

William Provine (1942-2015)

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When I think of Will Provine, I think of his Cowboy tie. This, to me, sums him up: only someone with his sense of humor, courage, and lack of self-consciousness could wear that tie. There was no irony in the tie. Will was not being “camp” with his bolo tie with the picture of a cowboy on the front: he did not use the tie as a way to raise eyebrows or convey a knowing look. He simply liked the tie. There was (in my experience) no ironic bone in Will’s body; he was earnestness embodied.

Apart from his tie, I also cannot think of Will Provine without thinking of his huge smile, kindness, and endless enthusiasm. Will was a force for good; he set an example, not only as a great scholar, but also as a teacher, mentor and humanist (in the widest possible sense). His students loved him, because he treated everyone, and everyone’s ideas, with enormous respect. He was never one to dismiss questions or talk over others. He was a generous spirit, and a passionate advocate for science. He loved to argue about evolution, and his fascination with history, people, scientific ideas, and the natural world made him an excellent historian of science: one of the best.

I am not sure when I first encountered Will Provine’s work. I know I read his *Origins of Theoretical Population Genetics* (1971) in graduate school, but I may have done so in conjunction with Mark Adams’ graduate course in History of Biology, or in conjunction with my first course in Population Genetics with Warren Ewens. What I do know is that this book inspired at least a decade of my subsequent research, and provided me context for my understanding of evolutionary biology that graduate coursework in biology alone could not convey. Theoretical population genetics can be pretty dry stuff; but Will Provine gave the history of this field drama. He was able to explain how the ideas that Fisher, Haldane and Wright proposed were controversial, and how they departed from and drew upon the work of Darwin, Galton and Pearson. He also was able to explain clearly and concisely why they disagreed, and what was important about their disagreement. Provine’s work gave me a sense of the narrative arc of the history of biology, and helped me to see how important the history of biology was to the philosophy of biology.

While the *Origins* was an important book, Provine’s masterly biography of Sewall Wright (1989), *Sewall Wright and Evolutionary Biology* achieved tenfold what the *Origins* accomplished, and provided even greater depth. Moreover, he gave us a sense of the man, his personality, interests, and their historical trajectory, that I’ve rarely encountered in other scientific biographies. Provine spent over a decade conducting interviews and doing research for this book, and with enormous attention to detail, he gave flesh and personality to Wright as a man and as a scientist. You feel you have come to know Wright by the end of this book. It’s not a “light” read, but it identifies the origins and historical trajectory of so many important ideas in evolutionary theory: the idea of the adaptive landscape, the origins of Wright’s shifting balance theory, the exchanges between Wright and Fisher over dominance, shifting balance, and adaptation, and Wright’s place in the modern synthesis. I would recommend this book to any graduate student in evolutionary biology; it gives one a sense of this period in evolutionary biology’s history that is so essential to providing context for current debates about everything from speciation to biodiversity conservation. Will Provine published many more

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books and articles, reviews and edited volumes, on topics ranging from the modern synthesis, to free will, to race, to science education. He was an enormously prolific scholar, and supervised many students in the both the sciences and humanities. His research should continue to inspire future historians and science scholars; but, I think that anyone who knew him was most inspired by his kindness, sincerity, and overwhelming joy in intellectual exchange.

I was lucky enough to meet Will Provine at conferences and workshops, and share my work with him; I was honored that he shared his work with me. He was always kind, thoughtful, and generous with his time and knowledge. He also had a light hand; he added a note of levity with his presentation on the neutral theory of molecular evolution at the Molecular Evolution workshop at the Dibner Institute. Gossip about Ohta and Kimura was served up with musical accompaniment, along with immensely useful background on the history of the neutral and “nearly” neutral theory. He generously visited the University of Utah to speak to my undergraduate Darwinism seminar, and gave not only two excellent talks, but also brought along offprints of all of Wright’s publications. Will Provine was simply one of the most thoughtful and knowledgeable historians of biology alive.

Will did not shy from controversy. He engaged in several public debates with intelligent design advocates. But, evolution could not have had a more gentlemanly advocate; Will was always kind and generous to his interlocutors. He never said an unkind word, or attacked the person. He was a friend to those he debated, and took his interlocutors seriously. Indeed, some might think he took them too seriously; some of his later publications suggested that evolutionary biology carried implications that many evolutionary biologists (and philosophers) might think do not logically follow from evolutionary theory or the empirical facts of common descent. For instance, Will claimed that evolution implies that there is no afterlife, that life has no purpose, and that we have no free will. These claims are contentious, and go to the heart of the concerns that motivate advocates of intelligent design. That is, many advocates of ID are advocates exactly because they assume that evolutionary biology proscribes free will, or suggests that there is no overriding purpose in life. Not everyone agrees that these claims follow from the theory of evolution.

Whether you agreed with him or not on these issues, Will was a great advocate of evolution, and enormously generous to his interlocutors, his readers, and to the scholars he studied. I think we should give him the last word, as this exchange from his debate with Phillip E. Johnson at Stanford University, (April 30, 1994) sums up his personality and views nicely:

Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear -- and these are basically Darwin's views. There are no gods, no purposes, and no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end of me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning in life, and no free will for humans, either. What an unintelligible idea.

Christian humanism has a great deal going for it. It's warm and kindly in many ways. That's the good part. The bad part is that you have to suspend your rational mind. That part is really nasty. Atheistic humanism has the advantage of fitting natural minds trying to understand the world, but the disadvantage of very little cultural heritage -- and that's a real problem.

So the question is, can atheistic humanism offer us very much? Sure. It can give you intellectual satisfaction. I'm a heck of a lot more intellectually satisfied now that I don't have to cling to the fairy tale that I believed when I was a kid. Life may have no ultimate meaning, but I sure think it can have lots of proximate meaning. Free will is not hard to give up, because it's a horribly destructive idea to our society. Free will is what we use as an excuse to treat people like pieces of crap when they do something wrong in our society. We say to the person, "you did something wrong out of your free will, and therefore we have the justification for revenge all over your behind." We put people in prison, turning them into lousier individuals than they ever were. This horrible system is based upon this idea of free will.

Since we know that we are not going to live after we die, there is no reward for suffering in this world. You live and you die. I've seen bumper stickers (very sexist ones, actually) that say "Life's a bitch, and then you die." Well, whatever life is, you're going to die. So if you're going to make things better for yourself or for those you care about, you had better become an activist while you're still alive.

Finally, there is no reason whatsoever that ethics can't be robust, even if there is no ultimate foundations for ethics. If you're an atheist and know you're going to die, what really counts is friendship.

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