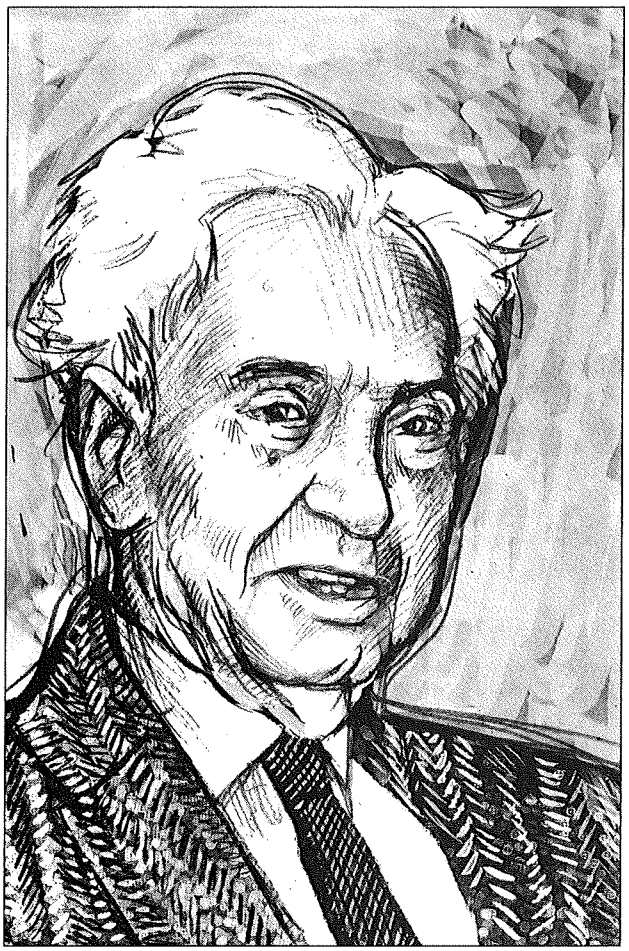
Ernst Mayr, 1904-2005 Remembrances and Tribute

FRANK J. SULLOWAY



Editor's note: I received the following remembrances of and tribute to Ernst Mayr a couple of days after his death on February 3, 2005, from Frank Sulloway during his expedition retracing Darwin's footsteps in the Galapágos Islands (there are Internet cafés on two of the islands). As a young man Frank was a student of Mayr's at Harvard University, and later he became Ernst's close friend and collaborator. I find it most fitting that the following remembrance was written in the islands that inspired Darwin and subsequently led to the discovery of the mechanism of evolution—natural selection. I have been a close friend of Frank's for many years now. Frank and I conducted an interview with Ernst that was published in Skeptic *magazine, which we reposted on eSkeptic (archived at www.skeptic.com) the week of his 100th birthday this last July, 2004. I called Ernst on his birthday to wish him a happy hundredth, and even at his advanced age, and not really knowing me all that well (we corresponded several times over the past decade and I spent an afternoon at his home a few years ago), he carried on a lucid and stimulating conversation more advanced than that of a man half his age (me!). Frank spoke of Ernst always in positive terms and on many levels: as student, colleague, and friend. But Frank was most proud of the fact that Ernst once told Frank that he was "the son I never had." I cannot think of a sweeter and more touching connection to the man who did more to reinforce, refine, and restructure evolutionary theory in the 20th century.*
—Michael Shermer

ERNST MAYR WAS, WITHOUT A doubt, the most important intellectual figure in my life. He was my closest mentor and a towering model for anyone to try to live up to. He was always remarkably generous with his time to younger scholars and scientists. He was well known at the Museum of Comparative Zoology for his open-door policy, which effectively invited people to drop in unannounced, so that they could chat with Ernst about scientific matters.

Ernst dutifully read and commented on every paper that I ever gave him to read, supplying excellent advice regarding corrections and revisions. He read my undergraduate thesis on "Darwin and the Beagle Voyage" (1969), although he was not required to do so, and he voluntarily wrote a report about it for the Harvard History of Science Department, which I was very flattered to be able to read later, because it was so positive and thoughtful. Others were often surprised by the fact that Ernst would read papers sent to him by mail, by people he did not even know, and he would supply important comments and suggestions. Once I tried to thank Ernst for reading a paper of mine, by presenting him with a bottle of cognac. But Ernst would not accept it, saying that it was a pleasure for him to read such manuscripts and that I should drink the bottle myself. How he had time to read all these manuscripts, and to write and proofread everything he published himself, remains a mystery to me.

