [ASU Origins Project](#) at Arizona State University in Phoenix (and for which Professor Krauss serves as Director). This most recent debate in the series was about the origins of deception, for which my friend Lawrence had assembled an interesting group of panelists with a diverse subset of interests and specialties. Here's the description as it was promoted to the public:

Why is deception such an essential part of the human condition? What evolutionary purpose does it fulfill? How can we recognize it on an individual level, and overcome it on a societal level in a modern democracy?

Join an exciting panel of scientists and public intellectuals including influential evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers, noted social psychologist Carol Tavis, accomplished neurobiologists and laboratory directors at Barrow Neurological Institute Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde, acclaimed magicians Jamy Ian Swiss and Joshua Jay, and Origins Project director and moderator Lawrence Krauss as they discuss the biological, behavioral, and political boundaries of this controversial issue.

The only person on the panel not previously known to me was [Robert Trivers](#), who amid his brilliant and eclectic resume has written an excellent book about self-deception, "The Folly of Fools," a subject particularly relevant to the panel discussion. Here's a bit of text from the book's promotional material:

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.

Briefly stated, I recommend it.

Also on the panel were my friends and colleagues, [Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde](#), neuroscientists who, in the past few years, have been pursuing the study of a possible neuroscience of magic, and about which they've written an interesting and enjoyable popular science book (in which I make an appearance) entitled "Sleights of Mind." [Joshua Jay](#), a young magician colleague, who also appears in "Sleights of Mind," also joined us on the panel as a fellow performer and presenter.

Last but far from least, also on the panel was my pal and frequent TAM speaker and colleague, [Carol Tavis](#). If you haven't seen her 2011 TAM8 talk on "Dissent and Dissonance: the Science and Art of Argument," I encourage you to do so promptly. On the panel, she spoke of one of her many areas of expertise, namely the subject of "cognitive dissonance," about which she wrote the excellent book, "Mistakes Were Made, but Not By Me."

So much for the back-story. Needless to say I had a grand time from start to finish in Phoenix. The program was first rate, presented in the stunning 3000-seat ASU Gammage Auditorium, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. I have long said that while skeptical activism often feels like a losing proposition in the grand scheme of things, nevertheless one of the greatest returns on one's activism investment is the great people and friends one gets to meet and make. There are worse ways to spend your life than having dinner with the great minds of your generation, and my weekend in Phoenix was a grand example. I managed to have dinner with Lawrence on Friday, lunch on Saturday (at which we discovered a shared appreciation for baseball, among the many subjects covered), afternoon snacks with Carol, dinner after the program with Carol, Lawrence, and Robert Trivers, more terrific conversational hang time after that with just my new friend Robert and myself, and then as if that wasn't enough fun packed into 24 hours, the local Skeptics in the Pub managed to show up at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and take Robert and I out for late cocktails and more conversation. Hard to remember that we managed to fulfill our work responsibilities in the midst of all that, which included each of our individual presentations in the first half of the program, plus magic performances by Josh and myself, followed by an intermission and then a lively audience question-and-answer session,

Did I mention that I had a blast?

So, here is my own performance and presentation (about 25 minutes total) at ASU Origins Project Great Debate on the Origins of Deception:

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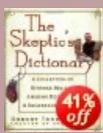
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And here is the entire first half of the program (about an hour and a half, including all the participants' performance and presentations):

And for the diehards among you, here is the second half (about 50 minutes), the moderated question and answer session:

Now, what I need to tell you before concluding this leisurely report is that there is much in the subject matter of the panel that is of interest and value to skeptics who care to have a look and listen. In particular, the talks by Tavis and Trivers both deal with aspects of self-deception that are very useful to skeptics in helping to understand – and empathize – with how people arrive at their personal beliefs about themselves, about the beliefs they attach themselves to, why it's difficult to change people's minds and is virtually never just achievable merely by a presentation of facts, and what purpose self-deception and cognitive dissonance serve the human mind. Any skeptic who thinks that believers who put their faith and confidence in unscientific, pseudoscientific, supernatural and other mystical tenets do so purely based on intelligence or the lack of it do themselves and the skeptical movement a great service by looking at the mind of the believer in subtler, more complex, and compassionate ways.

And then there is my own talk, which addresses some of the ways that magicians deceive our audiences, the role that empathy and emotions play in the ability of magicians and con artists alike to deceive people, and finally why it is that human beings are so readily deceived. (And here's a hint: It ain't because we're stupid.)

*Jamy Ian Swiss is Senior Fellow at the JREF. He blogs regularly at [randi.org](#).*

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#### A Quote from Teller

written by rogermorris, March 29, 2013

This post reminds me of Mr. Teller's statement: "Nothing fools you better than the lie you tell yourself."

Votes: +1

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...

written by ConspicuousCarl, March 29, 2013

Is there some reason to think that deception originated in humans? I doubt it.

I'm not even sure if honesty came before deception. I don't think communication is originally based on information transfer, I think it might just be the descendent of evolved behaviors which happen to cause one organism to behave for the benefit of another. Maybe honesty and satisfaction from the belief that we pass facts on to others is what needs explanation.

Votes: +1

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#### Deception in nature

written by jamyianswiss, March 30, 2013

There is plenty of pre-human deception in nature. Camouflage, for one, in many classes of animals. Or consider mimicry, in which an animal evolves to mimic the colors, markings, or other appearance of poisonous or venomous animals, in order to gain protection from predators.

And there is plenty of deliberate deception in birds and mammals as well.

Votes: +0

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