

In memoriam John Tooby
Daniel Sznycer

It's very hard to say goodbye to Tooby.

John Tooby was an exceptionally sharp observer, unyielding in the pursuit of discovery, and unmoved by received wisdom and the observances of genteel society. He was a frontiersman, a genius, and a hugely humane and generous person.

I read *The Adapted Mind* in the late 90s. To say that reading it was a transformative experience is an understatement. Then I had the singular fortune that Tooby took me as a grad student.

In my early years in Santa Barbara, I found it a bit stressful to be around Tooby and Leda. You don't stare at God. It was my neurosis, though, because they were the gentlest, sweetest people in the lab, their staggering IQ notwithstanding. Eventually, I acquired the American protocol for sociality and started chilling out and luxuriating in their company. I spent many evenings working at their house. Tooby's signature greeting was "Can I offer you some water, beer, whisky...?". There was no sarcasm in his offer—the theme is freedom with Tooby and Leda.

Tooby's laptop always needed syncing and updating, so while this was being done it was standard practice for him to dissertate about the Founding Fathers, Mark Twain, Kipling's *Gods of the Copybook Headings*, the Hero in Western movies, American politics, and on and on... for hours on end. Those chats were pure gold—an education on their own. Then we'd move from the living room to the kitchen and have dinner, cappuccinos—hope against hope to not drift back into history and politics and do work under Leda's watchful eye.

All you had to do for Tooby to give you an epochal lecture for free was to ask him something—anything.

Like *The Architect* in *The Matrix*, Tooby could see the ocean of nexus causation behind perceived reality, pick the relevant links in the morass of data, and connect the dots for the benefit of the curious. Sometimes he and Leda started off the known grid, redoing the basics. So, for example, in a chapter on friendship, they'd set things up by showing that the "donor cost" variable is incidental in the evolution of adaptations for altruism. Then they'd move on to the fact that people's actions have effects on others that can be positive, neutral, or negative. You'd read that and chuckle—you guys aren't starting that basic, are you? Well, yes, they are. And soon enough, the bones, flesh, and sinew of friendship psychology would be extracted before your eyes like in a time-lapse video of an airport terminal being built. And so "Friendship and the banker's paradox" is the bedrock for the study of friendship.

Tooby's greatest breakthroughs are perhaps his papers on the evolution of sex and intragenomic conflict. But even his 117th best idea was field-transformative.

We wax poetic about Tooby's otherworldly intelligence and kindness because those traits were obvious in him and important to us. But his humor was no less legendary. He was hysterical. For example, Tooby would say the fact that pharmacological research uses mouse models, thus

selecting for those human genes that are more similar to mouse genes, was unequivocal proof that Mickey Mouse's conspiracy to rule the world was coming to fruition.

Another one: As grad students we'd wolf down the after-talk free food like there was no tomorrow. Then Tooby would show up and see us, gluttonous and embarrassed. He'd admonish us: "If you don't polish off the free food that means we're overpaying you... so you better eat all the free food!". His fatherliness was touching.

One more: I was once giving a labgroup about shame and Tooby says: "OK, here's how you need to frame the talk. You say: 'On the one hand, stealing is good because you get stuff. But on the other hand, stealing is bad because people get mad at you. Behavior is guided by the joint payoff of those things, and the anticipatory feeling of shame is the internal estimate of being devalued by others'". Fair enough, but the thing seemed kind of laughable. Tooby's framing was hilarious because it was the unadorned truth about the wretchedness of humans. Tooby had little time for the make-believe of polite opinion.

Few people understood status dynamics as Tooby did. But to him, power games were nothing compared to the pleasure of reading nature. So he spent zero time cultivating his persona.

Publication without replication was ridiculous to him—this was decades before the Open Science movement. It's in his writing too. His style was dense, but he wrote for the common person—the citizen. In a world of academics hell-bent on interventioning but barely able to replicate their findings, Tooby was a Spartan titan.

Tooby was a capable sociologist of science. Once scribe and courtier, market forces have softened the relevance of the intellectual. To the scientific guild, being demoted in the managerial process is a world-historical catastrophe; reinsertion an imperative. To Tooby, that was an interesting phenomenon in need of explanation. To hear him annotate the academia was something else entirely.

Constitutionally suspicious about fashionable fantasies, Tooby was stone-cold sober about reality. So he was the best partner you could have to brood about your gruesome preoccupations. Orwell, Malcolm Muggeridge and Walter Duranty, Kolyma, the Killing Fields, Malthusianism and resource economics, the cancellation of everything, predatoriness and appeasement in geopolitics... Those things were the background music of our relationship. And yet, despite the ghoulish tune, Tooby's presence turned any place into a wonderland of warmth and mirth.

Although Tooby was heartbroken about it, the plagues visited upon the House of Enlightenment were no surprise to him—mob rule, censorship and self-censorship, kangaroo courts, struggle sessions, celebrations of the pogrom, the retribalization of America. To Tooby, it all followed deductively from the nature of human nature, and empirically from world events, which he could never get enough of.

For the last few years, we were holding our breath for Tooby to finish his book about outrage psychology. Tooby being Tooby, he wasn't one to write his book in haste. But if you didn't know

Tooby had a heart of gold you'd be forgiven for thinking he made a pact with the Devil to get a mudslide of hardcore, real-life outrages to help him illustrate this or that point in his book.

I was struck by a tweet by a man who, I believe, is a general reader, not an academic. He wrote the following:

"I am moved to learn of [John Tooby's] death (and a little surprised at my own emotion, since I didn't know him personally), but the countless hours I spent reading his books and scientific publications, which helped me better understand who we are, are perhaps the greatest gift I have ever received from another human being. I feel immense gratitude and humility for this man. I thank him."

In closing, I'd like to say that:

If Tooby had simply existed but had not invented the modern evolutionary study of human nature, that would have been enough for us.

If Tooby had invented the evolutionary study of human nature but had not spent time with us, that would have been enough for us.

If Tooby had spent time with us but had not befriended us and enriched our lives immeasurably, that would have been enough for us.

I'd like to express my condolences to Leda and Nike.

Tooby shall be missed greatly.