I first got to know Ernst in 1967, when I was just 20 years old and organizing the Harvard-Darwin film expedition to retrace Darwin's route in South America. Ernst agreed to be the chairman of my little film advisory group, which I had assembled to give this project a semblance of legitimacy. Thanks in part to Ernst's name and prestige, I was able to raise $25,000 for this film expedition—a considerable sum in those days. While in South America for four months, doors opened at the very mention of Ernst's name, and local scientists eagerly offered their services as guides into the jungles of Brazil, the pampas of Argentina, the channels of Tierra del Fuego, and the mountains of the Chilean Andes. Because of my own association with Ernst, people often thought I was a Ph.D., but I had yet to obtain even my bachelor's degree!

After I wrote a paper for Ernst's

graduate seminar in evolutionary theory, in the fall of 1970, Ernst took me under his wing. He was very impressed by this paper, which showed that Darwin had mistaken the various forms of Darwin's finches in the Galápagos Islands for the forms they mimic through convergent evolution, and hence that Darwin had not been an evolutionist during his visit to these islands. I showed that it was the case of the Galápagos mockingbirds that finally converted Darwin to evolution, after his return to England and a meeting, in March 1837, with ornithologist John Gould. (Gould, it turned out, understood Darwin's Galápagos birds much better than Darwin did.) Ernst always dutifully cited me for these historical discoveries.

After I took his seminar in 1970, Ernst used to invite me to informal seminars at his house. I also used to drop by on an occasional basis just to chat, since I lived nearby. Mostly Ernst brought me up-to-date about his latest ideas, or talked about the things that interested him, and I just listened. Many times, in subsequent years, Ernst brought up how much he had enjoyed these conversations and how much he missed them. But I never felt that I was contributing much, although I think I was rather good at knowing just enough about whatever was being discussed to be able to make some comment that allowed Ernst to expand to a new or related topic. In short, I was good at keeping him talking (and I did enjoy these encounters). I also taught two seminar courses with Ernst in the history of biology, in the early 1970s, and this was a great learning experience for me.

I owe much of the success of my career to Ernst and his unflagging support for me. In 1973 he nominated me for a Junior Fellowship at Harvard, and when the Senior Fellows did not see things his way, he nominated me again the next year. This time I got the fellowship, one of the most prestigious that a young scholar could possibly receive. Ernst was like that—he did not take "no" for an answer when he believed strongly in something or someone. Other letters of recommendation that he wrote for me were doubtless largely responsible for my receiving subsequent fellowships.

There are so many ways that Ernst's intellectual style has influenced my own scholarship. His thinking was so logical, his scholarship so meticulous, and his intellectual sweep so impressive. In my own career, I always tried to live up to this stellar example and to make Ernst proud of the fact that he had nurtured my scholarship along and had supported me so generously with his time, recommendations, and advice.

Ernst's influence on me continues as I write here in the Galápagos Islands. I recently read a manuscript by a scientist visiting these islands who works on Darwin's finches. I thought the conclusions of the paper were basically wrong because they violated Ernst's fundamental ideas about the role of geographical isolation in the emergence of new species. So I rewrote the conclusion to the paper, showing that the interesting case, involving *Geospiza fuliginosa* (the Small Ground Finch) that the scientist had studied was actually consistent with Ernst's model of allopatric speciation, although the scientist's findings perhaps added a new wrinkle to that model. My corrections were entirely accepted, and now I am a coauthor on the paper. But it is really to Ernst that I owe such a basic understanding of the origin of species.

I heard Ernst say, several times, how much his own career was enabled by luck, such as the wonderful episode of seeing a pair of birds with a red bill in Germany that had not been seen in that region for nearly a century—and how this chance observation led to his meeting German ornithologist Erwin Stresemann and his subsequent career in science. Well, the greatest stroke of good fortune in my career was my meeting Ernst as a young undergraduate in 1967, and the considerable interest he took, thereafter, in my own career. On so many levels, I shall miss Ernst. ▼

Dr. Summers' Hidden Agenda
Women, Men, and the 80-Hour Work Week

SUSAN CAROL LOSH

HAVING BEEN INVOLVED WITH gender research for some 30 years I want to comment on Harvard Univesity President Lawrence Summers' observations on gender differences in the sciences.

In a book chapter I wrote 18 years ago (S. Losh-Hesselbart, "Development of Gender Roles." In M. Sussman and S. Steinmetz (eds.), *Handbook of Marriage and the Family.* New York: Praeger, 1987, 535-563, I noted, as Diane Halpern does, in her SKEPTIC and eskeptic articles, the same set of probable biologically influenced sex differences. They're pretty ubiquitous in the research literature. I also noted that these could not possibly account for the huge 98-2 percentage gender differences that existed at the time among engineers, physicists, chemists and the like, and that obviously there were other processes operating as well.

I have been working with the National Science Foundation Surveys of Public Understanding of Science and Technology for many years. We defined sex differences among adults, in that women express more interest in life and medical sciences and men more interest in "generic" science and new technology. In other research I am working on, these are differences that show up, certainly, by kindergarten. If no intervention is made—and usually there is not—these sex differences widen over time